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Source: *Western Historical Quarterly*, Apr., 1987, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Apr., 1987), pp. 157-176

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/969581>

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Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner

WILLIAM CRONON

What is there left to say about Frederick Jackson Turner? After all the articles and books and dissertations, what could possibly justify yet another excursion onto the “blood-drenched field” of the frontier thesis?¹ That thesis is by now so familiar that even to summarize it is to engage in ritual. Its central claim is contained in a sentence which many of us have nearly memorized: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”² How did “free land”—“the frontier”—“explain American development”? According to Turner, the West was a place where easterners and Europeans experienced a return to a time before civilization when the energies of the race were young. Once the descent to the primitive was complete, frontier communities underwent an evolution which recapitulated the development of civilization itself, tracing the path from hunter to trader to farmer to town. In that process of descent and reevolution—as the frontier successively emerged and vanished—a special American character was forged, marked by fierce individualism, pragmatism, and egalitarianism. Thus, fundamentally transformed as a people, Americans built their commitment to democracy, escaped the perils of class conflict, and overran a continent. Now, in the 1890s, the frontier was gone, and a new foundation for American life must somehow be discovered. So ran Turner’s argument.

No less familiar than the Turner thesis itself, of course, are the complaints against it made by Turner’s critics.³ In the half century since Turner’s

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¹ Allan G. Bogue, “Social Theory and the Pioneer,” *Agricultural History*, 34 (January 1960), 21.

² Frederick J. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, DC, 1894), 199.

³ The quickest introductions to the debates about Turner will be found in George Wilson Pierson, “American Historians and the Frontier Hypothesis in 1941,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 26 (September 1942), 36-60, 170-85; George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner*

death, his reputation has been subjected to a devastating series of attacks which have left little of his argument intact. Some critiques have been epistemological. Turner's vocabulary was more that of a poet than a logician, and so his word "frontier" could mean almost anything: a line, a moving zone, a static region, a kind of society, a process of character formation, an abundance of land. His fuzzy language conferred on Turner's argument the illusion of great analytical power only because his central terms—frontier, democracy, individualism, national character—were so broad and so ill-defined.⁴

Other critiques have been more empirical. Historians of non-Anglo-American regions—the Spanish Southwest, say, or French Canada—have argued that "democracy" simply was not a relevant category in their areas; for them, Turner consistently misunderstood the cultural complexity of frontier regions.⁵ Even in areas of Anglo-American settlement, critics argued, westerners looked to the East for whatever models of democracy they possessed, and were themselves models less of individualism than of dull conformity. Among the eastern institutions dominating western life have been the Federal government, the corporation, and the city, none of which were given adequate attention by Turner.⁶ Although those who went to the fron-

Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History, rev. ed., 1956 (Boston, 1949); Gene M. Gressley, "The Turner Thesis: A Problem in Historiography," *Agricultural History*, 32 (October 1958), 227-49; Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York, 1968); Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (New York, 1966); Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York, 1966); Harry N. Scheiber, "Turner's Legacy and the Search for a Reorientation of Western History: A Review Essay," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 44 (July 1969), 231-48; Jerome O. Steffen, "Some Observations on the Turner Thesis: A Polemic," *Papers in Anthropology*, 14 (1973), 16-30; Jackson K. Putnam, "The Turner Thesis and the Westward Movement: A Reappraisal," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 7 (October 1976), 377-404; Richard Jensen, "On Modernizing Frederick Jackson Turner: The Historiography of Regionalism," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 11 (July 1980), 307-22.

⁴ George Wilson Pierson, "The Frontier and American Institutions: A Criticism of the Turner Theory," *New England Quarterly*, 15 (June 1942), 224-55, makes these points about vocabulary most strongly. A linked objection has been that Turner's style of argument is sometimes overly monocausal.

⁵ For an excellent example, see David J. Weber, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *American Historical Review*, 91 (February 1986), 66-81. See also T. M. Pearce, "The 'Other' Frontiers of the American West," *Arizona and the West*, 4 (Summer 1962), 105-12; Edward Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico, and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1553-1960* (Tucson, 1962); Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque, 1978); J. M. S. Careless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, 35 (March 1954), 1-21; Morris Zaslowsky, "The Frontier Hypothesis in Recent Historiography," *Canadian Historical Review*, 29 (June 1948), 153-67.

⁶ Benjamin F. Wright, Jr., "American Democracy and the Frontier," *Yale Review*, 20 (December 1930), 349-65; Mody C. Boatwright, "The Myth of Frontier Individualism," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 22 (June 1941), 14-32; Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 41 (March 1955), 579-600; Paul W. Gates, "Frontier Estate Builders and Farm Laborers," in Walker O. Wyman and Clifton B. Kroeber, eds., *The Frontier in Perspective* (Madison, 1957), 143-63.

tier in the United States sometimes found their opportunities for upward mobility enhanced, mobility rates in the West were not vastly different from those one might expect to find in the urban centers of the East.⁷ Far from being the crucible of "Americanization" which Turner made of it, the frontier was a region where racial and ethnic minorities remained significantly isolated from other communities: Blacks, Chicanos, Chinese, and Indians all had historical experiences that meshed neither with Turner's thesis nor with the dominant culture of Turner's day, and so he failed to study them.⁸ The same was true of women.⁹ Worst of all, because Turner's frontier necessarily ended in 1890, it left historians few clues about what to do with the West in the twentieth century: in an odd sense, Turnerian western history almost literally ended at the very moment that Turner created the field.¹⁰ Within three decades of his death, Turner's defenders were a distinct minority, and the master was now studied more for his rhetoric and ideology than for his contributions to historical knowledge.¹¹ Those who speculated about the future of western history went so far as to wonder whether it would survive as a field at all.¹²

⁷ Ralph Mann, "Frontier Opportunity and the New Social History," *Pacific Historical Review*, 53 (November 1984), 463-91. There is a large literature on Turner's "safety-valve" thesis which is relevant to this question of mobility.

