

**BEYOND MYTH AND MASTER NARRATIVE:
TOWARD A NEW HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER***

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In the spring of 1993, a young filmmaker told a reporter from the New York Times about all the trouble she was having finding any place to shoot a western. "New Mexico is booked," she complained, "and almost all of Arizona and a lot of Montana. It's crazy . . . There's a new Kevin Costner film that's booked practically all of New Mexico." The once wide-open spaces of the West now seemed closed to her, "booked" by other filmmakers who had got there first and left no room for her cameras to roam. Three years earlier, in fact, the object of her disaffection, Kevin Costner, had uttered a similar sentiment in the opening minutes of his hit movie, "Dances With Wolves." Costner's character in the film, Lieutenant John J. Dunbar, had behaved recklessly enough in a Civil War battle to be declared a hero, and for his exploits he was given his choice of duty assignments. Staring into the camera, Dunbar said slowly "I've always wanted to see the frontier" - and then added, "before it's gone." It is arguable, of course, whether or not a Civil War soldier in the 1860s might really have worried about getting to the frontier before it was gone, but a filmmaker in the 1990s no doubt knew that the line would resonate with modern audiences.

In different ways, one apparently spontaneous and the other quite consciously scripted, both filmmakers were expressing variations on a common theme about the fate of the American frontier: it was a part of the past that has been crowded out by the present. Indeed, the popularity of their particular cinematic genre, the Western, depends largely on its portrayal of a place that no longer exists - or exists only as a memory most often tinged with a sense of regret over opportunities lost: what once was wild has now been tamed; what once was open has now been closed - even, apparently, to those who want to make more westerns. The filmmakers

* NOTE: This essay is adapted from the introduction and conclusion of my forthcoming book, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996; since published: ed.).

might not have known, however, that the timing of their respective expressions about the end of frontier opportunity marked a centennial of sorts. By 1993, the idea had been around for at least a century.

The still-common notion of the "closing" of the frontier stems largely from the work of Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), perhaps the most prominent American historian of his era and even now a major figure in the pantheon of the profession. Turner's essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) has become a standard point of reference among American historians, and there is little need to rehash it here. The important point, simply, is that the supposed closing of the frontier in 1890 represented "the closing of a great historical movement". With a note of nostalgia and even a hint of loss, Turner looked back on the previous century of national expansion and saw not only that it was over, but that it was good. The essential virtues that he ascribed to the "American" character - openness, opportunity, freedom, freshness, a break with "the bondage of the past," and so forth - stemmed from the frontier experience.

In turn, the significance of Turner's work was that his analysis - or more to the point, celebration - of the expansionist past soon became the centerpiece of a triumphalist telling of the national story, the main theme of a master narrative of American history that long outlived its chief author. By the time of his death in 1932, the so-called "Turner school" of historians had secured a prominent place in the profession, and an able body of followers helped maintain the Turnerian tradition throughout the first half of the twentieth century, embedding it not only in historical writing but in other areas of scholarly and popular culture. In 1946, a scholar writing in "The American Historical Review" observed that "none of our university departments of history is complete without a frontier specialist, and no one . . . would essay a history of the United States, whether for the profession, or the schools, without paying homage to the Turner hypothesis." Turner's emphasis on the significance of the frontier, he continued, had been "productive not only of caviar for seminars but of common fare for journalists and radio commentators." (He could easily have included novelists, film makers, and other creators of popular culture as well.) A few years later, in 1949, the historian Ray Allen Billington used the Turner thesis as the organizing principle for a comprehensive and impressive work, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*. The book, Billington stated in the preface, attempted "to present a synthesis of the thousands of pages of writings . . . inspired by Professor Turner's original essays." Billington did what Turner himself had never been able to do and

"compressed his voluminous researches on the American frontier within one volume." Thus the Turner thesis finally became a tome.

