

**"TURNER IS STILL ON THE BURNER:" A ANALYSIS OF FRONTIER AND WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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In the summer of 1893, while the nation celebrated four hundred years of progress at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a young historian from Wisconsin argued for the significance of the frontier in the formation of American character. It is traditional to begin any paper on the frontier or the West with some reference to Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal essay. Some authors lovingly invoke Turner as the sage responsible for opening up the field of frontier history. Others cite Turner as an at best quaint, at worst bigoted, foil to their allegedly new interpretation of the American West. But whether historians show respect or disdain for him, they cannot deny the significance he holds to their subject matter. The purpose of this essay is to explore the presence of Turner's thesis in frontier and Western historiography, ranging from the work of Turner himself to the so-called "new" western historians of the present. By examining the pantheon of the twentieth century's "old" and "new" Western historians, this paper will illustrate the indelible legacy and influence of Frederick Jackson Turner in this field of history. Whether historians insist that they are writing to expand or dispel the concepts of Turner, he is always present in their work; in other words, "Turner is still on the burner."<sup>1</sup>

It is scarcely necessary to reiterate the specifics of Turner's frontier philosophy when it has always been such a vital part of American historiography. For the purposes of showing the continuity that is central to this essay, however, one must briefly come to terms with some of Turners most durable tenets. Turner's thesis is typically summarized with one line; "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the

advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."<sup>2</sup> This statement is simple and almost commonsensical; of course the frontier played a defining role in America's path to maturity. But in 1893 Turner was one of the first historians to advocate a new approach to explaining social, institutional, and cultural development. Turner's thesis stated that an environment, specifically the frontier with its "free" land, can have formative effects on culture and institutions. Culture is not simply transplanted wholesale and statically from some metropolitan source. The physical or geographical conditions of the American frontier forced an evolution of culture that produced egalitarianism and individualism. Similarly, as the frontier advanced, old frontiers became unique, autonomous regions. These regions developed distinctive cultures based on their disparate paths of development from frontier to settled region. These individual regions gave rise to the sectionalism that characterized American politics and culture. These aspects of Turner's theory appear contradictory. How can one shared national frontier experience create sectionalism and provincialism? Nonetheless, Turner's formative power of environment and the related idea of sectionalism, continue to be two durable concepts that even modern Western historians cannot put to rest.

The thesis that Turner provided is admittedly general, hegemonic, restrictive, and at times self-contradictory. Turner's essay attempted to apply a broad, static, and universal superstructure of development to a process that was, in reality, far more dynamic. Unfortunately, Turner did not write prolifically so his lectures became the venue for further articulation of his new paradigm. Turner was often praised as an instructor and his greatest asset was the legion of historians that

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<sup>1</sup>Wilbur R. Jacobs, *On Turner's Trail, 100 Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 212.

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<sup>2</sup>Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Turner Thesis, Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, revised edition, ed. George Rogers Taylor, Problems in American Civilization Series, ed. George Rogers Taylor (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1956), 1.

came to maturity under his tutelage.<sup>3</sup> This new generation of Turnerian western historians would dominate the field for the first half of the twentieth century. These former students formulated new expressions and departures from the original thesis that their teacher could not have foreseen.

One of these students was Herbert Eugene Bolton. Bolton's contribution to Western history is nearly as legendary as that of his mentor. Turner and his successors have often been criticized as racist or least ethnocentric in their interpretation of the frontier. For Turner, the West was settled exclusively by white Northern Europeans, advancing from east to west from the Atlantic Seaboard. Bolton took issue with Turner's Anglo-only explanation, because it did not fit with vast areas of the North American continent. In 1911, Bolton argued that

Turner, of Wisconsin, has directed attention to what he calls the West; but his West is a moving area which began east of the Appalachians and has not thus far reached beyond the Mississippi Valley. He and his school have contributed very little to the history of the Southwest and the Far West.<sup>4</sup>

Bolton focused his frontier research on the overlooked Spanish settlement experience in Florida and the Southwest. Beginning in the 1900s and continuing into the 1950s, H. E. Bolton formulated a new field of Western research which was coined "Borderlands." Contemporary historians like David Weber have shown that the Borderlands are still an active and meaningful area of research today. But this school of thought, even in its modern form cannot shake the influence of Turner's thesis.

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<sup>3</sup>Jacobs, "Appendix B, Turner as a Teacher—Testimonials from His Former Students," in *On Turner's Trail*, 255-276.