⁸ Howard R. Lamar, "Persistent Frontier: The West in the Twentieth Century," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 4 (January 1973), 4-25.

⁹ See the excellent review essay by Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review*, 49 (May 1980), 173-213. Susan Armitage, "Women and Men in Western History: A Stereotypical Vision," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 16 (October 1985), 381-95; and William Cronon, Howard R. Lamar, Katherine G. Morrissey, and Jay Gitlin, "Women and the West: Rethinking the Western History Survey Course," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 17 (July 1986), 269-90.

¹⁰ Lamar, "Persistent Frontier"; Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation."

¹¹ Lee Benson, *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered* (Glencoe, IL, 1960); Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968); John T. Juricek, "American Usage of the Word 'Frontier' from Colonial Times to Frederick Jackson Turner," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 110 (February 1966), 10-34; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 1950); Warren I. Susman, "The Useless Past: American Intellectuals and the Frontier Thesis, 1910-1930," *Bucknell Review*, 11 (Number 2, 1963), 1-20; Ronald H. Carpenter, *The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner* (San Marino, CA, 1983). Among those who defended the Turnerian vision, Ray Allen Billington was by far the most stalwart and energetic; see his *America's Frontier Heritage*, as well as his biography of Turner, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York, 1973), and *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, 1971).

¹² W. N. Davis, Jr., "Will the West survive as a Field of American History? A Survey Report," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 50 (March 1964), 672-85. A recent survey by Richard Van Orman indicates that pessimism on this question is greater today than it was twenty years ago; Van Orman's study is described in Gene M. Gressley, "Whither Western American History? Speculations on a Direction," *Pacific Historical Review*, 53 (November 1984), 493-501. For three excellent recent surveys of western history as a field, see Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln, 1983); and Rodman W. Paul and

What, then, justifies yet another essay about Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier? Simply this: we have not yet figured out a way to escape him. His work remains the foundation not only for the history of the West, but also for much of the rest of American history as well. Textbooks still follow the basic outline which he and his students established in their lecture courses.¹³ For all the criticism his successors have directed against his work, no new synthetic paradigm for western history has yet emerged to replace Turner's. We continue to use the word "frontier" as if it meant something.¹⁴

The remarkable persistence of the Turner thesis in the face of so much criticism might be attributable to any of a number of causes. It may simply signal the inertia which prevents universities from abandoning disciplines, courses, and professorships even after their original *raison d'etre* has disappeared. It may be that we continue to use Turner's vocabulary only because it is so comfortably broad that it never gets in the way of our research and never forces us to adopt a more rigorous approach. Or it may be that Turner's thesis, in fact, retains more explanatory power than the critics have been willing to acknowledge in it; certainly it expresses some of the deepest myths and longings many Americans still feel about their national experience. Whatever may be the case, the continuing presence of the Turnerian paradigm in American history is itself a fascinating enigma. Why is it that the "vanishing frontier" refuses to vanish?

One way of beginning an answer to that question is to reflect on the influence Turner exercised during his own lifetime. Many of his contributions were of the sort that tend to be forgotten rather quickly: his work as library-builder and bibliographer, his role in shaping the AHA, his teach-

Michael P. Malone, "Tradition and Challenge in Western Historiography," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 16 (January 1985), 27-53; and Roger L. Nichols, ed., *American Frontier and Western Issues: A Historiographical Review* (Westport, CT, 1986).

¹³ Here one can compare Turner's lecture outlines (for instance, the ones quoted in Wilbur R. Jacobs, ed., *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner* [New Haven, 1968], 107-9) with Frederic Paxson's *History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893* (Boston, 1924), and with standard modern textbooks such as Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion*, 5th ed., (New York, 1982); Robert E. Riegel and Robert G. Athearn, *America Moves West*, 5th ed., (New York, 1971); and Frederick Merk, *History of the Westward Movement* (New York, 1978). Merk's and Billington's books lie more or less in a direct line of descent from Turner's original lecture notes. Even textbooks which try to move away from Turner's organization still follow his trail for significant stretches: compare Robert V. Hine, *The American West: An Interpretive History*, 2d ed., (Boston, 1984); and Richard A. Bartlett, *The New Country: A Social History of the American Frontier, 1776-1890* (New York, 1974).

¹⁴ Often even those who are critical of Turner use him as a foil for organizing western history: in my own lecture course, for instance, much of the underlying structure is devoted to showing the inadequacy of Turner's original formulation of the frontier. After several years of teaching, I've come to realize that the resulting course would not hold together without Turner's presence: in a sense, all my criticisms eventually become elaborations on at least portions of his original argument.

ing in one of the most famous graduate seminars of his day. Of these, the last was probably the most important, shaping as it did a generation of scholars that included such names as Carl Becker, Merle Curti, Herbert Eugene Bolton, Frederick Merk, Marcus Lee Hansen, Samuel Flagg Bemis, and others.¹⁵

There can be little doubt about Turner's electrifying effect in seminar. Years before James Harvey Robinson promulgated the doctrines of the "New History," Turner was telling his students that they must bring to the past their most urgent concerns of the present. "*Each age*," said Turner in 1891, "*writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.*"¹⁶ Pursuing that idea, he argued for a history that would study not just politics and elites, but the social history of ordinary people: "the focal point of modern interest," he wrote, "is the fourth estate, the great mass of the people."¹⁷ A history that would do those people justice would have to study many fields—literature, politics, religion, economics, culture. It would have to focus on places and regions which past historians had ignored, places which, as luck would have it, were also home to many of Turner's students. It would have to turn to untapped documentary sources and apply new statistical techniques to their interpretation. It would have to set American history in the context of world history, and it would do so not by simple narrative but by studying *problems*. If these things were done, then the histories of ordinary people in places like Wisconsin or Kansas or California might come to have the significance they deserved. "History has a unity and a continuity," wrote Turner; "the present needs the past to explain it; and local history must be read as a part of world history."¹⁸

There is a great deal in these lessons from Turner's seminar that our more recent generation embraces as its own. Change the vocabulary to match the modern jargon, and we find Turner championing social history, quantification, *l'histoire problématique*, interdisciplinary studies, local case histories, "history from the bottom up," and the search for a relevant past. But for the students in Turner's seminar, several additional things added to the excitement inherent in these ideas. One was the sense of being present at the creation of a new academic profession that was exploring the history of a continent's interior as it had never been studied before. Turner's

¹⁵ Merle Curti, "Frederick Jackson Turner," in O. Lawrence Burnett, Jr., ed., *Wisconsin Witness to Frederick Jackson Turner* (Madison, 1961), 199-200; Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 250-58; 329-36.