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Every thesis, of course, eventually has an antithesis, and so did Turner's - many times over.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the "Turner thesis" was still widely regarded as an impressive monument to an important academic achievement, but a monument that was beginning to crumble at its foundation. In the post-war era other issues - especially American foreign policy and domestic issues such as race, ethnicity, and social conflict - rose to the top of the academic agenda, and the history of the frontier became associated primarily with the history of the American West, which was often considered an antiquarian backwater in most major universities. Despite the efforts of a few remaining disciples, most notably Ray Allen Billington, to keep the Turnerian emphasis on frontier history alive, the Turner thesis was becoming, if not a ruin, then certainly a relic of an earlier age. In general, it seemed as if the field of frontier scholarship were coming to a close.

Yet academic interests and agendas have a curious way of changing. In 1974, for instance, Ray Allen Billington opened the preface of the fourth edition of *Westward Expansion* with a rather testy explanation of his more recent revisions. With considerable reluctance, he said, he had included racial or ethnic identifications for particular people in the story. In the first edition, he noted, "those of us who believed in the universal brotherhood of man and the equality of all persons whatever their pigmentation or ethnic background took pains to avoid such labels." But in the wake of the social unrest of 1960s, the

understandable need of minority groups for a prideful association with a cultural heritage has outmoded those beliefs of a generation ago, and today authors are obligated to let Negroes or Mexican-Americans or Indians speak loudly from their pages.

Thus the main Turnerian text began to offer a more multicultural prospective. Then, in the 1980s, a number of younger historians - some of whom first watched Walt Disney's "Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier" on television as children but later came of age politically and intellectually when John Kennedy's "New Frontier" policies led the United States deeper into war in Vietnam - began a much more extensive rethinking of the significance of the frontier. To be sure, the frontier, and especially the West, had become encumbered with ahistorical myths, but it was still, as Turner had noted, "a fertile field for investigation." All the issues that engaged "mainstream" historians - war and peace, political and social conflict, race, class, and, more recently, gender - were manifest in frontier regions. Yet in order to revive the frontier as a field of serious study, they had to free themselves, as historian Susan Armitage has put it, from "the dead hand of Frederick Jackson Turner." In a sense, recent scholars of frontier regions, especially the so-called New Western Historians, have resurrected the Turner thesis only to make sure it is buried again.

Above all, the new scholarship has challenged Turner's notion of the frontier and the perspective from which he viewed it. Most historians would now agree (and the Turnerian die-hards, perhaps, reluctantly admit) that Turner's notion of the term "frontier" was an ethnocentric, or Eurocentric, concept that had meaning only from the perspective of the colonizing culture. His description of the frontier as "the outer edge of the wave - the meeting point between savagery and civilization" made clear his preconceptions, even prejudices. It was European "civilization" that met Indian "savagery" at the farthest point of European penetration in the New World wilderness. The land beyond was uncharted, uncontrolled, and therefore threatening.

But for the New World natives - the people the Europeans called Indians - there was no such notion of a frontier. To them the land was not a howling wilderness, but home. By the same token, they were not savages, but civilized people. They had well-established territories, stable social systems, and extensive trade networks. Like Europeans, they often made war on their enemies, but they never set out to annihilate other tribes. It was only with the arrival - or as some scholars now describe it, the invasion - of Europeans that Native Americans faced a threat to their very existence. The advance of the newcomers, with their diseases and desires for land, ultimately forced natives into long-term retreat. Indeed, when seen from the perspective of Native Americans, the westward movement of Euro-Americans was hardly the positive process Turner described. Rather than

freedom, opportunity, and democracy, it brought displacement, destruction, and death.

If nothing else, the record of Indian-European relations in North America has rendered terms like "savagery" and "civilization" essentially meaningless, or certainly made it impossible to apply either term exclusively to one culture or the other. One might well revise Turner's definition to describe the frontier as the meeting point where otherwise civilized people often exhibited savage behavior. A better approach is to define "frontier" in terms that are less loaded in favor of Euro-American culture. In recent years, post-Turnerian scholars have begun to use terms like "contact zone," "zone of interpenetration," or "middle ground," thus suggesting an area of interaction between two or more cultures in which no one culture is assumed to have an altogether superior position. The recognition of this interaction helps us redefine the frontier not just as a place, or even as a frequently repeated, one-dimensional, process of contact, settlement, and development. It involves, rather, a much more complex process of mutual exchange in which neither culture, Native American or Euro-American, could remain unchanged.

