

Many Wests: A Review Essay

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Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West, by Donald Worster. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. ix, 292 pp. Notes, index. \$27.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West, by Richard White. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. xix, 644 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past, edited by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992. xii, 354 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

NINETEEN NINETY-THREE marked the centennial of the founding of the history of the American West. One hundred years ago, Frederick Jackson Turner suggested that the West was the key to the history of the United States. He argued that democracy and such fundamental traits of the American character as individualism, mobility, and materialism were forged out of the struggle of white men to subdue the vast areas of so-called free land in the West. This frontier thesis—debated and refined by succeeding generations of historians and endorsed by an endless series of writers, artists, filmmakers, and politicians—is part of the enduring popularity of the western myth. It has, however, little to do with the history of the region as understood by most of today's historians.

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Despite the public satisfaction with Turner's interpretation of the West, many historians have had problems with it at least since the 1940s—and in the past two decades, they have criticized it more harshly than ever before. Proponents of what has come to be called "the new western history" believe that the frontier thesis is at best inadequate and at worst "racist, sexist, and imperialist" (Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, 4). Turner believed that history progressed inexorably through stages from "savagery" to "civilization." More recently, as historians have broadened the scope of their inquiry, applied new methods, and asked new questions about the West, they have revealed a vastly richer, more complex, and morally ambiguous history than Turner ever imagined.

Where Turner described isolated and curiously innocent white men—each one made stronger through his private struggle with the wilderness—recent scholarship strips the West of its isolation and its innocence. The West, far from being an empty land, was populated with American Indians, Mexicans, Asians, and African Americans and, of course, women of all races. The new western history seeks to understand the experiences of these people in the context of white American expansion into the region; it also explores such topics as (imperial, federal, or state) government presence on the frontier, the environment, the role of cities, and regional and global economics as they reshape our understanding of the region.

More than anything else, perhaps, the new western history offers a darker vision of the West than we have seen before. Turner, of course, praised all things western, and most subsequent histories were similarly celebratory. In contrast, the West of today's historians is one in which nothing comes without a cost. Even William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin—who are more optimistic than many of their colleagues—oblige us to remember that however we may interpret the nation's past and present, we must not be blind to the fact that "the America we know today was built on the bones of those who never wanted it to exist" (26). Awareness of the manifold ways in which one people's ambitions are fulfilled at the expense of another's—be they of contemporary or subsequent generations—is what makes the new western history really new.

DONALD WORSTER'S passionate and wide-ranging collection of essays, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*, illustrates how new approaches to the West—environmental history, in his case—can turn older ideas upside down. What makes the West unique in his view is that it is largely “ecologically marginal for many human purposes” (36). He defines the region as, with some exceptions, that part of the nation characterized by “the lack of enough rainfall to sustain traditional, European-derived agriculture.” Specifically, it “begins with the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas,” and continues to the Pacific (23). Although its boundaries are determined by ecology, the West is characterized by specific human relationships and behavior. For Worster, the central relationship is between humans and nature, and the history of the West is the story of people living out of synch with their environment.

In an essay titled “Freedom and Want: The Western Paradox,” Worster argues that westerners are caught between two conflicting visions of their home and its future. On the one hand, they are drawn to the sensation of freedom felt in wide-open spaces—spaces that are the product of water scarcity and are not (in their unaltered state) a source of wealth. On the other hand, westerners seek the prosperity that comes of controlling and transforming nature. As a result of his analysis of economic development, Worster concludes that the price of prosperity is, ironically, the loss of freedom. In “Hydraulic Society in California,” Worster describes how completely unnatural that state’s water resources have become in California’s efforts to sustain its vast urban centers and extensive agriculture. The losses suffered by humans and the natural world are an inescapable consequence of this prosperity, and are symbolized by “a concrete-lined irrigation canal in Kern County [California], by a stream that is not a stream, where no willows are allowed to grow or herons or blackbirds nest” (53).

