

Book Reviews

The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region, by Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf. Midwest History and Culture series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. xix, 169 pp. Notes, index. \$25.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ALLAN G. BOGUE, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Scholars have hardly become infected with Middle West Fever, but their interest in this great "fly-over" land between the Appalachians and the Rockies does appear to be growing. In 1988 James H. Madison and various collaborators gave us *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*. A year later, James R. Shortridge's *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* appeared. Now Andrew Cayton and Peter Onuf review the recent historical writing dealing with the five states of the Old Northwest.

Regional research was popular during the 1930s in both the humanities and social sciences. That enthusiasm persisted. The scholarly essays edited by Merrill Jensen in 1951 as *Regionalism in America* probably marked the climax of such concern. A new generation, however, found that the boundaries of one regional variable often failed to match those of others. New problems and methodologies beckoned. Are the current books indicative of renewed interest in regionalism in general and the Middle West in particular, or will they and a number of other recent publications on midwestern subjects ultimately be viewed as a minor aftershock of the bicentennial of the Northwest Ordinance when historians were summoned to the task of celebration?

Frank Jones of the Indiana University Alumni Association led the scholars of his institution in providing leadership among the Big Ten universities for the bicentennial commemoration of the Northwest Ordinance which included a symposium on midwestern history. Cayton and Onuf prepared an extended paper for this meeting on the current scholarly understanding of the famous document and the history of the Old Northwest. Distinguished specialists in midwestern history served as critics of their statement, and some of them, as well as other referees and colleagues, provided additional criticism of the revised manuscript that appears now as *The Midwest and the Nation*.

Cayton and Onuf explain that they are attempting to place the history of the Middle West in "a larger, more inclusive narrative framework" than Frederick Jackson Turner and his followers used. They doubt that "the Turner thesis is likely to inspire further interesting or important contributions to historical writing." But Turner's argument, they suggest, "sheds new light on the emergence of *regional* consciousness." They propose to "turn Turner on his head," and explain that they are performing a "deconstruction of [his] narrative." Their "intention" is "to show how a vigorous, enterprising middle class achieved a dominant, hegemonic position in the Midwest" (xv-xvii).

The authors have divided their book into six chapters. These evaluate the significance of the Northwest Ordinance, describe the peopling of the Old Northwest, trace the origins of community and politics in the territories and states of the region, consider a later stage of "politics of cultural definition," and, in a final chapter and epilogue, consider "The Politics of Accommodation and the Significance of the Frontier" and "Frederick Jackson Turner, Regional Historian."

In the first chapter, the authors draw on their previous research to develop the idea that the Northwest Ordinance served as a basic "charter" document. In the second chapter they adopt the style that continues throughout the book, providing summaries of the work of other scholars plus their own interpretive reading of the meaning of that research. The Old Northwest, they tell us, was developed by individuals of diverse cultures who sought to "reap the benefits of market capitalism while maintaining familiar customs and assumptions" (42). It became a region of "kin-dominated, highly mobile communities" (49) in which the leadership was essentially middle class, imbued with bourgeois values.

In the political realm, "the fundamental struggle was not over whether the market should or would come to the Old Northwest but the degree to which traditional relationships and values would be transformed by that development" (65). The Whigs, Cayton and Onuf argue, wished to transform "community and family as well as economic activity." The Jacksonians wished to profit from commercial capitalism "while resisting the social implications of its triumph." The political party therefore became a "vehicle of cultural definition" (82-83). The Republican party's appeal lay in the fact that it was "the political embodiment of the values and aspirations of the American middle class" (85). But the hegemony that the Republican party established would not stand unchallenged: industrialism, consumerism, and political pluralism forced adaptation; and, by the 1920s, Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis were questioning the very nature of midwestern values and achievements. The response of

many to this intellectual crisis was the making of myth, "imagining a frontier era in which people—middle-class, midwestern people—had once been the powerful progenitors of a new civilization" (122). This, the authors suggest, is the proper perspective in which to view Frederick Jackson Turner—the greatest of midwestern myth makers.

This is an excellent book of its kind. Since, in effect, it is an extended historiographical essay, the authors have not included a bibliography, but the endnotes are full and serve as a fine guide to the recent literature on the Midwest. Cayton and Onuf are most interested in reading cultural meaning into the history of the Old Northwest. Some of their interpretation is insightful, ingenious, and thought-provoking. On occasion, however, the analysis becomes a bit rarefied. More prosaic historians may well ask how one can adequately test a proposition such as the following: "In a very real sense, Turnerian assumptions about the flattening impact of the frontier notwithstanding, the citizens of the Old Northwest had transformed their environment far more than it had transformed them" (42). We may also wonder whether midwesterners, living in a world of personal objectives, problems, and community challenges, would have understood that they were "attempting to make sense of [a] transformation by reorganizing the complex processes through which individuals simultaneously define themselves as individuals and join with others to form coherent communities" (64).

In the epilogue Cayton and Onuf praise Turner for setting the terms of the debate over the meaning of the midwestern experience but note the deficiencies that scholars see in his work today. "We need our own story," they conclude. That we do. In the end, though, that story may show more of the old "truths" to be correct and relevant than Onuf and Cayton apparently deem possible.

The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History, by Carlos A. Schwantes. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. xxi, 427 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$15.95 paper.

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The history of many regions in the United States has been amply documented, but curious gaps remain. Excellent histories of New England are readily available. Distinguished historians have produced outstanding histories of the South, and a wide range of histories of the West awaits interested readers. But comprehensive histories of the Pacific Northwest have been very few, indeed. The only complete work was written more than three decades ago by Charles M. Gates

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