Above all, the point is not to reduce the history of the frontier to a morality play about cultural monoliths, the "civilized" Europeans and "savage" Indians (or, as some might just as easily argue, vice versa). Neither side was that simple. Euro-Americans fought among themselves for control of the continent, and they often enlisted Indian allies to help them defeat fellow Europeans. Equally important, there was considerable conflict even within individual European cultural groups. Anglo-Americans, for instance, were divided by lines of gender, class, religion, and a host of other factors, and those differences became the source of recurring intracultural struggles over the course of several centuries.

By the same token, the natives the Europeans lumped together as Indians were in reality a remarkably diverse people encompassing many different cultural and tribal groups. They had different belief systems, different ways of life, and different relationships with Europeans. Like Europeans, they could be honorable allies or vicious enemies, equally capable of creating beauty and committing atrocity. And like Europeans, they deserve respect both for the integrity of their own cultures and for their contributions to the broader synthesis we now call "American" culture. In fact, the first step to understanding the significance of the frontier in American history is to appreciate how many different sorts of Americans there were on the frontier - not just native Americans and Euro-Americans,

but also African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Asian-Americans - and how each group contributed to the making of frontier history.

Finally, no matter what the ethnic group, Turner's picture of the frontier still overlooked women. The "Turner school" allowed no room for women's studies in the curriculum. Neither, for that matter, did Turner's early critics. For years the debate about the history and the nature of the frontier was carried on largely by men and about men. In 1944, Nancy Wilson Ross, an anthropologist, published a comprehensive account of white women on the frontier, *Westward the Women*, but her work stood virtually alone for over two decades. Beginning in the early 1970s, with the increasing scholarly interest in the history of women, new studies began to ask important questions about the opportunities for equality open to white women on the frontier. There was no single answer, in fact, because there was no single type of frontier woman: a farm wife on the Great Plains, for instance, lived a different life from a prostitute in a Rocky Mountain mining camp. More to the point, both of them lived different lives from the men around them. As several studies of migrant families have shown, wives often went west with much less enthusiasm than did their husbands, and even their perception of the land itself suggested a distinct perspective on their new environment. No doubt prostitutes and their clients likewise had different outlooks on their respective prospects in frontier society. More recently, studies of women of non-European ethnic and cultural backgrounds have added greatly to the multicultural mosaic that now defines frontier history.

At this point, just over a century after the publication of Turner's essay, the point is clear: Turner was an insightful, innovative historian, but his notion of the frontier was seriously flawed. Some of the standard terms once taken almost for granted - not just "frontier," but "expansion," "settlement," "progress," and even "freedom" - now seem somewhat loaded, skewed to the particular perspective of Euro- or Anglo-Americans. The history of the frontier is not a clear-cut account of westward migration by white people. As Peggy Pascoe has noted, historians are now rethinking the notion of the frontier as place of "interactions among the various cultural groups who lived in or passed through the area . . . a cultural crossroads rather than a geographic freeway to the West." It is a story of continuing encounter that must be told from many perspectives, from the standpoint of native inhabitants as well as Euro-American invaders, immigrants as well and emigrants, women as well as men, even land and animals as well as people. Clearly, no one can now write about "How the West was One".

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Is it still meaningful, though, to write about "How the West was Won"? That depends, again, on one's point of view, especially about the implications of the term "won." To portray the history of the frontier, as Turner did, as a near-inevitable national victory for the Euro-American people of the United States clearly runs counter to recent research that provides multiple perspectives on the past; writing in such triumphal terms can narrow our awareness of the true complexity of historical developments. Yet by the same token, the more recent emphasis on cultural diversity and the intercultural exchange inherent in contact relationships can likewise divert our attention from one important, virtually inescapable outcome - the conquest of the continent by Euro-American powers, culminating in the eventual military, economic, and political control exerted by the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The task is to account for that outcome without making it seem like the massive westward march of a monolithic people, much less their manifest destiny.