¹⁶ Turner, "The Significance of History," *Wisconsin Journal of Education*, 21 (October & November 1891), 230-34, 253-36, reprinted in Billington, ed., *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, 1961), 17 (Turner's italics). This is arguably the richest, most creative essay Turner ever wrote.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

role as a remarkably accessible and egalitarian mentor, his enthusiasm for exploring new documents and methods, his great flexibility in allowing students to choose their own research topics, only added to their sense that they were genuine colleagues working to build the profession. "The engaging theory," remembered Carl Becker, "was that we were all scholars together, surveying broadly the field of American history, each man having his particular subject . . . subjects large and unconfined, opening a career to talent."¹⁹

Although Turner's students would do their best to defend their master against the criticisms that flooded in after his death in 1932, ultimately his reputation would stand or fall, not on his teaching, but on his writing. And here we encounter a central part of the enigma, for Turner was one of the great nonpublishing scholars of his generation, a man who seemed almost congenitally incapable of finishing a book. Turner's major scholarly writings fall into two rather meager groups: there are the two books, only one of which was finished during his lifetime²⁰, and there are the essays, which were eventually collected into two volumes.²¹

The books and the essays are quite different. In this, they bear a striking resemblance to the work Turner required of his graduate students in seminar. Merle Curti reports that the seminar ordinarily centered upon an arbitrarily chosen period of a decade or two, and that "each student took, for the given period, some field in which he was interested, such as agriculture, transportation, immigration, internal improvements, banking, finance, tariff, land policy, literature, labor, or religion."²² The narrow period allowed students the diversity of topics that was the hallmark of Turner's interdisciplinary method, and still guaranteed that research remained tightly focused. To force students to keep track of both the forest and the trees, Turner required each to write two essays. One, known as the "problem paper," was meant to be a limited monograph on a well-defined research

¹⁹ Carl Becker, "Frederick Jackson Turner," *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York, 1935), 201.

²⁰ Turner, *Rise of the New West, 1819-1829* (New York, 1906); and Turner, *The United States, 1830-1850: The Nation and its Sections* (New York, 1935). Avery Craven, who completed this posthumous *United States* volume, was surely right when he speculated that Turner "probably never would have completed this volume—at least to his own satisfaction." (See "Introduction" to *United States*, v.) Ray Allen Billington has written about Turner's monumental writer's block not only in the biography but in "Why Some Historians Rarely Write History: A Case Study of Frederick Jackson Turner," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 50 (June 1963), 3-27.

²¹ Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920); and Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York, 1932).

²² Merle E. Curti, "The Section and the Frontier in American History: The Methodological Concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner," in Stuart A. Rice, ed., *Methods in Social Science: A Casebook* (Chicago, 1931), 367. Professor Curti has also been kind enough to discuss this matter with me in person.

question; the other, known as the "correlation paper," gave the student an opportunity "to correlate his problem and to some extent his field with those his colleagues were studying."²³ By the end of the year, in other words, each student had tried to synthesize the research of the entire seminar and relate it to the topic he or she was studying.

Turner's own writing echoed his seminar assignments. His two books consisted of a string of "problem papers," each chapter covering narrow research topics ranging from agriculture to transportation to the history of presidential administrations—the very subjects his students had examined in seminar. His essays, on the other hand, were usually "correlation papers," bold attempts to "explain" the history of American settlement in its widest sweep.²⁴ Turner's fame rests on the very few of those essays which are still read, while most of his other writings are largely ignored. Struggle as he might to create a work that would equal the fame of his great 1893 essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," he never managed to do so. Indeed, he never even succeeded in expressing the vision of that essay in a book that elaborated the original argument into a systematic presentation of western history as a whole. That task was left to his students.

Turner's failure to write such a book may, in part, be attributable to the anxieties which affect all writers to a greater or lesser degree, but his difficulty may also have been intrinsic to both his topic and his method. For Turner, "problem papers" and "correlation papers" somehow never quite came together. They always remained separate assignments, with different analytical frameworks and different rhetorical styles that persistently prevented them from merging. Although Turner, during his lifetime, was justly famed for having put American history on a new analytical basis that enabled it to escape older narrative historical writing, his books failed to discover a rhetoric to match his analytical vision. Both begin with long, static descriptions of the different regions on which Turner based his vision of American sectionalism, but these descriptions are overburdened with detail, weak in theory, and lacking in the dynamic energy of Turner's essays; in *The United States, 1830-1850*, for instance, they run to over 375 pages. Moreover, once the regional descriptions are done, both books become straightforward narratives of American national history organized by presidential administrations. Despite Turner's protest that "much that has passed as history is the merest frippery," his own books were not so very different from the traditional histories he criticized.²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The essays which best exemplify Turner's skills at "correlation" are "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," "The Significance of History," "Problems in American History," and "The Problem of the West," all written during the 1890s. All are gathered in Billington, *Frontier and Section*.

²⁵ Turner, "The Significance of History," in Billington, *Frontier and Section*, 14.

