

Leland L. Sage

Frederick Jackson Turner, by Ray A. Billington. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. \$17.50.

SERIOUS STUDENTS OF HISTORY and many others of varying degrees of loyalty to the muse have eagerly awaited this long announced biography of Frederick Jackson Turner. Enough of its contents had been divulged in pre-publication articles in the scholarly journals to whet the appetite for the complete work. The patient vigil of those who waited is now at an end and has been handsomely rewarded by this well-nigh perfect treatment of both the man and the historian.

The enormous challenge to Professor Billington was to give a picture of the whole man, the man within the man, not to evaluate the frontier thesis and the concept of sectional influence—this the author and others had done elsewhere at great length. What everyone wanted to know was what kind of man had advanced these two theories, and what else if anything had he contributed to his profession and to mankind. Everyone knew, at least superficially, that Turner was one of the giants of the historical guild, a man who with missionary zeal had dealt with and demonstrably affected every phase of academic historianship. His two major books and a long list of articles, many published posthumously in collected form, his oracular book reviews, his teaching and placement of his graduate students, are all dealt with in this biography and their merits assayed. Probably more surprising to most readers is the revelation of Turner's interest in and his vast efforts to improve public school curricula and methods, and his efforts to popularize history with the non-academic public.

In addition, he was an organization man, a member of The Establishment which for years ran the American Historical Association. He was a successful administrative head of a growing

department within a growing university, an administrator who sacrificed his own chances for personal gain to his interest in improving his department and securing higher pay *and* better facilities and research opportunities for his colleagues. Finally, he played an effective part in supradepartmental affairs of the two universities which he served—Wisconsin and Harvard—even to the extent of deep involvement in efforts to reform the gladiatorial aspects of intercollegiate football in the early 1900s.

Billington reveals much of Turner's non-academic life. He is shown to be a man of pronounced though fluctuating political views. He was a lover of nature and outdoor life whose soul was restored and his health preserved by hiking, camping, and fishing. (Summer school appointments were measured largely in terms of the opportunities they afforded for these activities). He was a devoted family man. His wife loved fine clothes and he loved books, works of art, and travel; both required frequent and expensive medical care, and household servants, and remedial vacations were a necessity not a luxury. All in all their regime was an expensive one, and this in an era of unbelievably low salaries and nonexistent fringe benefits. The drain on his finances was tremendous and the reader is at times amused by the ineptness of his financial management, but ends with admiration for his ability to juggle assets and liabilities, often paying both Peter and Paul just enough to keep them at bay. Much to be admired was Turner's willingness to drive himself to summer school jobs and writing and speech-making, partly for the desperately needed money, partly because these jobs were prestigious and helped him professionally, and partly because they were a means of carrying out his self-appointed task of furthering the cause of historical scholarship.

It is vastly to the credit of Billington that he has not allowed his empathy with Turner to blind him to the realities of scholarly judgment of Turner's theories. All he claims for them is that Turner himself never considered them to be more than *theories* which were useful in explaining the workings of historical forces, and that even after the savage attacks on them they still have a modicum of validity and usefulness.

It is difficult to see how any reasonable reader or reviewer can fault this book in any respect. There may be a bit of repetitiveness but, if so, to a good purpose. It has been asserted that there is an

over-emphasis of the University of Wisconsin experience and a short-changing of the Harvard years, a judgment not shared by this reviewer. Turner's formative years were the Wisconsin years; the fourteen years at Harvard were not productive of the things that made Turner great.

Obviously, the author enjoyed the research and even more the telling of his story. A born raconteur who has polished and repolished his art, Billington has given us far more than a biography of Turner. He has given us an unforgettable picture of the academic life of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He has shown us the price that one man paid in the achievement of greatness, and, by indirection, why so few of us have achieved greatness. Few, regardless of native talent, are ready to pay the price Turner paid in devotion to an ideal.

Awed as we are by the evidence of the endless amounts of reading and the mountainous piles of notes which Turner made, one wonders at Turner's reading speed and his powers of retention. Was he another Lord Acton, a Harold Laski, a Theodore Roosevelt? If Billington deals with this, I cannot find it. Apparently Turner slogged his way through the mountains of materials which he read and made notes on—and somehow preserved, as Billington's copious notes show, all this in the midst of many other activities. He was not a genius nor was he a recluse who made up in isolated drudgery what others could do more easily and rapidly.

To be sure, there were only two books plus the collections of essays and other writings. Again one thinks of Lord Acton, this time of his "one book" of so much fame, easily forgetting his numerous essays and the editing of the monumental *Cambridge History*. Turner gave away to his graduate students and others enough material for many books. Billington is delightful as he reveals Turner's difficulties at getting words on paper, his unfulfilled promises to publishers, his eternal questing for that last elusive scrap of information before he could finish a project. Only the insistent demands of editors and friends plus the valiant services of a loyal secretary enabled him to finish the second book. And yet he is by universal consent one of our greatest historians and one of our most potent influences.

For showing us how this could have happened and that it did happen, Professor Billington deserves our sincere thanks and our unlimited admiration.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.