

# Does Turner Still Live?

## Considerations on the Popular Afterlife of the American Frontier

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**L**AST JULY MARKED THE 125TH anniversary of the “Turner thesis,” which boldly asserted that the westward-moving frontier determined the shape and nature of American civilization. The Turner thesis resonated profoundly. It became the accepted explanation of U.S. development for generations, both among professional historians and the broader public. Does it today?

Let us have a look at the birth of the Turner thesis in July 1893. It took place in Chicago, at the World’s Columbian Exposition, which was in full swing that summer. It boasted a huge Ferris wheel on the Midway Plaisance, along the south side of the newly-opened University of Chicago, and a host of classical-styled buildings eastward to Lake Michigan. (All but one was temporary; it became, and still is, the Museum of Science and Industry.) Exotic ethnic exhibits of strange, “primitive” peoples entertained thousands of visitors; ethnic-themed concerts edified them (Antonín Dvořák, for example, conducted his and other composers’ works on Bohemian Day on August 12th); and Buffalo Bill Cody’s

Wild West Show delighted many fair-goers. Several miles to the north, just off the Loop, another freshly-built, classical structure—the only one on the east side of Michigan Avenue and about to become the Art Institute of Chicago—served as the venue for scholarly and literary conferences from May into October. The nine-year-old American Historical Association (AHA) sponsored one of them.

The AHA meeting opened on the hot and humid night of Tuesday, July 11—Chicago’s daytime temperature was in the nineties that week—with a session chaired by James B. Angell, president of the University of Michigan and of the Association. It included four academic papers. Jesse Macy of Iowa College spoke on “The Relation of History to Politics.” George Kreihn of Johns Hopkins described “English Popular Uprisings in the Middle Ages,” followed by Reuben Gold Thwaites of the Wisconsin Historical Society on “Lead Mining in Illinois and Wisconsin.” The final speaker was thirty-year-old Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin, who spoke on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”

Press coverage of the session began bravely in the *Chicago Herald*, which gave Professor Macy seven paragraphs, but the reporting petered out after that. The press probably had their deadlines to meet and had likely braved enough of the day's heat. In even the most conscientious newspapers, Turner received only a mention. The journalists did not describe or discuss it, then or in the following days. His eventual biographers doubted that he could have read the entire paper or even much of it, given the length of the program, the heat of the evening, and the fatigue of the historians who had spent the afternoon with Buffalo Bill. When it was published later in the *Proceedings* of the AHA, it ran to nearly fifty pages.

unsettled. The "frontier line" had, up to then, demarcated the two regions. By the end of the 1880s, the Census report found, "the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line." This, Turner concluded, "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 colonization of the Great West." And here comes the thesis: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, *explain American development.*" (Italics added.) And, he would go on to say, that movement explains American culture. A student once

## **The official report of the 1890 U.S. Census observed that it was no longer possible to draw a "frontier line" between the Canadian and Mexican borders, east of which was settled territory and west of which was unsettled.**

Turner's thoughts on the frontier's significance did not catch on immediately, but they gained momentum and attention after 1900. In fact, his accumulating fame propelled him to the presidency of the AHA in 1910, when he was only forty-eight, making him one of the youngest ever to receive that honor. The Chicago daily newspapers, and for that matter, historians at that time, little noted what Turner said. But in time, historians and a good bit of the general public would long remember "the Turner thesis."

What, then, was that thesis? Turner began by noting a fact: that the official report of the results of the 1890 U.S. Census observed that it was no longer possible to draw a "frontier line" between the Canadian and Mexican borders, east of which was settled territory and west of which was

said in a class of mine that she did not think much of Western history because it lacked ideas. I should have quoted Turner to her (but failed to), as it's almost impossible to conceive of a more comprehensive statement than his—or one more audacious.

Only later did historians and others point out that the land was not "free"—it usually cost good money to own it and start a working farm on it, and it was certainly not empty. Indians already lived there. But those objections surfaced in the years ahead. The conventional wisdom in the 1890s among those who pondered America's origins was that Europeans had brought with them the germs of civilization, and those germs evolved, in time, into the forms of American civilization. Not so, said Turner. "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the

Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.... The frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization.... Little by little [the American] transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs.... The fact is, that here is a new product that is American.”