<sup>4</sup>Herbert Eugene Bolton, "Need for the Publication of a Comprehensive Body of Documents Relating to the History of Spanish Activities within the Present Limits of the United States," December 18, 1911 in John Francis Bannon, ed., *Bolton and the Spanish Borderlands* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 25.

Bolton's *Spanish Borderlands* (1921) is, by all accounts, an old fashioned narrative typical of that period of historical writing. But in it, Bolton still addresses his major criticism of Turner's interpretation of the West. He says, "the Southwest is as Spanish in color and historical background as New England is Puritan, as New York is Dutch, or as New Orleans is French."<sup>5</sup> Bolton suggested that the frontier story is far more complex than Turner initially proposed. In addressing the disparate cultural roots of America's regions (still leaving out African and Indian influences) Bolton implied that Turner's rejection of "germ" theory may have gone too far. Bolton believed in the traditional Turnerian culture-making frontier, but he also did not lose sight of the cultural institutions that the Spanish carried with them in their settlement of the Borderlands.

Bolton may have found some fault in Turner's philosophy but he did not completely reject it. Bolton built his *Borderlands* thesis around the same basic guidelines that Turner set up for his generic frontier; namely that the frontier experience changed culture and society. He recognized the limitations of Turner's Anglo-centric frontier, but still praised his methods. He admitted that Turner was rightly acclaimed in the study of the Anglo-American frontier, "and for him who interprets, with Turner's insight, the methods and the significance of the Spanish-American frontier, there awaits a recognition not less marked or less deserved."<sup>6</sup> Bolton advocated an application of the Turner thesis to the study of Mexican and other Latin American frontiers; a call to action which remains unheeded.

No one has picked up the flag of the universal Western Hemisphere history that Bolton called for, but his interest in the *Borderlands* has been advanced in the able hands of David Weber.<sup>7</sup> Bolton, like Turner was criticized as an ethnocentric. He

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<sup>5</sup>Herbert Eugene Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands, A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), vi.

<sup>6</sup>Bolton, "The Mission as a Frontier Institution in the Spanish American Colonies," in Bannon, 189.

<sup>7</sup>Weber's most essential book is; David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

tends to illustrate the Spanish frontier with the same rose-tinted lens that Turner used for the Anglo-American one. Bolton ignored much of the brutality of the Spanish mission and presidio systems and often denied the native population of its active role on the frontier. Weber's notion of Borderlands has provided a far more realistic interpretation of the Southwest. He expanded upon Bolton's nascent idea of, "the interplay of cultures on both sides of the frontier."<sup>8</sup> Culture is changed not just through the experience of the physical or geographical conditions of the frontier as Turner argued, but also through the cultural discourse that occurs between two societies. These meeting points are less like "frontiers" of a dominant, conquering culture, than they are "Borderlands" between two equal cultures. What emerges is not Turner's essential progression from savagery to civilization, but rather a hybrid culture. This meeting and melding of cultures, which in America was magnified on the frontier, seems to be the most historically significant aspect of the Western environment. While Turner overlooked this aspect of the frontier environment, it still fits with his essential thesis. Modern Borderlands historians, though they may hate to admit it, are still influenced by Turner's ideology. Weber gave Turner the credit he deserves and explains why he is rarely referenced in Borderlands discourse:

His remarkable success in challenging the idea that the "germs" of European institutions planted themselves in North America and spread westward unchecked has led to a new conventional wisdom. It appears that most Borderlands scholars see no need to cite Turner's works or to carry on a running dialogue with him when they assert that the frontier altered the society and institutions of Hispanics.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>David J. Weber, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *The American Historical Review* 91, no.1 (February 1986), 73.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 80.

Clearly, Turner's thesis still implicitly haunts this vibrant interpretation of Western history, even if its practitioners fail to acknowledge its presence.

Just as Bolton argued that Turner's progression from savagery to civilization did not completely fit with the history of the Southwest, Walter Prescott Webb noted that it was also flawed as a model for the Great Plains. Webb was schooled in the early twentieth century when Turnerians still dominated history departments all over the United States. Webb's seminal book, *The Great Plains* (1931), spoke a language that Turner could have understood, but it also featured a new method of looking at frontier history. Webb proposed that the Great Plains region, "affected the various peoples, nations as well as individuals, who came to take and occupy it, and was affected by them."<sup>10</sup> The first half of Webb's thesis is in accordance with Turner: the Plains environment "affected" the settlers that moved there. The second half represents a new departure; those same settlers "affected" their environment. Not only did the frontier, specifically the Great Plains play the classic Turnerian role of cultural crucible, but that same frontier environment was physically altered to fit the culture that settlers carried with them.