To an extent, Worster’s vision is a dark version of Turner’s in which white men tame nature to achieve their own prosperity, but at a high price. However, he develops his analysis further, ultimately standing Turner’s West on its head. He argues that technology cannot, finally, transcend environmental constraints, however much it may stretch them. “The control

we achieve, as it is pushed to higher and higher levels of intensity, turns out to be self-defeating. The water we command becomes increasingly degraded in quality. Instead of becoming more useful to more people, it becomes less so" (89). Prosperity, then, is only temporary. Worster has pursued similar themes in earlier works on the Dust Bowl and on western rivers. In each case, he argues passionately that human disregard of the natural limits of the western landscape necessarily leads first to environmental disaster, and second, to an equally destructive centralization of power.¹ Not only does the effort to subdue nature not lead to individual freedom, democracy, and vitality, as earlier generations of historians had suggested, but nature was never actually conquered, only temporarily restrained. But Worster is not merely a critic of western life, he is deeply in love with the West as well. Thus, he longs for an alternative future for the West, one in which people will finally face "the hardest challenge of all: finding a relationship with aridity and water that will help Americans *stay in this place*" (92).

If Worster's volume is an example of one of the approaches that has made the new western history so exciting, Richard White's massive work, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West*, demonstrates how thoroughly that recent research has reshaped our understanding of the region. White, one of the most original and thoughtful western historians at work today, has synthesized much of the new literature to create a coherent and strongly argued interpretation of all of western history from the arrival of the first Spanish conquistadors in the 1500s up to the Reagan presidency. Unlike Worster, White does not see geography as the region's defining trait. Instead, he argues that the various parts of the West share a "common dependent relationship to the federal government and a common economic origin in a largely extractive and service-based economy." Other defining traits include a "dual labor system based on race and the existence of minority groups with distinctive legal relationships to the larger

1. Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979); idem, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985).

society . . . ; particular patterns of party loyalty and political organization, and widespread aridity" (539). White therefore organizes his narrative around two linked topics: the role of the federal government in the West, and the region's economic structure.

The title refers to White's ironic sense that the dominant Anglo-American society in the West consistently distanced itself from the consequences and effects of its actions on other people. The result is that members of this dominant group see and portray themselves as perpetual innocents. During the rapid westward expansion in the nineteenth century, for example, most white westerners saw themselves as blameless victims suffering from the aggression of Mexicans and Indians—the very people they were displacing. White argues that conceptual separation of an act from its consequences is as much a trait of the modern West as it was of the old West. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, California Governor Ronald Reagan struck a responsive chord when he portrayed the dominant society as the innocent victim of urban rioters and other antiestablishment protesters. In contrast to the people he studies, White insists on making connections and pointing out contradictions; to this end, he sums up the politics of former Arizona senator and presidential candidate Barry Goldwater as "a political stance that combined individualism and independence from federal subsidies as a matter of principal with a willingness to solicit them in practice" (602).

Although White draws on a large portion of the recent literature, he could not have incorporated all of the insights of the new western history without surrendering his narrative line. Readers should be grateful that he reserves until his final chapter, "The Imagined West," any discussion of the interplay of history and imagination in shaping the West; addressing this vital topic chronologically throughout the text would have rendered the narrative hopelessly confusing.

Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past, edited by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, employs a different approach to the new western history that more fully demonstrates its breadth. The essays in this collection were written in honor of Howard Lamar, emeritus professor of

history at Yale University, by many of his former students. The editors solicited essays on the theme "does the western past have a future?" Most of the essays describe the current status of research in the contributors' particular areas of western history. Unlike White, who shows how much recent scholarship has accomplished, the contributors to this book explore where it needs to go. Unfortunately, while demonstrating that western history has a brilliant future, their relentless emphasis on the important research yet to be done unintentionally and erroneously implies that it lacks a particularly noteworthy past.