Turner is most boldly analytical in the essays. But there are problems here too. For one, the rhetorical style of the major essays is as much that of an orator as that of a scholar. Turner's first major successes as a writer came during high school and college oratorical competitions, and his essays never shed the flourishes he had learned in that context. Indeed, in his search for a history that would speak to the concerns of the present, he frequently adopted a pose that looked as much to the future as it did to the past. Turner the historian was not at all averse to playing prophet. Listen to his undergraduate oration on "The Poet of the Future":

He will find beauty in the useful and the common. . . . In his ear humanity will whisper deep, inspiring words, and bid him give them voice. He will unite the logic of the present and the dream of the past, and his words will ring in the ears of generations yet unborn, telling them the grandeur of today which boils and surges with awakening life. He will reflect all the past and prophesy the future.²⁶

The youthful enthusiasm of this passage may be that of a college student captivated by his discovery of Emerson, but one nevertheless recognizes both the voice and the career it prophesies. Turner himself would seek to be that "Poet of the Future."

The most direct expression of Turner's prophetic impulse came in the essays whose titles began, "The Significance of . . ." There were no fewer than seven of these, including three of his most important: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," "The Significance of the Section in American History," and the remarkable early essay which laid the foundation for everything else, "The Significance of History."²⁷ Turner's affection for essays devoted to "significance" revealed the essentially *interpretive* thrust of his historical projects.²⁸ Like the prophets, he was drawn to exegesis and hermeneutics, to creating a web of verbal elaboration around a core set of ideas that never finally changed; like the prophets, he sought

²⁶ Turner, "The Poet of the Future," in the *University Press*, 14:35 (26 May 1883), reprinted in Carpenter, *Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner*, 123. Compare Emerson's American Scholar: "He is the world's heart... Whatsoever oracles the human heart, in all emergencies, in all solemn hours, has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions,—these he shall receive and impart... The Scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," (1837), in *Essays and Lectures*, Library of America edition, (New York, 1983), 63, 64, 70.

²⁷ The others were "The Significance of the Louisiana Purchase," (1903), "The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History," (1910), "The Significance of Sectionalism in American History," (1914), and "The Significance of the North Central States in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century," (1917). See Everett E. Edwards, "The Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner," in Edwards, ed., *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Madison, 1938), 233-68.

²⁸ As usual, Becker furnishes the most incisive observation on this point: "If in all his published work there are five pages straight narrative I do not know where to find them. His writing is all essentially descriptive, explicative, expository." (Becker, "Frederick Jackson Turner," in *Everyman*, 227.)

not to prove or disprove his vision, but to apply its sweep to all of American history. For all his commitment to problem-oriented history, his central concepts rarely expressed themselves as testable theories. Few could be falsified.²⁹ The emphasis on “significance” was a black box which avoided the necessity of more rigorous analysis and theory.

It is only when one realizes the essentially hermeneutic nature of Turner’s work that one understands why his legacy has been at once so powerful and so problematic. Prophets take the events of history and reorder them to give them new meaning, pointing them toward a future moment when history itself will finally come to an end. In that teleological act of interpretation, the past comes to have sequence, significance, direction; it becomes, in other words, *a story*. Turner’s frontier thesis had all of these properties. Absorbing the Darwinian metaphors of evolution and organism that Herbert Baxter Adams had taught him to use at Johns Hopkins, Turner proposed a model of social change that placed the American West at center stage in world history. Although his goal was to explain the origins of American democracy, the tools he used to do so were at least as important as the democracy he was trying to explain. As we all know, the frontier thesis describes American history in terms of sequenced “stages” of social evolution, and it peoples those stages with a series of frontier “types.” Turner by no means invented those “stages”—Americans had identified them as symbols of republican progress since the time of Jefferson—but he, more than anyone else, was responsible for canonizing them. To quote the key passage in the 1893 essay is again to engage in ritual:

The United States lies like a hugh page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution. It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization; we read the annals of the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farming communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system.³⁰

On this generous scaffolding, almost all American history could be erected as a case study in the progress of human civilization.

Here, then, is one of Turner’s central ironies: the man who could not, and did not want to, write narrative history nevertheless codified the

²⁹ This criticism applies only to Turner’s writing, not his teaching. His students were consistently struck by his willingness to question any fact or idea and to consider any alternative explanation: Curti remembered that this “impressed me more deeply than any single experience that I had” as Turner’s student. (Curti to Turner, 13 August 1928 in Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 265). Turner’s personal tragedy may well have been that his temperament best suited him to teaching, criticizing, and researching, but his fame demanded that he keep producing works that were synthetic and theoretical.

³⁰ Turner, “Significance of the Frontier,” in *Frontier in American History*, 11. His use of the same imagery in *Rise of the New West* will be found on 89-90.

central narrative structure which has helped organize American history ever since. It was Turner who showed that the history of any given American place could be written in terms of a progressive sequence of different economic and social activities.³¹ It was Turner who showed that those activities could be embodied in representative figures who might serve as “types” for the community around them, so that Andrew Jackson became “the champion of the cause of the upland democracy,” and Henry Clay “represented the new industrial forces along the Ohio.”³² For lesser figures, the result was to raise ordinary people to heroic stature, so that their stories became “significant” simply by standing for the larger whole. And even if one accepted neither Turner’s metaphors of social evolution nor his heroic typologies, there was still the underlying sequence of the frontier itself. Turner showed that one could write the history of the United States according to the order in which different regions of the country had been occupied by Anglo-American settlers.³³ One could thus organize American history along geographical lines that were also temporal: the frontier thesis, in effect, set American space in motion and gave it a plot.

Whatever the merits of Turner’s hypotheses about democracy and the national character, his stages and types had great rhetorical attractions. Seen through their lens, previously disparate phenomena and events suddenly seemed to become connected.³⁴ This, surely, was one of the reasons that Turner’s seminar generated such excitement in his students. All those wildly eclectic research topics were related to each other not just chronologically, not just by region, not just by their emphasis on the role of social and economic forces in politics, but by their place in the grand sequence

³¹ Here again, the middle group of essays in *The Frontier in American History*, those tracing the frontier from Massachusetts to the Mississippi, demonstrate this more effectively than either of Turner’s books, although Chapters V through VIII of *Rise of the New West* (pp. 67-133) are as close as Turner ever came to applying the model to a book-length narrative.

³² Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 173. Howard Lamar has noted that the only portrait that appears in *Rise of the New West* is that of Henry Clay. Howard R. Lamar, “Frederick Jackson Turner,” in Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, eds., *Pastmasters* (New York, 1969), 92. Turner’s formulation of frontier “types” in terms of the third person (male) singular—the Indian, the trader, the rancher, the farmer—was one of the ways he unconsciously shied away from examining more closely the pluralism and conflicts of frontier regions. But they were also the way in which society as a whole could become a kind of character in his story, much as different species had functioned for Darwin as emblems of the larger evolutionary struggle for existence.

³³ Doing so obviously reveals an ethnocentric bias that especially distorts the experiences of Indians and Hispanic-American peoples, but that bias nevertheless persists in the writing of most western American History.

³⁴ As Becker characterized his master’s method, “He studies American history as furnishing a concrete illustration, many times repeated and on a relatively grand scale, of the social process.” (Becker, “Frederick Jackson Turner,” in *Everyman*, 214.) Again one is grateful for Becker’s precise use of language: to “illustrate” a social process meant in this case to take the “process”—whatever that broad phrase might have meant—for granted and to *interpret* the case to fit it. There was no testing of theory by such a procedure.

of civilized ascent. The frontier, whether understood as geographic expansion or social evolution, was the "unity and continuity" which held everything together; without it, the "correlation papers" would dissolve into an overabundance of fragmentary detail much as Turner's own books did. However much the frontier thesis has been criticized, western historians have been unable to replace the rhetorical sequence that Turner synthesized for them: when the chapters of the standard textbook of western history move from Indians to ranchers to farmers, they do so because no other arrangement seems properly ordered.³⁵ We continue to follow the Turnerian plot.

There is, of course, a dark underside to all of this, and there, Turner himself came to grief. The Turnerian frontier had supposedly ended in 1890. With the passing of the frontier, the original forces which had created American democracy and the national character would begin to dissipate, and who could predict what might happen as a result? How would the immigrants be Americanized? How would the nation escape the class conflicts which had scarred the societies of the Old World? What could restrain the rise of corporate power and the decline of rural virtue? What would serve as an outlet for the nation's expansionist tendencies?³⁶ Questions such as these gave Turner his prophetic opportunity, but they also masked the contradiction that lay at the very heart of his frontier thesis.

For the whole point of the frontier had been to vanish. Like Timothy Flint's Daniel Boone or James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking, its "purpose" in Turner's scheme was to prepare the way for the civilization that would ultimately replace it. Civilization had always been the teleological goal which had lent its force to Turner's historical sequence, and so there was no escaping the doom it must finally spell for the frontier thesis. If each new generation of historians must discover a past that spoke to the needs of the present, then western history, as Turner had framed it, would become more and more irrelevant. Turner himself saw this almost from the start, and it caused him increasing anxiety as he grew older. By 1910, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, he was implicitly arguing for the replacement of his own frontier thesis by noting that "a comprehension of the United States of today . . . demands that we should rework our history from the new points of view afforded by the present."³⁷ A year later, he acknowledged, in a letter to Carl Becker, that the historical processes he had studied were reaching "the point when the frontier becomes subordinated in influence to general social forces. . . ."³⁸

³⁵ Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion*, 573-661.

³⁶ Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, and Benson, *Turner and Beard*, remain the two best studies examining this aspect of Turner's thought.

³⁷ Turner, "Social Forces in American History," in *Frontier in American History*, 330.

³⁸ Turner to Becker, 21 January 1911, in Jacobs, *Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner*, 135.

His own proposal was that historians should substitute for the frontier “another fundamental factor in American history—namely, the Section.”³⁹ With the disappearance of free land, as natural resources proved “no longer boundless,” Americans would increasingly discover “sectional differences arising from unlike geographic regions.”⁴⁰ The United States would come to look more and more like Europe, with the peoples of different sections struggling among themselves for control of a nation that would seem more and more to be a kind of empire. Turner’s hope was that this new prophecy would serve as a general application of the same geographical and social principles that had so successfully underpinned the frontier thesis. Sections could thus be used to “explain” American history in much the same way that the frontier once had.

It didn’t work. Unlike the frontier, the sectional hypothesis had no overarching structure, no *narrative* that could be used to link monographic themes into an organic unity. What motion it had still came from the frontier. When Turner wrote of “the influence of the frontier and the West upon American sections,” he was clearly seeing the frontier as the *primal* section whose energy had shaped all others. “The West,” he wrote, “was a migrating region, a stage of society rather than a place.”⁴¹ The frontier had been about movement; the section was about stasis. Whereas sections were bounded, motionless, and particular to their moment in time, the frontier was the moving embodiment of time, and so conferred on places it touched a universality the section could never attain.

Turner’s generalizing inclination was to personify sections in much the same way he had personified frontier types, with the result that homogenizing regional “characters” came to dominate his sectional analysis. Although the sectional theme was rich in implications, suggesting the importance of conflicts between east and west, between city and hinterland, between old elites and new, it lacked both analytical precision and narrative force. Without a more sophisticated theoretical apparatus, the section remained inert. As Turner struggled to finish *The United States, 1830-1850*, the book that was to act as a showcase for the new hypothesis, he must have realized that he was fighting a losing battle. It was published only after his death, and showed little of the “unity and continuity” which the youthful Turner had held up as his historical ideal. The scholarship of the book was extraordinary, but as a fulfillment of its author’s dreams, it could only be labeled a failure.