So strikingly comprehensive was this proclamation, so in contrast with the conventional wisdom, yet so flattering to Americans’ nationalism, that it took firm hold among historians, academic and amateur, who concerned themselves with how America came to be whatever it had become. Although the thesis had some serious flaws, they were not immediately obvious. For one thing, the frontier was not over in 1890. A line may have been gone, but a great many unsettled places remained. Homesteading, the creation of quarter-section (160-acre) farms by personal and family industriousness, had indeed been chartered by the Homestead Act of 1862 and reinforced by later statutes, but its heyday was post-1890. More homesteads were patented from 1900 to 1920 than in the previous forty years. The “Indian wars” were over by 1890, after the surrender of the Apache Geronimo in New Mexico Territory in 1886 and the murder of Sitting Bull and the Army’s massacre of Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890. For that matter, the consigning of indigenous peoples to “savagery” placed Turner within a comfortable consensus among Euro-Americans who did not doubt the superiority of their own “civilization.” It would be decades before reflective “New Western Historians” would seriously question these categories.

The Turner thesis took firm hold beginning in the late 1890s because it was a simple explanation, tied to a Census fact, the “end of the frontier,” and because it was uncritically nationalistic and self-assuring.

Territorial expansion, thought to be over after Oregon and the northern half of Mexico were incorporated into the continental U.S. by 1854, resumed with the taking of Hawaii and the Spanish colonies of Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico after the “splendid little war” of 1898. Through “protectorates” over Central American countries and Cuba from 1898 to the 1930s, the Caribbean became an American lake. The Turner thesis seemed to ratify and resurrect, in academic language, the old idea of Manifest Destiny. National chest-thumping continued anew, and Turner’s thesis gave it resonance.

Turner and his thesis flourished for several ensuing decades. One of his biographers, Ray Allan Billington, remarked that by 1950 or so, the entire field of American historians had become “one big *Turnerverein*.”<sup>1</sup> Turner mentored many graduate students at Wisconsin and then at Harvard where he taught from 1910 until retiring in 1924. By the 1930s and 1940s they were scattered in history departments around the country, engaging in research on aspects of the Turnerian West and producing their own students who carried the Turnerian torch a generation further. Turner kept track of when his students gave papers at the AHA or the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (now the Organization of American Historians), the two national organizations of professional historians. They “sometimes number a third of those reading papers.”<sup>2</sup> My undergraduate teacher of American history, Peter Beckman, earned his Ph.D. at the Catholic University in Washington in the late 1940s. Asked one time what his dissertation topic had been, he replied,

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1 Billington was referring to the *Turnervereine*, or Turner Clubs, a popular and widespread social and athletic organization of that time among German-Americans.

2 Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 330.

“What was anybody’s dissertation at the Catholic University about at that time? The Catholic Church on the xyz frontier, from bumpty-bump to bumpty-bump.” (His was on Kansas in the 1850s and 1860s). History departments made sure they included faculty who specialized in regions of the U.S., so as to explore their development in the Turnerian mode. In the late 1940s, the AHA named Turner and Francis Parkman the most outstanding U.S. historians ever.<sup>3</sup> In 1963, when I joined the faculty at Indiana University, history students could take Oscar Winther’s “History of the Far West,” or Chase Mooney’s “History of the South,” or John Barnhart’s (himself a Turner student) “History of the Middle West.” By 1970 all three of these senior colleagues had died or retired. They were not replaced. Their courses, begun in the late 1930s heyday of Turnerism, were not taught again. The department prioritized newer subfields—first, quantification, and soon, African-American history, and a bit later, women’s history. The Turnerian hegemony had begun to erode.

By the 1980s it was definitely crumbling. Turner himself wrote many essays, but only one book. That book, *The Rise of the New West 1819-1829* (1906) and a good portion of his published articles were on events that took place in the early nineteenth century. His students and followers traced frontiers of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, concentrating on trans-Appalachia to the Mississippi and a little westward before the frontier was reputed to have closed. But in time, the sheer weight of eighty years of further history after 1893, whether of “frontiers” or simply of events that happened in the West, however defined, made younger historians uneasy. How to fit the twentieth century within Turner’s framework? Often,

it didn’t work. Historians were also aware of trends and currents in the general culture—the civil rights movement, women’s rights in its various aspects, a troubling suspicion that Native American history had not been told fairly, and that ethnic minorities in the West—Asians, Latinos and others—had never had a frontier history in the Turnerian sense, but they undoubtedly had histories. Beyond those areas that the Turnerian canvas hardly covered, the United States had changed from a society and economy in which farm life was the norm, as it still was in Turner’s own day and certainly was in the times he wrote about, to the urban, even metropolitan, society of the late twentieth century. The Turner thesis was showing too many holes. Too many monographs and journal articles were appearing that owed nothing to it. It was time, by the 1980s, for a new thesis—a new paradigm—a new Western history.

