

Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis:"
Changing How American History is Studied

A Review Essay by Bill Cummings

Etulain, Richard, ed. *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?* Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.*

Bogue, Alan G. *Frederick Jackson Turner; Strange Roads Going Down*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press. 1998.

Billington, Ray Allen. *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity*. San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library. 1971.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Significance of Sections in American History*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co. 1932.

Limerick, Patricia. *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co. 1988.

Worster, Donald. *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 1992.

In July, 1893, at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, Frederick Jackson Turner, a professor from the University of Wisconsin delivered a paper to the American Historical Association entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Largely unnoticed for several years, this essay has become the most important paper written in its field. Turner's thesis statement is simple, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Overturning the then prevalent "germ theory" of American history, Jackson's thesis has forced subsequent writers to consider the role of the frontier in the shaping of America's character.

The first book listed in the bibliography, *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?*, by Richard Etulain, is included for those who may have little or no knowledge of the Frontier Thesis, and is only included here as an introductory reference. The volume begins

with Jackson's thesis as published in the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893*, then presents essays discussing the various strengths and weaknesses of the thesis as considered by a few leading historians. If you are unfamiliar with the Frontier Thesis, this book will give you enough information to better understand my review.

Considered by many as the definitive biography of Frederick Jackson Turner, Alan G. Bogue's *Frederick Jackson Turner; Strange Roads Going Down* (hereafter *Strange Roads*) is a comprehensive study of the man who the Council of the American Historical Association once called "one of [America's] . . . two most outstanding" historians.¹ Working with the understanding that we can not fully appreciate the Frontier Thesis without understanding the man who wrote it, Bogue begins with a brief outline of Jack and Mary Turner, Frederick's parents, and their migration from New York to Portage, Wisconsin in 1855. Like many migrants, the Turner's had little . . . "ten cents' and a printer's skill."² He details many of the sights and circumstances to be found during Turner's childhood in Portage, such as the frequent visits of Indians, the rowdy lumbermen, Civil War soldiers returning home, and a lynching. Turner grew up fishing, hunting, and supporting the Republican Party. He worked with his father and learned the printer's trade, and learned to write news stories for his father's paper. He excelled in school, and won prizes for his oratorical skills.

Bogue gives a sampling of statistical analysis in discussing the population of Portage which included a dozen or so ethnic groups in a population of nearly 4000 in 1870. Setting the stage a little further, Bogue mentions that Turner's best friend through high school was Jim Cole, who would find himself chasing Geronimo a few years later.

¹ Alan G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner; Strange Roads Going Down*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p. xiii.

² Bogue, p. 3.

In 1879, Frederick Jackson Turner enrolled in the University of Wisconsin to pursue a Journalism degree. His exposure to History, however, was quite limited. The History Department was comprised of two professors, one being the highly regarded Dr. William Allen. Turner's entire undergraduate experience in American History consisted of half a semester. After graduation, Turner became a professional journalist, but quit that to become an instructor at Wisconsin. From there he entered Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and began serious work in western history.

At that time, 1888, the field of History was focused on European history or Colonial history. There were no courses in Western history. Turner's work, under the tutelage of Dr.'s Charles Adams and Richard Ely changed that. He focused his graduate work on the history of the Northwest Territory, completing his dissertation on the Wisconsin fur trade and earning his doctorate in 1889. He returned to the University of Wisconsin as an Assistant Professor in History, and then succeeded to the Department Chair on the death of Dr. Allen.

It is at Wisconsin that Turner pioneered the field of Western history. He created a course by that name, the first in the country, then built the Department into one of the most prestigious history programs in the nation. Much of that prestige rested on his own writings and teaching. One of his first major papers written at Wisconsin was entitled "Problems in American History."³

With this paper Turner laid out his conception of the role of the historian in analyzing the development of America. Turner broke with the idea that colonial history was the key to understanding America, and pronounced the Mississippi Valley as the "true point of view."⁴ He called on historians to study the "physiographic basis of our history," as well as the effects of

³ Bogue, p. 82 ff. This paper was published in the student newspaper, "Aegis," in November 1892.