One way to approach the problem of telling the story in accurate and somewhat more dispassionate terms is to borrow a phrase from Turner - not "the closing of the frontier," but "the colonization of the Great West." In many respects, "colonization" helps put the process of conquest in its proper historical context as a phenomenon that operates on several levels. In the study of the early era of European exploration and settlement of North America, we commonly understand colonization to be a state-sponsored process of expansion and appropriation, or at least the extension of national military and economic power. By the same token, colonization also involved the migration of thousands of ordinary people - trappers, traders, farmers, and other common folk - who usually settled a new territory for their own reasons. Yet the point is that the notion of colonization reminds us that the massive population movements to America were fundamentally political, not merely demographic, processes.

We can usefully extend the concept of colonization to encompass the expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century - after the period commonly called the "colonial era" had come to an end. That is, the former colonists and their descendants continued as colonizers, seeking to assert their control over the continent and over the other peoples who lived on it. In that sense, westward expansion cannot be seen primarily as a process carried out, as Turner suggested, by restless citizens seeking to gain greater

opportunities or perhaps to escape the restraints of government. Rather, it was a process that depended on the participation, even the active promotion, of the national government. To be sure, the relationship between settlers and the state was often a troubled, even tumultuous one, and the desires of independent-minded people often clashed with the designs of government officials for "orderly" settlement.

Moreover, American state authorities also adopted a variety of distinct, sometimes seemingly contradictory strategies in dealing with the Indians who inhabited the interior. Soldiers and social reformers often argued over appropriate policies for pacifying native people, and the government often pursued two or more policies at once, making war or peace as best suited the situation and, like the earlier Euro-American imperial powers of previous centuries, playing one Indian group off against the other in military or diplomatic or economic alliances. Still, whatever the underlying uneasiness, common people and policy makers ultimately became allies in a process of conquest. By the end of the nineteenth century, that process was essentially complete.

But that notion of frontier history as a process of colonization and conquest raises another difficult problem of definition: when does the process stop, or, put differently, when does the history of the frontier come to an end? For Turner, of course, the end came in 1890, when the Superintendent of the Census assessed the spread of white settlement and declared the American frontier "closed." Indeed, there may be many reasons for calling 1890 a critical year in frontier history. The death of Sitting Bull, followed so soon after by the slaughter of Big Foot's followers at Wounded Knee, should certainly qualify for inclusion at the top of any historian's list. In fact, Turner could just as easily have argued that the destruction of Indian resistance meant that the North American frontier had never been more open to his fellow Euro-Americans. For four centuries, since the arrival of Columbus and the creation of a permanent European presence in the Americas, people of European origin had asserted increasing control over the North American continent - and of the people who had lived there for several millennia. Then, in the century or so that it had been an independent nation, the United States had continued and essentially completed that process. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, the United States became the single most powerful - and most powerfully single-minded - force on the North American frontier. The frontier may not have been completely "closed," as Turner argued, but it had certainly become subject to the authority of the United States.

But in the longer run, the process of conquest does not always come to such a definite conclusion. As Patricia Limerick has observed, many of the issues that formed the history of the frontier up to 1890 - new towns and territories, land sales and settlement, gold rushes and oil booms, and, above all, the ongoing struggles between Indians and whites, speculators and settlers, ranchers and farmers, bureaucrats and taxpayers - have by no means been resolved or put to rest. Over a century after the official closing of the frontier, people are still struggling over many of those issues, from Maine to California, and even farther west to Alaska and Hawaii.