That regrettable impression aside, the essays in this book express two complementary views of the West. First, the West is far less isolated from and far more connected to the rest of the world than either the older literature or popular culture would have us believe. In "Kennecott Journey: The Paths out of Town," William Cronon employs a broadly ecological analysis to show how Kennecott, a nearly inaccessible abandoned copper mining town in south central Alaska, is linked to people and places remote from it in time and space. Similarly, in "On the Boundaries of Empire," Jay Gitlin argues that the Mississippi valley frontier must be understood in terms of its position on the "edges of the worldwide expansion of European economies" (72).

The West was not only less isolated than we used to believe, it was also a much more fragmented place than we ever imagined — indeed, the Turnerian frontier has been replaced by a multiplicity of wests. In "Landscape of Enclaves: Race Relations in the West, 1865–1990," Sarah Deutsch sees a West characterized by semiautonomous racial or ethnic enclaves. The essay begins with the striking example of the sixty-year-old Spanish American community, or *colonia*, in Greeley, Colorado. Only two miles from the center of town, this neighborhood is so far removed from the consciousness of the town leadership that — as recently as the 1980s — government maps showed only a green belt where the streets of the enclave should have been. The geographical, cultural, and legal boundaries that divide one group from another are not, however, as impermeable or unchanging as the Greeley example might suggest. Deutsch also reveals how complex the dynamic relations between enclaves

could be. She describes, for example, how, in Los Angeles in the 1940s, whites, blacks, and Chicanos interacted in the workplace while living in segregated housing and leading otherwise separate lives.

Other contributors to this volume write on topics including gender, Native Americans, regionalism, the twentieth-century West, and popular culture. Together, they demonstrate that each of the various wests must be understood on its own terms and explained in its own way. No longer the endlessly repeated orderly process of Turner's frontier, the historians' West has become kaleidoscopic—composed of a vast number of pieces that are forever coming together in new ways and offering us new insights.

Several of the contributors to this volume, cognizant that there is no longer a shared understanding of what "the West" is, employ metaphors to convey their own particular vision. D. Michael Quinn proposes a particularly imaginative and effective one in "Religion in the American West." He notes that the West is known for its secular nature and the low church membership of many western populations; simultaneously, however, it is the most religiously diverse region of the nation, and it incorporates enclaves of intense religiosity. Quinn believes that this diverse and contradictory situation can best be visualized as a gigantic aquarium—"God's aquarium." "Throughout the wide spaces in God's western aquarium," he continues, "there are schools of familiar (but easily startled) denominational species, there are slow-moving crustaceans, there are religious exotics from the depths and an occasional shark, there's the Mormon leviathan, and unchurched plankton are floating everywhere" (164). The image serves equally well to represent the field of western history today. Ironically, western historians have moved in so many different directions that they are joined more by a shared rejection of the frontier thesis than anything else. Turner, though obsolete, is not irrelevant; he is still the glue that holds western history together.

THE MIDDLE WEST receives scant attention in these books. There are, for example, no entries in White's or Worster's indexes for either Iowa or Illinois. Both states do receive brief

mention in John Mack Faragher's essay on western communities in *Under an Open Sky*, and Quinn informs us that the first mosque in the United States was constructed in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. There is, nevertheless, a solid literature on the Middle West firmly if uneasily based in western history. Cronon, Gitlin, and Miles note that "Midwestern historians (like Turner himself) often consider themselves frontier or even western historians, but their more westerly colleagues tend to scoff when they do. Most scholars who call themselves western historians study the region west of the Mississippi River" (24). Thus, the Middle West has long held an uncertain place in western history. How western historians regard the region depends on their conception of the West itself.

Turner's original vision emphasized the transitional boundary between "wilderness" and "civilization." Since this boundary or frontier moved over time, a particular geographical location could be part of the West in one decade and not in the next—hence historians' long-standing interest in the history of the middle western frontier from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Worster sees the West quite differently; for him it is not a process but a place. Although he recognizes the importance of human relationships in determining its regional identity, he nevertheless defines the West according to its environmental traits and assigns it permanent geographical boundaries. Illinois and Iowa will never be part of his West.