⁴ Bogue, p. 84

“Indian tribes” both positively and negatively, on settlement and on political institutions.⁵

Turner was emphatic that “American history cannot be treated as a simple expansion of European enterprise.”⁶

Further, and of real significance to this study, Turner described four major sections of the country that must be studied; the Atlantic Coast, from the Appalachians to the Mississippi, from the Mississippi to the Rockies, and from the Great Salt Lake to the Pacific. He called for “independent, original investigation” of each area, and pointed out that the area from the Mississippi to the Rockies remained “virtually untouched.”⁷

This paper became the basic framework for his next, and most famous, work, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in July, 1893. Here, Turner laid out his “Frontier Thesis,” the proposition that American history can be understood as the development of a democratic ethic based upon the availability of “free land.”

Turner believed that the moving frontier line explained the development of American culture and institutions. The first frontier was the Atlantic seaboard. Colonials became more Americanized until a break with Britain, ‘the East,’ resulted in the Revolution. Development in the “West” shaped the Constitution in the debates over control of the Ohio Valley and the Northwest Territory. The extension of slavery into the southwest, then Alabama and Mississippi, eventually led to the Missouri Compromise. The frontier continued rolling across Texas, passed over the Great Plains to Oregon and California, then returned to the Great Plains

While this concept was for Turner an explanation of American development, it was only a beginning. As Bogue explains, Turner did not stop with the “Frontier Thesis.” It was a call for

⁵ *ibid*, p. 83

⁶ *ibid*, p. 85

⁷ *ibid*, p. 87

American historians to explore the ideas he presented. In further developing his ideas he eventually became convinced that while the frontier played a definite part in the advancement of American culture, to really understand our national development required the study of the various sections of the country, of which he identified the Northeast, the South, the Middle States, the upper Midwest, the Great Plains, etc., to the Pacific Coast. According to Merle Curti, one of Turner's students at Harvard, sectionalism was "even more important in Turner's thinking" than the frontier.⁸

Bogue discusses in detail the career of Turner, and deals with critical attacks on his work, as well as support. One of those who supported Turner was Ray Alan Billington, author of our next book, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*. In this work, Billington focuses on the issues and events that led Turner to write the Frontier Thesis. This book is divided into three sections; "Years of Preparation, 1885 – 1892," "Formulating the Thesis, 1892 – 1893," and "Frederick Jackson Turner Remembers." Much of the first section echoes Bogue's analysis of Turner's youth and college studies, so I will not discuss that section here.

Within Section II we find four chapters dealing with "The Social Climate" and "The Intellectual Climate" of Turner's day, as well as a chapter on Turner's reading and one on "The 1893 Essay and Its Reception." In these chapters we learn that there was a general malaise over the disappearance of the frontier, and that scholars, politicians, economics, and other professionals were concerned with the results. Turner read widely in various fields to gain an understanding of the 'big picture.'

As chair of the History Department at Wisconsin he focused on building the leading History Department focusing on Western history by using the massive archives of the State Historical Society which was located on campus. In this endeavor, he recruited some of the top

⁸ Bogue, p. 444

students in the nation, and focused their graduate work on Western topics. While they completed their papers, Turner was learning from them about topics too varied for one scholar to pursue. Adding his personal research to that of his students, he became one of the best informed historians in the nation.

When asked to present at the American Historical Association's 1893 annual meeting in Chicago, Turner was at first reluctant. Instead, he asked the committee to allow one of his students to present. When that suggestion was denied, Turner began work on his paper. Long a procrastinator, Turner put off the task until the last minute, finishing the essay only an hour or so before the presentation. The last paper to be read that day, it was largely ignored until it was published, first in the proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, then in the AHA's Annual Report for 1893 in December 1894..

As more historians took note of Turner's thesis, it became the focal point of American historical studies. By 1900 nearly every university in the nation offered courses on "Western History" with the Frontier Thesis the centerpiece. Many of Turner's students became leaders in various fields and made it the basis of their work.

Turner, however, was 'changing course.' Rather than the frontier, Turner began focus on the various sections that made up the United States. Shortly after his death, Turner's essays on sections were published as *The Significance of Sections in American History*. In twelve essays, Turner examines the role of sections as they influenced the development of the nation.