There are thus two quite different components of the Turnerian legacy. On the one hand, there is the West of the frontier, which at the height

³⁹ Turner, “The Significance of the Section in American History,” (1925), in *The Significance of Sections*, 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34, 35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

of Turner's fame seemed to be the key to explaining much of American history generally. On the other, there is the West as section, a locus for academic study in its own right, but one with no special claim to exceptional status.⁴² For western historians, there is no escaping the tension between these two poles of Turner's thought. The frontier had been the central reason for studying western history in the first place: it had given the field its "significance," and it had created the narrative trajectory which turned the peopling of the continent into an epic on the grand scale. Without the frontier, western history, like Turner's sectional thesis, lost its forward momentum. It became the history of a region that was not really a region, a section whose boundaries were never quite fixed until the 1890 census announcement left them stranded somewhere beyond the Mississippi River.

The years since World War II have seen proposals from a number of historians for new ways of researching and thinking about western history. One group of such proposals has sought to build on the inadequacies of the Turner school by focusing on those aspects of the West which remained invisible to the earlier generation.⁴³ The result has been to reveal the masculine biases of Turner's frontier by exploring the lives of western women, to rediscover the racial and ethnic communities which somehow never quite melted into Turner's "line of most rapid and effective Americanization," and to provide a vastly richer and more accurate picture of the Indian peoples who were all but absent from Turner's vision.⁴⁴ Such critics have been able to remain more or less agnostic on the question of whether the "frontier" is a useful category, since their research retains its importance whatever the merits of the original thesis.

A second group of proposals has accepted the criticisms of Turner's frontier by more or less inverting his original claims.⁴⁵ These proposals have sought to show the derivative, conservative nature of western communities by exploring the complex transfer of institutions which enabled settlers in new communities to reproduce the worlds they had known back home. Here too are the works that emphasize the importance of the Federal government in shaping western life, along with those which have pointed to the urban character of much western settlement. Curiously, although such research explicitly rejects Turner's claims about the frontier sources

⁴² See for instance, Walter Rundell, Jr., "Concepts of the 'Frontier' and the 'West,'" *Arizona and the West*, 1 (Spring 1959), 13-41.

⁴³ Lamar, "Persistent Frontier," is probably the most comprehensive example of such an essay. See also Jensen and Miller, "Gentle Tamers Revisited," and the bibliographical essays gathered in Malone, *Historians and the American West*, and Nichols, *American Frontier and Western Issues*.

⁴⁴ Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," in *Frontier in American History*, 3-4.

⁴⁵ Pomeroy's "Toward a Reorientation of Western History," remains the classic example here. See also Malone, *Historians and the American West*.

of American character and democracy, it still relies on westward movement—the frontier—as its central analytical category.

A third and final group of proposals argues that the concept of “frontier” is powerful enough to deserve salvaging by redefinition. Here especially we can include the work of those who have sought to develop generalized models of frontier development by comparing the American experience with that of other areas of the world. Some have attempted to do this by using the Turner thesis directly; more often, broader definitions of the frontier have been offered to replace Turner’s.⁴⁶ In general, these broader proposals have veered toward defining the frontier as a region in which peoples of different cultures struggle with each other for control of resources and political power. Turner’s central focus on frontier interaction with the landscape is thereby reduced—such redefined frontiers become essentially contact zones where culture, rather than environment, plays the pivotal defining role—but many of the other Turnerian arguments remain.

What is striking about all of these proposals is the extent to which they continue to rely on Turner for their direction and sense of synthesis. Whether we fill in his gaps, or turn him on his head, or redefine his vocabulary, western historians still look to Turner for their basic sequence. He still allows us to narrate our story from east to west, and to organize it around the continuous, albeit complicated, transition of economies and communities from one form of activity to another. However much we understand his *analytical* shortcomings, we still turn to him for our *rhetorical* structure.

If American historians are finally to come to terms with Turner, they must recognize the true nature of his legacy. The greatest attraction of the frontier thesis has been its simplicity and its sense of movement, its ability to shape and set in motion so many of the mere *facts* that American historians need to narrate. It supplies at least a rhetorical connection between those facts, and that connection in turn supplies the larger sense of order and unity that keep a reader turning the pages to find out “what happened.” These are no small virtues, as recent debates about the rediscovery of historical narrative have suggested.⁴⁷ The key question, then, is whether we can escape the analytical weaknesses of Turner’s “vanishing frontier” and still retain his narrative strengths.

⁴⁶ Samplings of this approach can be found in Wyman and Kroeber, *Frontier in Perspective*; David Harry Miller and Jerome O. Steffen, eds., *The Frontier: Comparative Studies* (Norman, 1977); and Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, 1981).

⁴⁷ See Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present*, 85 (November 1979), 3-24; E. J. Hobsbawm, “The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments,” *Past and Present*, 86 (February 1980), 3-8; Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography,” *American Historical Review*, 87 (February 1982), 1-24.

A full-scale resynthesis of western history is beyond the scope of this essay, but I do want to suggest that Turner's legacy may in fact have wider implications for such a synthesis than one might at first think. For myself, the most useful elements of Turner's frontier are its focus on the history of how human beings have interacted with the American landscape; its ability to relate local and regional history to the wider history of the nation; its interdisciplinary focus; and, not least, its commitment to putting ordinary people at the center of the story. None of Turner's weaknesses—the dubious arguments about democracy, the rather mystical search for “national character,” the distorting collection of frontier “types,” the teleological problems of a vanishing frontier whose closing marks a false end to history—are intrinsic to what I, at least, find most suggestive in Turner's work.

It is no accident that much of what we today call “environmental history” has been written in this country under the guise of *western* history. No other academic field, historical geography excluded, has proven to be a better home for those interested in studying human uses of the earth. This is Turner's doing. His initial frontier essay emphasized environment, but defined “free land” too narrowly in terms of unoccupied agricultural territory. Later in his life, he broadened this definition to include “the unpossessed resources of the nation.”⁴⁸ In so doing, he came close to anticipating the central thesis of David Potter's *People of Plenty*, a remarkable book that suggests at least one major linkage between Turner's work and a more general environmental history.⁴⁹ For Potter, Turner's frontier was but a special case of the general abundance of natural resources that had made America exceptional from the start. “By failing to recognize that the frontier was only one form in which America offered abundance,” Potter wrote, Turner “cut himself off from an insight into the fact that other forms of abundance had superseded the frontier even before the supply of free land had been exhausted. . . .”⁵⁰ Potter's book has flaws that are akin to Turner's—he too chose to rest his argument on the fuzzy category of “national character”—but his central insight is surely a major key to the Turnerian riddle.