Webb implied that Turner's notion of progressive settlement was only applicable to the lands located east of the Mississippi; the same criticism, one might recall, that Bolton addressed. Webb employed a useful image to describe the problem that emerged when a culture designed for the humid East was applied to the semi-arid Plains:

east of the Mississippi civilization stood on three legs—land, water, and timber; west of the Mississippi not one but two of these legs were withdrawn,—water and timber,—and civilization was left on one leg—land. It is small wonder that it toppled over in temporary failure.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931), 8.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 9.

Grade school images of sod houses and buffalo chips show us how Great Plains settlers were affected by the environment's lack of trees. But far more devastating images emerge when one contemplates the way the environment was affected by the settlers' attempts to force Eastern woodland culture on a completely different environment. Webb's book proved prophetic; it was published only one year before the catastrophic Dust Bowl ravaged across the Great Plains. A generation of inappropriate agricultural practices, imported unchanged from the East, had precipitated one of the worst environmental disasters in the nation's history. Webb's attention to the environment as a transformative and exploited entity follows Turner's logic, but his vision of the same environment as a victim of an imported culture makes his work unique. Webb's environmentalism is a major inspiration for the latest attempt at frontier and Western history; the aptly named "New Western History."

It seemed that frontier history as a field of inquiry had stagnated during the middle of the twentieth century. Ray Allen Billington offered *Western Expansion* (1949), essentially the textbook that Turner would have written if he had the ability. It provided a last stand for the purely Turnerian interpretation of the frontier. Aside from Billington's eloquent, but old-fashioned narrative, the field saw little action and scarce innovation. Urban-dominated social history came into vogue and the frontier seemed to wane from its former significance to American history. Perhaps riding the wave of pluralism, multiculturalism, and revisionism, in so many other fields, however, "New Western History" emerged in the 1980s with new analytical tools like race, class, and gender that it had gained in hiatus. Three of the most influential historians to come out of this new school are Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and William Cronon. Each of these three has a different relationship with Turner, but they have all injected Western history with much needed intellectual vigor.

Patricia Nelson Limerick's, "Making the Most of Words," articulated one of the many new directions that Western history

is taking. In this article, perhaps influenced by the "linguistic turn" and post-structuralism, Limerick turned to an analysis of language in understanding Western History. She argued that one must examine, "what westerners have done to and with words and what words have done to and with westerners."<sup>12</sup> Limerick posited that historians of the past have failed to separate the language of their frontier subjects from the reality. With an implicit stab at Turner and his disciples, she says that the, "the earlier breed of western historians adopted the terms, the point of view, and the assumptions of the people they studied," which "left western scholars echoing, not analyzing, the thinking of Anglo-American colonizers."<sup>13</sup> Limerick believes that the last generation of Western historians had failed to criticize the language of pioneers who were engaged in "the kind of activity that provoked shiftiness in verbal behavior."<sup>14</sup> Overall, Limerick's body of work, including *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987), presented an anti-Turnerian interpretation of Western development. She provided a frontier story characterized not by the positivism that Turner saw in settlers' language, but by the conquest and imperialism they were trying to hide. Limerick presents a strong case, but one must ask if a pessimist's frontier of exploitation could be just as culturally transformative as a positivist's frontier of progress? If so, Limerick has not really abandoned the question that lies at the core of Turner's thesis.

Similarly to Limerick, Richard White also takes a revisionist's stance against Turner. He has set out to write a new history of the West and Turner is conspicuously absent. In "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own," *A History of the American West* (1991), White attempted to define the West as an autonomous physical region, west of the Missouri River, and not as a part of the frontier process that Turner espoused. "The West

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<sup>12</sup>Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Making the Most of Words, Verbal Activity and Western America," in William Cronon, et al., eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 170.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

did not suddenly emerge;" at the crest of a Turnerian tide of Anglo-American settlement, "rather, it was gradually created."<sup>15</sup> Although White has explicitly refused to engage Turner's thesis, his book still touches on some of its themes. One critic has pointed out that White, "leans on 'sectionalism' (p.74) and 'safety valve' (p.75) and mentions regions or subsections of the West (p.344). In these terms and ideas Turner is ever lurking."<sup>16</sup> White has demonstrated that it is possible to write Western history without mentioning Turner. Whether or not that makes it good history, however, is debatable.