He shows how geography divides the nation into sections that have common interests with no regard for state lines. In voting, for instance, these common interests lead representatives to form voting blocks to protect those interests and to form alliances with those who will support them. For instance, The Northern Great Plains states of North and South

Dakota, Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and Colorado contain less than five percent of the nation's population, yet they wield fourteen votes in the Senate, nearly thirty percent. When voting on regional issues, the agricultural Plains states can vote with the eleven agricultural southern states, and pass laws in their favor. Thus, southern states vote for western subsidies, and western states reciprocate.

Turner further deals with the complexity of western expansion in essays on "Western State-making in the Revolutionary Era" and two essays discussing French policy regarding the region from the Appalachians to the Rockies (which they regarded as rightfully theirs). In "The Children of the Pioneers" Turner shreds the idea that children of pioneers would be culturally deprived, illiterate, and poor. While making a valid point, this essay reads like a name-dropping contest. Two other essays, "Since the Foundation [of Clark University (1889)]" (a Commencement address), and "The West – 1876 and 1926" artfully describe the changes that his generation had witnessed. Clearly, Turner viewed Sectionalism as more important than the frontier.

The Turner Thesis was not without its detractors, so I will discuss two of them here. (In the interest of brevity, I will introduce them separately, but combine my observations.) In 1987, Patricia Nelson Limerick, in the introduction to her book, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, wrote, "The rigidity of the Turner Thesis left it particularly vulnerable to a great expansion of scholarship, accelerating in the 1960s and afterward. Individual historians simply set aside the Thesis and studied particular places, people and events."⁹ With this declaration of the end of Turner's Thesis, she proceeds to discuss the "New Western History," of which she is considered as co-founder.

⁹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co, 1988), p. 22.

The book is comprised of largely unrelated topics divided into two domains. The first, “The Conquerors,” deals mostly with the actions and attitudes of whites who “conquered” the west. She discusses the attitude of westerners as victims, dependence on the federal government, speculations, water usage, boom-and-bust industries such as mining, and the results of twentieth century mismanagement in numerous aspects of American western civilization.

The second section, “The Conquerors Meet Their Match” deals with issues involving Indians, the southern border, racism, mismanagement of nature, and finally, with “The Burdens of Western American History.” These essays are well written, and explain the issues to the reader in well researched and documented fashion the context of numerous topics (each essay contains several shorter essays).

Likewise, Donald Worster’s book, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*, also deals with many of these same issues. This book is comprised of eleven essays dealing with issues from irrigation in California and the Hoover Dam to the development of Alaskan oil.

The scholarship in this book is excellent, and the discussion on the Black Hills is to be highly recommended. Worster discusses the issues surrounding the Black Hills and Indian claims to it from a variety of angles. We learn of the 1867 Treaty giving the Hills to the Sioux in perpetuity, and we learn that that treaty disregarded the claims of other tribes to ownership of the Hills. He discusses how the whites manipulated the Indians to gain ownership in violation of the treaty, and of the attempts of the Indians to regain control of the area. He also reveals that the Black Hills were not considered to be “sacred” by the Sioux until the late 1960’s. His other topical discussions are similarly thorough.

The one essay that I found less than compelling is entitled “New West, True West.” Like Limerick, Worster claims to be a “New Western Historian.” He says that the Turner Thesis is dead because he, like his comrades, defines the west as a specific region (sectionalism?), not a process. According to the New Western Historians, the west begins at the 98th or 100th meridian and extends to the Pacific, or to Hawaii, or to Alaska. While most would put the northern boundary at the Canadian border, and the southern boundary at the Mexican border, Limerick claims that, “[i]n fact . . . the Mexican border was a social fiction that neither nature nor people . . . observed.” It sounds like Turnerian sectionalism to me.

While I find the scholarship of Limerick and Worster to be exceptional, I believe that in their criticisms of Turner they have not proven their case. I admit that I have read only a small portion of their work, but I find that they are guilty of the rhetorical fallacy of arguing from a definition. I also do not believe they have accurately portrayed Turner’s thoughts on the issues they raise. Space requirements prevent me from elaborating, but I intend to continue my studies on this point.