

Western History, New and Not So by Walter Nugent

In the last several years, the field of western American history has become more vibrant and visible. One might even describe it as “hot.” But this is a recent phenomenon. Colleges and universities that had once thought it essential to offer a course in “frontier” or “westward expansion” had by the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, often even failed to replace their retiring colleagues who taught those courses. The field that Frederick Jackson Turner founded in 1893 when he delivered his paper on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” and that Walter Prescott Webb rejuvenated with *The Great Plains* in 1931, seemed, even to its practitioners, to be losing its relevance. By the 1950s and 1960s, the region requiring scrutiny was the South, where a past of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow laws demanded wholesale reinterpretation. **The West, meanwhile, seemed more than ever the region of cowboys and Indians, “pardners” and “cayuses,” an antiquarian fun house not to be taken very seriously. Its past seemed nostalgic, not tragic.**

By the early 1980s, western historians lamented that their field had become a **backwater**. Their conventions featured papers with such titles as “Is There Life after the Frontier?,” “Will the West Survive as a Field in American History?,” and “The Death of the Frontier.” **DEMO VERSION of CAD-KAS PDF-Editor (<http://www.cadkas.com>)** of pessimism, a good many historians (including a young generation who were eagerly choosing careers in western history despite its tarnished reputation) were beavering away, producing articles and monographs of high quality on a widening range of subjects, including the Turner-less twentieth century (his famous “thesis” stops with what he took to be the “closing of the frontier” in 1890). Two major historiographical stocktakings, one edited by Michael P. Malone and one by Roger L. Nichols, appeared in the mid-1980s, revealing that reports of the field’s death were, to paraphrase Mark Twain, greatly exaggerated (1). At the Western History Association’s meeting in Sacramento in 1985, past-president Howard R. Lamar called his banquet speech “Much to Celebrate: The WHA’s 25th Birthday,” and he proved his point. Despite all the laudable work going on, the mood was defensive, the visage downcast.

The cloud lifted suddenly when the stiff, fresh breeze of Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* blew across the field in 1987. At the WHA meeting in Wichita in October 1988, a session appraising *Legacy of Conquest* drew a crowd of several hundred, and the author received a rousing ovation. In September 1989, Limerick put together a conference at Santa Fe which drew considerable media attention, **partly from a “non-manifesto” she distributed, which journalists seized upon as the start of a “New Western History.”** Papers from this conference (and some other essays) appeared in book form in 1991 as *Trails: Toward a New Western History*. By then the “New Western History” had been written up in the *New York Times Magazine* and in many op-ed pieces in major

newspapers; Limerick had been interviewed in *People* magazine and on PBS; and the “New Western History” had become a major cultural event—and controversy. Limerick was not, however, a solitary prophetess. Others, including many of the monographic scholars of the previous decade, shared her views; and, in different ways, such historians as Donald Worster, Richard White, and William Cronon shared her leadership role.

By mid-1991, to judge by the media attention, the “New Western History” had revolutionized the field. Historians were not always equally overwhelmed, however. In 1991, I conducted a survey of nearly five hundred members of the WHA and the Western Writers of America, a group chiefly of novelists and essayists, and some leading newspaper people in the West. Many continued to think within Turnerian or Webbian categories, and a few were adamantly hunkered down against these winds of change (2). Western historians were polarizing between “new” and “old,” and by early 1993 something of a Thermidor had set in, expressed in sharply critical statements by William W. Savage, Gerald D. Nash, and Gerald Thompson (3). Where this will proceed is not fully clear. It appears that western historians, while not accepting the “New Western History” as a full-scale paradigm shift, will absorb many of its points into their teaching and research. In fact, evidence suggests that they are already doing so.

What did *Legacy of Conquest* and *Trails* say, and why all the media attention? To answer the second question first, Limerick and her associates state in a fresh way that the West is an important region on its own terms, and beyond that, its meaning is crucial for understanding what America means. The West remains of intense interest, and thanks to Limerick more than to any other individual, this interest is less a matter of entertainment, and more one of national self-explanation, than it has been perhaps since Turner’s day. The West is important to the media and their watchers and readers for the same reason that any slight twitch on the subject of the Dead Sea Scrolls gets immediate media coverage: research into either the Scrolls or the American West constitutes a high-risk process of shedding light on matters of fundamental belief. In the case of the West, the belief in question is the cultural bedrock of American nationality. Everything we like to think of as “American”—flattering things that Turner said best: individualism, democracy, or progress—are things widely considered western and as having developed out of the frontier and westering experience. Historians Richard Slotkin, William Goetzmann, and others have called it “the creation myth of America.” To assert that the West and the frontier experience were not always honorable or flattering upsets many people and literally beggars their belief.