Nowhere is that more evident, however, than in the East, where the Pequot Indians have made a remarkable comeback in Connecticut. For over 350 years, the Mashantucket Pequots, a remnant of the powerful Pequot tribe that had been defeated and declared dissolved by the English Puritans in the 1630s, lived on a small reservation in southeastern Connecticut; by the 1980s, the reservation's population had fallen to a handful of older people, and the future of the reservation seemed quite doubtful, indeed. But thanks to the energy, economic savvy, and political skill of a few enterprising tribe members, the Mashantuckets managed to turn the unpromising prospects around by taking advantage of their special sovereign status and following a path pioneered by other Indian groups: they opened a gambling casino. Since its opening in 1992, in fact, the Foxwoods High Stakes Bingo and Casino (adjacent to Ledyard, Connecticut, not far from Hartford) has become the biggest gambling casino in the western hemisphere, complete with auxiliary activities ranging from hotels to a sporting events center, golf course, monorail, and virtual reality theater. Within a year, Foxwoods had begun to bring in several hundred million dollars a year, and in addition to making a huge profit for the Pequots, the casino complex also pumped much-needed money and jobs into Connecticut's economy.

Grateful state officials granted the Mashantuckets monopoly control of Connecticut's slot machines, thus increasing their opportunity for even greater profit. Suddenly, Indians had become engines of economic growth.

But the success of the Pequots caused some people considerable consternation. Donald Trump, the multimillionaire owner of the Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey - which formerly could claim to be the hemisphere's biggest - complained that federal policies gave Indian entrepreneurs an unfair advantage in the gambling business, and he filed suit to protest the Pequot's special status. Closer to home in Connecticut, uneasy neighbors watched warily as the Pequots took further steps for territorial expansion. In August, 1993, tribal leaders announced that the

Mashantuckets planned to buy an additional 8000 acres of land in the surrounding region, which would more than quintuple the size of the tribe's trust lands. Non-Indians in Ledyard and other neighboring towns quickly, if quietly, became worried, wondering what the Mashantucket moves would mean for future control of their communities. On one hand, Mashantucket money certainly appeared attractive to local landowners who took advantage of escalating real estate prices and sold out to the Indians. At the same time, other people complained about the negative effects of overcrowding and overdevelopment, casting Indians in the role of greedy and aggressive newcomers: as Bruce Kirchner, a member of the Mashantucket tribe and a senior vice president of the casino, noted to a "New York Times" reporter, the rising anti-Indian sentiment made it seem "that we're not really American, we're foreigners."

The fate of Foxwoods and the surrounding Connecticut communities remains to be seen, of course, but the image of Indians as "foreigners" - as land-hungry invaders who threaten to damage the environment and disrupt a simple, stable way of life - certainly puts a new twist on an old story. Those Euro-American neighbors of the Mashantucket Pequots who have studied the early history of the region might well have had occasion to reflect on how it feels - and thus how it might have felt - to confront people who claim their own sovereignty and who have the economic resources to assert themselves from a position of strength. No doubt Mark Twain, who spent much of his later years in Hartford, where he died in 1910, would have relished the irony in this turn of events. The rest of us, especially those with an interest in the many facets of intercultural interaction in the American past, can perhaps find in the Pequots' apparent resurgence a useful long-term perspective for the future study of American frontiers. History may not repeat itself, but it does allow for some remarkable reversals. Nothing stays closed forever.

And that, ultimately, is the most important point. As both a phenomenon in American life and a field of study in American history, the frontier has not stayed closed. Turner's particular notion of the frontier may now be discredited, but the broader subject he brought to the center of scholarly attention is not. Questions of cultural contact, territorial conquest, settlement patterns, and social relations are at the heart of historical study. The frontier - this important, albeit imprecise, zone of initial interaction between cultures - represents an excellent setting in which to examine them. Perhaps equally important, there are some great stories to tell in the process. The whole cast of characters - explorers, adventurers, soldiers, settlers, prostitutes, preachers, cowboys, and, always, Indians - makes for great

drama. They are certainly more exciting, if not more significant, than some of the other figures - the Puritan ministers, Jacksonian political hacks, or Cold War diplomats - who also populate the pages of history books. Even the scenery of the frontier - the dark forests of the East and, further West, the stark plains, deserts, and mountain ranges - is both rugged and romantic, always an inspiring image to novelists, artists, and filmmakers, not to mention academics locked away in university libraries. For a variety of reasons, then, the frontier still stands as a central focus of historical research.

The goal of post-Turnerian historians is still to make the history of the frontier comprehensive and coherent; to make it, as well, more complex but also more inclusive - and therefore closer to the reality of human experience.