And lo, that appeared. A one-time student of Howard R. Lamar at Yale and a native of inland Southern California, Patricia Nelson Limerick brought out *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* in 1987.<sup>4</sup> Within a few years, the book was acclaimed and recognized as the charter of the “New Western History.” Limerick treated Turner with appropriate deference. He was, she wrote, “a scholar with intellectual courage, an innovative spirit, and a forceful writing style. But respect for [Turner] the individual flowed over into excessive deference to the individual’s ideas.”<sup>5</sup> Turner’s assertion, based on the Census, that the frontier had “closed” in 1890, left a question: what came, or comes, after? (Turner never could decide; late in his life he suggested some form of capitalism, maybe socialism, something as yet inchoate.) And if it had closed, then

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3 Allan G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1998), xiii.

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4 New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

5 *Legacy of Conquest*, 20.

pre-1890 American history was walled off from anything later. That alone fossilized the field of Western history. Limerick's answer was to break the end of the frontier from the Census straitjacket. How to date the "end of the frontier"? Perhaps with the acquisition of Oregon and the Southwest in the late 1840s. Perhaps with the statutory end of homesteading in the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. Her "preferred entry in the 'closing competition' is the popularization of tourism and the quaintness of the folk: when Indian war dances became tourist spectacles, when the formerly scorned customs of the Chinese drew tourists to Chinatown...." Then the "frontier" could be considered over with.<sup>6</sup>

## How to fit the twentieth century within Turner's framework? Often, it didn't work.

So what next? Limerick argued that "the idea of the frontier is obviously worth studying" but it "is an unstable concept," which "required that the observer stand in the East and look to the West."<sup>7</sup> There were other perspectives. In fact—while Turner thought of the frontier as a repeating process, why not instead think of the West, or the many Wests, as places? Thus, "In rethinking Western history, we gain the freedom to think of the West as a place—as many complicated environments occupied by natives who considered their homelands to be the center, not the edge.... Deemphasize the frontier and its supposed end, conceive of the West as a place and not a process, and Western American history has a new look."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed it did. Prior to *Legacy*, historians of the West had already broken out of the Turnerian confines with books and articles on aspects of Native American, Latino/a, Asian and European immigrant, and women's history. *Legacy*, however, which Limerick always insisted was a book of synthesis rather than of fresh research, provided a new framework for such endeavors. The victory of the new framework was not sudden or complete, as was revealed in a survey I conducted of about three hundred Western historians and fiction writers in early 1991, about four years after Limerick's book appeared. I asked three questions: where do you think the West is? Where do you personally have to go to enter it (if you're outside) or exit it (if you're inside)? and what sets "the West" apart? The historians who responded showed lingering signs of Turnerian loyalties or training, i.e. a view of the West looking at it from the East. The eastern edge was most commonly said to be the north-south line along the Red-Missouri-and Sabine rivers, i.e. the eastern boundaries of the Great Plains states. Nearly as many responders chose the Mississippi, thus making the region the "trans-Mississippi West" of traditional college courses. A smaller cluster chose the 98th or 100th meridians. For the majority, the western boundary was the Pacific, though a good number excluded the coastal areas west of the Cascades and Sierras as not really "Western" despite geography. About one-eighth of the historians, but almost half of the fiction writers, refused to give any actual geographical limits, but claimed the "the West" was a myth, or a state of mind; and after all, that is what Western fiction is largely about.

Thus there remained in 1991 a residue, or even loyalty, to the Turnerian viewpoint. But two collections of essays, all in the New Western History camp, were already in the works. Limerick co-authored one with Clyde A. Milner II and Charles E. Rankin:

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

*Trails: Toward a New Western History*, which included a dozen essays by various historians on historiography. A then-all-Yale team of William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin produced *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, which included another fifteen essays with a similar non-Turnerian thrust.<sup>9</sup>

