

STATEMENTS

This chapter begins not with documents, as such, but with statements by historians. Appropriately, Frederick Jackson Turner speaks first. The introduction to his famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," explained *"the process of evolution in each western area"* (Turner's italics) where "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier." Turner asked the rhetorical question, "What is the frontier?" but he did not give a specific definition. In the second statement, from his 1896 essay "The Problem of the West," Turner asked, "What is the West?" He believed that it was "a form of society, rather than an area." Did Turner put social development—a historical process—ahead of geographic location in defining the West? Thirty-five years later in 1931, Walter Prescott Webb, a historian at the University of Texas, wrote of place as the significant factor in shaping social development. As shown in the third statement, from his book *The Great Plains*, Webb did not contradict Turner's ideas but he did stress geographic location and environmental factors. Webb contrasted life on eastern frontiers with the struggles of pioneers on the arid plains. In her 1987 book *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Nelson Limerick of the University of Colorado firmly advocated the primacy of place over process in understanding the history of the American West. In the fourth statement included here, Limerick rejects Turner's frontier thesis. Public recognition of her ideas brought attention to other scholars who were shaping what the media termed a "New Western History." The fifth statement is Limerick's informal definition of this new way to examine the western past which appeared in the 1991 collection *Trails: Toward a New Western History*. Other prominent scholars, however, continued to value the relevance of earlier historians as shown in the final two statements. In his 1987 essay, William Cronon of the University of Wisconsin argued for the relevance of some of Frederick Jackson Turner's ideas in environmental history and western history. Lastly, in an essay also published in 1987, Donald Worster of the University of Kansas, admonished western historians desiring to create a new regional history to follow the path blazed by Walter Prescott Webb. Where do Cronon and Worster stand in the debate over process and place in defining western history?

The Significance of the Frontier in American History

FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

In a recent bulletin of the superintendent of the census for 1890 appear these significant words: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the col-

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* (Madison, Wis., 1894). 79-112.

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onization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development. Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life, and shape them to meet changing conditions. Now, the peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. Said [John C.] Calhoun in 1817, "We are great, and rapidly—I was about to say fearfully—growing!" So saying, he touched the distinguishing feature of American life. All peoples show development: the germ theory of politics has been sufficiently emphasized. In the case of most nations, however, the development has occurred in a limited area; and if the nation has expanded, it has met other growing peoples whom it has conquered. But in the case of the United States we have a different phenomenon. Limiting our attention to the Atlantic coast, we have the familiar phenomenon of the evolution of institutions in a limited area, such as the rise of representative government; the differentiation of simple colonial governments into complex organs; the progress from primitive industrial society, without division of labor, up to manufacturing civilization. But we have in addition to this a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion. Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West. Even the slavery struggle, which is made so exclusive an object of attention by writers like Professor [Hermann E.] von Hoist, occupies its important place in American history because of its relation to westward expansion.

In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization. Much has been written about the frontier from the point of view of border warfare and the chase, but as a field for the serious study of the economist and the historian it has been neglected.

What is the frontier? It is not the European frontier—a fortified boundary line running through dense populations. The most significant thing about it is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land. In the census reports it is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile. The term is an elastic one, and for our purpose does not need sharp definition. We shall consider the whole frontier belt, including the Indian country and the outer margin of the "settled area" of

the census reports. This paper will make no attempt to treat the subject exhaustively; its aim is simply to call attention to the frontier as a fertile field for investigation, and to suggest some of the problems which arise in connection with it.

In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life, and reacted on Europe. Our early history is the study of European germs developing in an American environment. Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the Germanic origins, too little to the American factors. Now, the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization, and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and the Iroquois, and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick: he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history.

The Problem of the West

FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

The problem of the West is nothing less than the problem of American development. A glance at the map of the United States reveals the truth. To write of a "Western sectionalism," hounded on the east by the Alleghenies, is, in itself, to proclaim the writer a provincial. What is the West? What has it been in American life? To have the answers to these questions is to understand the most significant features of the United States of to-day.