⁴⁸ Turner, “Social Forces in American History,” *Frontier in American History*, 312.

⁴⁹ David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954).

⁵⁰ Potter, *People of Plenty*, 156. Walter Prescott Webb had made an analogous argument, framed in much more global terms, two years previously. See his *The Great Frontier* (Austin, 1952). Perhaps the best statement of this argument comes from Hofstadter: “We must do openly what Turner has been criticized for doing implicitly: understand that the West meant not just free land but the whole glorious natural abundance of interior America, its resources of all kinds, including timber, coal, oil, minerals; and that the westward movement involved the conquest of these resources and their incorporation into the machinery of American capitalism.” (*Progressive Historians*, 160.)

If the frontier represented only one kind of plenty, then it ought to be possible to rewrite western history—which in one rather Turnerian sense is actually the environmental history of North America—in terms of a transition not from free to occupied land, but from abundance to scarcity. Even that formulation is too sweepingly simple, since it attracts us to the same teleology that seduced Turner: we must be careful to avoid embracing frontiers that somehow “close.” Turner’s awkward transition from frontier to section has tended to keep western history fixated on the early stages of Euro-American settlement. But if we abandon the notion that regional history “closes,” we can trace his environmental dialectic as far backward or forward in time as we like.

Neither abundance nor scarcity has ever been absolute. Instead, their definitions shift always according to natural and artificial constraints on systems of human activity, and according to people’s *beliefs* about whether they are experiencing economic and environmental stasis, progress, or decline. Different forms of technology or social organization can produce entirely different levels of resource use, even when they exist on the same landscape; conversely, diminishing quantities of an essential resource, or newly discovered supplies of it, can produce drastic shifts in social organization and technology. People’s notions of abundance and scarcity—of wealth and poverty—change accordingly, and so too does their political life. Communities that define abundance in one way all too easily come into conflict with those that define it otherwise. Much of regional history can be organized around these fundamental relationships. Western history, under this framework, can become what it has always been, the story of human beings working with changing tools to transform the resources of the land, struggling over how that land should be owned and understood, and defining their notions of political and cultural community, all within a context of shifting environmental and economic constraints.

Such an approach is quite Turnerian in its implications. Indeed, to study regional environmental history is to free what is best in Turner from the frontier thesis which made Turner’s history seem to end in 1890. The vanishing frontier no longer needs to vanish. The dialectic between relative abundance and relative scarcity, as Potter showed, is something that can organize western history—and American history generally—without an arbitrary break at any particular moment. Such a theme applies as readily to the twentieth century as to the nineteenth.⁵¹ Better still, that dialectic

⁵¹ Examples of recent regional histories that demonstrate some of the possibilities of this approach include Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979); William L. Kahr, *Water and Power: The Conflict over Los Angeles’ Water Supply in the Owens Valley* (Berkeley, 1982); Donald J. Pisani, *From the Family Farm to Agribusiness: The Irrigation Crusade in California and the West, 1850-1931* (Berkeley, 1984); Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West* (Bloomington, 1984); and Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge, MA, 1984); and Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985).

retains the forward momentum Turner gave western history with his frontier: there is still a story here, albeit one with no definite beginning or end. The interplay between abundance, scarcity, innovation, politics, culture, and ideas may lack the high drama of the closing frontier, but it nevertheless retains the sense of *movement* that was Turner's most important contribution to American regional history. Equally important, scarcity and abundance can only be understood in terms of regionally specific environments, and so Turner's pivotal emphasis on "the importance of *space* in history," which allowed him to connect local history to national and world history, remains.⁵²

Ironically enough, Turner's sectional thesis may be more useful than his frontier thesis in pursuing this sense of interregional connection.⁵³ The central weakness of the famous 1893 essay was its tendency to portray the frontier as *isolate*, a place whose importance derived from the very fact that it was so removed from the rest of civilization. In reality, even the most remote frontier was always connected to economic activities and demographic changes in the rest of the world, especially in the rising urban centers whose growth was central to frontier expansion itself.⁵⁴ As several historians have suggested, cities did not wait for the final stage of Turner's frontier to make their appearance, but instead arrived with the first Euro-American pioneers. Indeed, Turner's frontier can easily be seen as the expanding edge of a metropolitan economy, along the lines that Harold Innis used in his synthesis of Canadian history.⁵⁵ What is true of the nineteenth-century

⁵² Turner draft of letter to Charles Homer Haskins, 19 May 1925, in Jacobs, *Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner*, 157.

⁵³ Michael C. Steiner makes this argument effectively in his "The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 10 (October 1979), 437-66. Hofstadter's critique of Turner's "exaggerated claims for sectionalism" resulted as much from Hofstadter's antiregionalist bias as from the actual flaws in Turner's argument. Hofstadter, writing in the wake of the New Frontier and the Great Society, had no patience for Turner's "futile Malthusian speculations arising from his fixation on closed space and exhausted land supplies;" historians writing in a post-1973 world of oil scarcities (and gluts), sun belts, frost belts, and sagebrush rebellions, may be inclined to feel more sympathy toward Turner's position. (Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 101-2.)

⁵⁴ Turner himself realized this at many points in his work. In "The Significance of History," he argued that "Every economic change, every political change, every military conscription, every socialistic agitation in Europe, has sent us groups of colonists who have passed out onto our prairies to form new self-governing communities, or who have entered the life of our great cities. . . . Our destiny is interwoven with theirs; how shall we understand American history without understanding European history?" (in Billington, *Frontier and Section*, 24-5.) Turner often conceived of such influences in terms of racial inheritances, so that the *continuing* interaction between frontier areas and other regions is often obscured in his work, but even this crops up in his longer monographs. See, for instance, his treatment of New York in *Rise of the New West*, 32-6, or the general treatment of western commerce in Chapter VII of that book.