Like Limerick's, White's tale is one of invasion and environmental disasters which is still arguably not a repeal of Turner's insistence on the frontier's ability to mold American culture. White attempts to make the West, which culturally belongs to the collective American psyche, into just another region on the map. In the national perspective, White's trans-Missouri West was the final frontier, the last of a series of regions to be called "the West." Therefore all of the myth and legacy of America's frontier experience was cemented in this terminus of westward expansion. The very fact that the region holds that national position means that it is more than just a geographical place, it is the manifestation of a concept as well, and must dealt with accordingly. White offered a compelling history of the place we call the West, but he provided very little insight into the more enduring and intriguing idea of the frontier that the West represented for Turner and continues to represent for most Americans.

William Cronon, unlike White and Limerick, still has some measure of respect for Turner. His book, *Nature's Metropolis, Chicago and the Great West* (1991) presented an intriguing interpretation of Western history that openly engaged Turner. Cronon dealt with Turner seriously and academically, avoiding the cartoonish straw man that other new western historians have

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<sup>15</sup>Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own:" A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>16</sup>Jacobs, *On Turner's Trail*, 206.

engaged. Even with use of "Great West" in his title and throughout his book, Cronon harkened back to Turner's conception of a West that included far more territory than new western historians like White and Limerick would cede. Cronon's book examined the relationship between Chicago and its massive rural hinterland that he terms the "Great West." Cronon demonstrated that, "The nineteenth century saw the creation of an integrated economy in the United States, an economy that bound city and country into a powerful national and international market that forever altered human relationships to the American land."<sup>17</sup> Cronon concerned himself with the exploitative relationship Chicago had with its Great West hinterland. One illustrative industry that Cronon examined was timber. He traced the role of Chicago as the exploiter of timber stands in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, and distributor of the finished lumber to the treeless Great Plains. Chicago could not survive without exploiting the rural hinterland, but conversely farmers could not exploit the hinterland without the resources that Chicago provided. Cronon tried to show that there is little difference between the dense and dirty city and the seemingly bucolic countryside. Both entities exploited the natural resources of the Great West, and each depended on the other for survival.

Cronon's depiction of the growth and development of Chicago and its hinterland would have appealed to Turner. In it one can see remnants of his stages of development from frontier to civilization. But Cronon's picture, in line with new western history, hardly paints a rosy image of progress; he stresses the environmental implications that this exploitation of the frontier holds for the future. In this sense, Cronon has departed from the traditional realm of western history, employing the tools of a newer field: environmental history.

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<sup>17</sup>William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), xiv.

At the center of Cronon's argument and essentially the argument of most environmental historians is Turner's idea of "free land."

Chicago and other cities of the Great West grew within the ecological context of what historian Frederick Jackson Turner called "frontier" conditions. Despite all the ambiguities and contradictions that have bedeviled Turner's frontier thesis for the past century, it still holds a key insight into what happened at Chicago...The "free land" that defined Turner's frontier was important not because it was "empty" or "virgin" or "free for the taking"...but because its abundance offered to human labor rewards incommensurate with the effort expended in achieving them.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of free land is revolutionary not in the Turnerian sense that it created egalitarianism, but in Cronon's interpretation, because it created a culture of exploitation of natural resources that shaped the American psyche. Rather than completely throwing Turner's ideas away, or ignoring them all together, Cronon has modified them to work with a more sophisticated interpretation of the American West. Cronon and environmental history still owe much to the legacy of Turner. Environmental historians have taken the concept of the frontier and the West out of Limerick and White's narrowly defined region and back into the larger realm of nationwide development. Like Turner, environmental historians are interested in the process of development that began when human beings first arrived in North America and began leaving their mark on the environment. Cronon has shown that Frederick Jackson Turner still speaks in Western historiography especially through the modern environmental historian.

This paper has examined nearly one hundred years worth of historical debate surrounding the role of America's frontier and the West. For the sake of brevity, many scholars with valuable contributions to the field have been left out. In looking at the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 150.

selection here, however, there is still one unifying point. The historians of yore like Bolton, Webb, and Billington, share commonalities with those on the frontiers of research like Weber, Limerick, White, and Cronon. Each of these men and women owe the existence of their field to Turner. Turner was the first to propose that the West was more than just a single well-defined region. To him it was a process and a cultural symbol that carried a higher significance for America's political, cultural, and social development. Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick have done great things in advancing the field of Western history. But promise for the future lies with environmental historians like William Cronon who still search beyond the physical West for the significance of the more tenuous "frontier."