White and the editors of *Under an Open Sky* fall somewhere in between. White is drawn by Worster's geographical certainty, but cannot finally accept it. Although his West is more the creation of history and politics, he nevertheless argues for clear and permanent geographical boundaries beginning west of the Missouri River. White's definition would seem to clearly exclude the Middle West from consideration as a western topic, and he does not pay it much heed in "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own." Yet his other recent book, *The Middle Ground*, explores the complex interaction between whites and Indians in the region between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes.² It is a

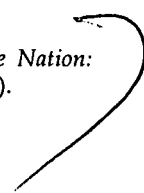
2. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991).

superb example of how much the new western history can add to our understanding of the Middle West.

William Cronon, whose first book on colonial New England established his reputation as a western historian, is unlikely to subscribe to a strict geographical definition of the West. In the introductory essay to *Under an Open Sky*, Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin argue for a definition—not so much of the West, as of what western historians should study—that gives Turner more credit than do either White or Worster. They argue that Turner's recognition of the frontier as a process that repeated itself is a key element in making western (and more generally regional) history of more than local interest. Western historians should study the process of transition from frontier to region. "The narrative we have in mind carries us from frontier invasion and land taking to the settlement and formation of new communities—processes often at odds with one another—bringing us to the gradual emergence of local and regional identities with their attendant problems of community reproduction, conflict, and change" (7). They suggest that there were common elements to the settlement of all parts of the nation. But because these shared processes operated under specific historical conditions, they yielded different results in each part of the country. Regional identity lies in those differences.

This conception does not really clarify the Middle West's status in western history. There are many reasons to see the Middle West as a separate region with a historical identity of its own. This is not, after all, the land of cowboys, or the gold rush, or dry farming. In fact, historians Andrew R. L. Clayton and Peter S. Onuf have recently called on their colleagues to recognize the importance of the Middle West as a distinct region and to write its history.³ On the other hand, Cronon, Gitlin, and Miles's formulation also recommends that the same tools used to study the West should be applied to the Middle West—eliminating the necessity for a distinct regional literature. Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, like White's *Middle Ground* and John Mack Faragher's *Sugar Creek*, all show how productively

3. Andrew R. L. Clayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington, IN, 1990).



western historians can apply their training to the study of the Middle West.⁴ We would undoubtedly learn a great deal as well if someone were to contrast the uses of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers with what Worster found in his study of the great rivers of the Far West.

In the end, I suspect historians will not create a distinctively middle western regional history for two reasons. The first is that the literature on the Middle West (like that of the West) still relies on Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis as its touchstone. The scholarship on the region (as opposed to its history) is not, therefore, sufficiently separate from that of the West to support its autonomy. Second, Cayton and Onuf argue that what makes the Middle West worth individual attention is, paradoxically, that it is quintessentially American. In his essay in *Under an Open Sky*, Michael McGerr argues that a similar claim made for the twentieth-century West is counter-productive because it undermines the regional approach it is intended to justify. "Modern American historians look at the writing on the West, find confirmation of what they already believe about the country as a whole, and, not surprisingly, dismiss western history" (255-56). Similarly, if we base our claim for the significance of the Middle West on the notion that it is typically American, then its history is not regional, but national. By definition, uniquely middle western phenomena would be of local interest only. It would be better, as McGerr recommends for the modern West, to emphasize the region's distinctiveness rather than its representativeness.

Western historians have traditionally accepted diverse approaches to their subject. Like the rugged individuals of the Turnerian West, they have generally respected the right of their colleagues to go their own way. Those scholars who study the Middle West will continue to find it fruitful to include themselves in this group and to draw on the literature and methods of the field.

4. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991); John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, CT, 1986); White, *Middle Ground*.

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