⁵⁵ Innis' works on the fur trade and the cod fisheries implicitly express this theme, but his most direct statement of it is in *Problems of Staple Production in Canada* (Toronto, 1933); and in "Significant Factors in Canadian Economic Development," *Canadian Historical Re-*

frontier is even more true of the twentieth-century West, whose urban centers lie at the core of the regional economy. If Turner's western history can be restated in terms of *connection* rather than *isolation*—so that the interactions among different regional economies, cultures, and environments come to be its central concerns—then we may find the *dynamic* sectional thesis that his original formulation lacked.⁵⁶

Cast in these terms, the questions Turner has left us remain very much alive. The challenge for western and environmental historians alike is to discover a subtler periodization for their fields to replace Turner's crude "frontier stages." Any such periodization must create a finer-grained sense of movement that will reflect interconnections between regional diversity and the shifting dialectic of scarcity and abundance. Western historians must abandon all illusions that "the vanishing frontier" is anything but a minor—and usually misleading—theme in the longer history of regional change and interaction. More comprehensive is the question of why "core" and "peripheral" American regions have experienced such different developments: if the "frontier experience" has at one time or another typified such diverse places as New England, the Old South, Appalachia, the Great Lakes, the Great Basin, the Pacific Slope, and the sub-Arctic North, why have the histories of these regions been so different? The answer will lie not in some homogeneous "frontier process," but in the diverse environments and cultures that have typified those regions.

And yet diversity is only half the story. The regions of the continent have developed within a larger system of political and economic relationships which have been affected by such things as changing international

view, 18 (1937), 374-84; see also Careless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History;" and A. F. Burghardt, "A Hypothesis about Gateway Cities," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 61 (June 1971), 269-85. For the United States, see Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Cambridge, MA, 1959); Edward K. Muller, "Selective Urban Growth in the Middle Ohio Valley, 1800-1860," *Geographical Review*, 66 (April 1976), 178-99; Muller, "Regional Urbanization and the Selective Growth of Towns in North American Regions," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 3 (Number 1, 1980), 21-39; and especially the excellent article by David R. Meyer, "A Dynamic Model of the Integration of Frontier Urban Places into the United States System of Cities," *Economic Geography*, 56 (April 1980), 120-40. Michael Conzen's work is very suggestive in this area; see his fine review essay, "The American Urban System in the Nineteenth Century," in D. T. Herbert and R. J. Johnston, eds., *Geography and Urban Environment, Progress in Research and Applications*, 4 (1981), 295-347.

⁵⁶ Fernand Braudel's work on early modern Europe is organized around exactly such regional models, as is the more problematic world-system analysis of Immanuel Wallerstein. Superb local studies by American scholars which suggest quite different ways of approaching the problem of regional dynamics and interconnection include James C. Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to its History* (Lawrence, 1947); Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1963); John W. Bennet, *Northern Plainsmen: Adaptive Strategy and Agrarian Life* (Chicago, 1969); Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle, 1980); and White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, 1983).

resource bases, the rise of the corporation, and the growth of the modern state, all within the framework of an expanding capitalist economy. To fulfill Turner's injunction that "local history . . . be viewed in the light of world history," these larger connections must be discovered in the dreams, joys, and tragedies of ordinary people—and in the ways those people have shaped and been shaped by the landscapes around them.⁵⁷ Since the inhabitants of a given area are themselves diverse, an essential aspect of this last question must be the system of social relations that has shaped regional life. Here western historians—like other historians—must continue their turn away from the white northern European males who have fascinated them for so long, and explore how peoples of different racial, class, and cultural backgrounds have struggled with one another for control both of their regional resource base and their institutions of political power. Likewise, the divergent perceptions and experiences of men and women have significantly influenced how regional environments have come to be defined, and that in turn will affect the way we write their histories.

Underlying all of these things, giving them a kind of neo-Turnerian unity, will be the question of how American uses of, and attitudes toward, regional landscapes have shifted with the dialectical interaction of scarcity and abundance. The virtue of that dialectic is that it gives sequence to our story without necessarily entrapping us—as it entrapped Turner—in the snares of civilized ascent. It can lend *direction* to regional history without implying the existence of some larger, extrahistorical *progress*. Among the deepest struggles in American western history have been those among peoples who have defined abundance—and the "good life"—in conflicting ways. Such struggles must fit into this story without oversimplifying the values embraced by opposing sides, for ultimately "abundance" was as culturally contested a terrain as "community." In the West, to occupy the natural landscape meant, simultaneously, to occupy a human community; those two acts of belonging are among the most fundamental that a historian of the region can trace. And here we may as well return to Turner's most important questions as well: what *is* the relation between abundance and American notions of liberal democracy? To what extent *has* the peculiar nature of American class consciousness and republican government been shaped by the shifting resource base of our economic and social life? How *do* nature and humanity transform each other?

None of these are dead or answered questions, and all are part of Turner's continuing legacy. Turner's notion of the "frontier" may be so muddled as to be useless, but if Turner's "free land" is a special case of Potter's American abundance, then the general direction of Turner's approach remains sound. In his commitment to ignoring the walls between disciplines, in his faith that history must in large measure be the story of

⁵⁷ Turner, "Significance of History," in Billington, *Frontier and Section*, 21.

ordinary people, in his emphasis on the importance of regional environments to our understanding the course of American history—in all these ways, he remains one of the pathfinders whose well-blazed trail we continue to follow. And whether or not we ultimately abandon the frontier thesis, we are unlikely ever to escape its narrative implications. In fashioning a rhetorical framework for telling the history of the first continental republic, Frederick Jackson Turner, almost in spite of himself, gave American history its central and most persistent story. However much we may modify the details and outline of that story, we are unlikely ever to break entirely free of it.


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