The “New Western History” has four basic points, and they appear most succinctly in Limerick’s “non-manifesto” of 1989. First, the West as a place, not the frontier as a process, should be our focus. “The term ‘frontier’ is nationalistic and often racist (in essence, the area where white people get scarce)” (4). The history of European advance across North America is better expressed by “invasion, conquest, colonization, exploitation, development, [and] expansion of the world market.”

Turner used “conquest” too, but the point is not the word itself, but rather the need to pay attention to the conquered as well as the conquerors. **The second point follows: whatever it was that happened, it involved “the convergence of diverse people—women as well as men, Indians, Europeans, Latin Americans, Asians, Afro-Americans. . . with each other and with the natural environment” (5).** The interaction of all these groups, whether in competition or cooperation, is the important thing. **“The West was not where we escaped each other, but where we all met” (6).** White males were certainly present, but so were many others whom Turnerian history has slighted.

Third point: the interaction has continued and is still happening. The “frontier” did not end in 1890, as Turner claimed; another hundred years of rich western history has followed, and it demands historians’ attention. Fourth, the western story is neither one of triumph over adversity, with the resulting ennoblement of the American character, nor a unique and exceptional subjugation of an empty land (for Indians were virtually invisible in the traditional story except as enemies who resisted the inevitable). Rather, it is a great moral ambiguity. “In western American history, heroism and villainy, virtue and vice, and nobility and shoddiness appear in roughly the same proportions as they appear in any other subject of human history. . . . This is only disillusioning to those who have come to depend on illusions” (7). And, some do. **A recent essay in *Montana*, pointing out artist Frederic Remington’s profound and explicit racism, provoked one reader to bellow: “My reply to the trendy ‘experts’ who tell me what Frederic Remington meant: Stay the hell out of my nostalgia” (8).**

Donald Worster has also contributed substantially to redirecting western history and requiring that it be taken seriously. **Author of books on the Dust Bowl, irrigation and power in the West, and ecological thought, Worster, more than anyone, has clarified the significance of western history as environmental history.** Keynoter at the 1989 Trails conference where he declared that “the invaded and subject peoples of the West must be given a voice in the region’s history,” he has also underscored the West’s importance. “Today,” he writes, “the history of the American West is undergoing a thunderous reawakening, drawing attention from journalists, film-makers, novelists, and undergraduates as well as a new generation of scholars. **People everywhere sense that this region is central to our nation’s experience and identity, as well as unique in so many ways, and they want to know from historians why that is so and what it means” (9).** Historians must “help the American West to become a more thoughtful and self-aware community than it has been, a community that no longer believes in its special innocence, but accepts the fact that it is inextricably part of a flawed world” (10). **However, many continue to believe in that “special innocence” in the West, and to them Worster’s words are discordant.**

A third leader in new directions is Richard White. In 1991 he published two books, either of which would satisfy many historians as a lifetime achievement. *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own’: A New History of the American West*, is a massive

history of what is now the western half of the United States (11). Never using the word “frontier,” White’s book is decidedly the most detailed history of the twentieth-century West which sees it as “a product of conquest and of the mixing of diverse groups of peoples.” White argues that the “West began when Europeans sought to conquer various areas of the continent and when people of Indian, European, Asian, and African ancestry began to meet within the territories west of the Missouri that would later be part of the United States” (12).

His second book, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, exemplifies the concern that all groups in a historical setting be treated equally, with respect but without romanticism (13). In another place, White contrasts a 1718 French map of what is now the United States, replete and almost crowded with Indian as well as French, Spanish, and English settlements, with an 1828 American school map presenting everything beyond the Appalachians as completely devoid of Indians, awaiting “settlers peacefully occupying vacant territory” (14). The French and other Europeans in the Great Lakes-Ohio-Mississippi region in the early eighteenth century had to identify their Indian neighbors. But the Anglo-Americans of the early nineteenth century could ignore them and, ethnocentrically, did so, laying the ground for Turner’s mistaken idea of the North American interior as a “vast area of free land.”

William Cronon has often been bracketed with the “New Western Historians,” but he differs in certain respects, such as his reaffirmation of the frontier as process: “Much as our own approach may differ from Turner’s we share his belief that a comparative study of parallel regional changes—‘frontier processes’—has much to offer. . . . By coupling western history with the idea of sequential frontiers, Turner showed that the history of ‘the West’ was in fact the history of the entire nation” (15). The 1992 collection of essays, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*, in which this statement appears should be read by all graduate students and teachers of “frontier” or western history. Cronon’s earlier books on colonial New England and on Chicago’s symbiotic development with the “Great West” of the nineteenth century demonstrate his unfailing attention to environmental history as well as to Native Americans and other non-Anglo-Saxon actors in his narratives (16).

Many other historians in recent years have brought out books, essays, and papers very much in the spirit of the “New Western History,” although often preceding it and appearing without obvious debt to it. Western historians have been tracing the interaction of men and women, racial and ethnic groups, and the villainous as well as the virtuous from colonial times to the present. A substantial and growing amount of literature now exists on the history of western women, Latinos, various Asian groups, African Americans, and others. Collectively western historians have broken into the twentieth century; they have been more fair to non-winners; they have recognized failure, waste, and exploitation as well as the plummier results of human endeavor; and, they have not automatically assumed the superiority of a colonizing and missionizing European (indeed Anglo-Saxon) race. They are

substantially rewriting the story of the occupation and development of North America in the past few centuries.

The “New Western History” has had its critics. Some have been know-nothings of the “stay the hell out of my nostalgia” type. Some, like the novelist Larry McMurtry (who does know his history), believe myths are necessary and sustaining. It is unlikely that the differences between historians (like Limerick) who want illusions dispelled, and novelists (like McMurtry) who think we continue to need them, will be resolved soon. Other critics, including many historians, deny that the “New Western History” is all that new; and a glance at WHA programs as well as the *Western Historical Quarterly*, several years before *Legacy of Conquest* appeared, reveals that sessions (for example) on Native Americans, Black cowboys, western women, Hispanics, and twentieth-century topics were there all along. Limerick, in a discussion on PBS, insisted that *Legacy of Conquest* is a synthesis of a great deal of earlier monographic scholarship and could never have been written without it.

Other critics include hard-nosed, hardheaded historians who believe they have always told it like it was. To them, there is much more to the “New Western History” than meets the eye. There is some truth to this; alternatives to Turner go back at least to Earl Pomeroy’s famous 1955 essay, “Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment” (17). Nor is the “New Western History” the first effort to reach out to non-academic audiences. Wallace Stegner and, earlier, Bernard DeVoto and Walter Prescott Webb were very good at that. So, in fact, was Turner. Thus, the novelty of the “New Western History” may be questioned. Another criticism is more overtly political: the tenets of the “New Western History” are simply an expression of negativism and disillusion emanating from members of the anti-Vietnam generation. This characterization is shallow and misguided. The leaders of the “New Western History,” in providing an alternative to the triumphalist interpretation of western and frontier history—and, therefore, of American history—are part and parcel of a very old and honorable tradition best called anti-imperialism (18).

As the historian Elliott West recently wrote, “The new history really is part of something larger. It is a maturing understanding of the West, a comprehension that takes into account the full length of its history, its severe limitations and continuing conflicts, its ambivalence, and its often bewildering diversity” (19). It is, in fact, helping us recognize that what went on in the West—that is, the successive Wests in North American history—was the product of the human condition. Turner and other contributors to the western-frontier mythology of triumphal expansion, notably Buffalo Bill Cody, Owen Wister, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Wayne, glamorized the story, however subtly or unsubtly (20). The new history is providing a better appreciation of just what did happen and just what is mythical about it. The result, as with all good history, is that we can better understand both our limitations and our possibilities.

Endnotes

1. Michael P. Malone, *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); and Roger L. Nichols, *American Frontier and Western Issues: A Historiographical Review* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).
2. The results appeared in Walter Nugent, "Where is the American West? Report on a Survey," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Summer 1992): 2-23. Pages 12-23 quote many of the most provocative responses.
3. William W. Savage, Jr., "The New Western History: Youngest Whore on the Block," *AB Bookman's Weekly*, 4 October 1993; Gerald D. Nash, "Point of View: One Hundred Years of Western History," *Journal of the West* 32 (January 1993): 3-4; and Gerald Thompson, address at the Phi Alpha Theta luncheon, annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Anaheim, California, April 1993, expanded and reprinted as "The New Western History: A Critical Analysis," *Continuity* 17 (Fall 1993): 6-24.
4. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "What on Earth is the New Western History?," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 85.
5. *Ibid*, 86.
6. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 291.
7. Limerick, "What on Earth," 86.
8. Letter from John S. du Mont (Hancock, NH), in *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Fall 1992): 93.
9. Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), viii.
10. Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," in *Trails*, 25.
11. Richard White, *'It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own': A New History of the American West*