To return now to our original question, does the Turner thesis still live? Are there still any Turnerians? Or has the New Western History obliterated it and them? I have not conducted another survey like the one I did in 1991, so the following report on the status of the field is impressionistic and hardly random. But it may be indicative. First let me quote a biographical item. For the program of the 2013 AHA meeting, Stanford University's Richard White wrote a short biography of the new Association president, William Cronon. Both were outstanding, well-published historians of the American West and were also leaders in the related field of environmental history.<sup>10</sup> Cronon also happened to hold the Frederick Jackson Turner chair at the University of Wisconsin. Recapitulating Cronon's career, White pointed out that Cronon had been a student at Yale of Howard R. Lamar's—as were Limerick, John Faragher, and others who became leaders in the new Western history. That history “gestated at Yale,” White wrote, “and those outside the field as well as the popular press sometimes lumped Yale, the New Western History, and a rejection of Turner's frontier thesis into one homogenous lump.” But that missed the mark. “Turner and the Frontier Thesis had

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9 Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), and Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

10 White had been president of the Western History Association and of the Organization of American Historians, and author of many books on Western and environmental history.

long ago lost influence among American historians,” White continued, “although Turner retained, at least indirectly, a great hold on the American popular imagination [more on this in a moment]. Patty Limerick certainly was explicitly and wittily anti-Turnerian, but her target was his hold over popular culture and popular history.”

Perhaps another survey like the one I conducted thirty-odd years ago would end up completely obliterating the Turner thesis. Perhaps not. In lieu of a full-blown survey, I contacted a handful of friends in the profession who have all achieved considerable eminence. I asked them about their views on the thesis today, at its 125th anniversary. Their responses—with one exception—pretty well confirmed White's epitaph.

Anne F. Hyde reported that she had just met with graduate students who “were complaining about western historians still feeling obligated to use Turner as a straw man.”<sup>11</sup> She agreed with one of them “who said it is fine if you take Turner seriously as part of a cultural moment” or if regionalism is taken seriously. But she doesn't require students to “use Turner himself.”

Nor does Steve Aron.<sup>12</sup> He wrote that he “stopped assigning ‘The Significance of the Frontier’ in my American West course about ten years ago. I still briefly summarize its argument and its impact in my opening lecture and come back to it in a lecture about intellectual and political currents at the end of the nineteenth century, but no longer make students read it.... It's clear that very few have encountered it before though a slightly larger number have heard of Turner.” In short, Aron finds that “[T]he

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11 Hyde is professor of history at the University of Oklahoma, editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly*, and author (among other things) of the prize-winning *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860*

12 Professor and chair of history at UCLA and former director of the Institute for the Study of the American West at the Autry Center of the American West in LA.



idea that the ‘settlement’ of the frontier/ West shaped American history/character/ culture has great popular resonance, though much less than it did decades ago.”

William F. Deverell finds that “Turner and his thesis have wandered largely out of my courses on the West, either as topics or as organizing principle.... [H]e and the thesis have begun to appear more in my US survey and environmental history courses as a moment in time in post-Civil War intellectual history.” He also lectures about “what motivated the thesis” and notes Turner’s “blind spot—lots of nature, few indigenous peoples.”<sup>13</sup>

Virginia Scharff writes, “I guess I’d say that Turner lives in pop culture and politics, most assuredly.... At the same time, I don’t see Turner resonating much in the most exciting scholarship. Some of the best stuff goes right at him, for example, Honor Sachs’ brilliant *Home Rule* (Yale, 2015) explores the way in which the settlement of Kentucky was premised not on valiant men taming the wilderness, but the establishment of other exploitative and violent households where the labor of women and children was crucial.”<sup>14</sup>

These historians, then, agree (within their own nuances) that Turner and the thesis are no longer the engines of new scholarship or of historical pedagogy. Yet they believe that versions of the frontier idea) still command much respect in American popular culture. Paul Andrew Hutton takes a quite different position.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Professor of history at the University of Southern California and director of the Huntington Library-USC Institute on California and the West.

14 Distinguished professor emerita at the University of New Mexico, past president of the Western History Association, and author of several successful novels as well as histories.

15 Distinguished professor at the University of New Mexico, longtime executive director (1990-2006) of the Western History Association, past president of the Western Writers of America and winner of many of its Spur writing awards.

“I not only still teach Turner but I still firmly believe that he was correct,” he writes. Hutton attached to his e-mail to me a piece he wrote for *True West* magazine in the November 2018 issue called “When the West Was True.” I cannot do justice to it here, but I encourage reading it. Turner appears, favorably, toward the conclusion. “Got a great response from that readership,” Hutton writes. He adds that by the 1880s-1890s and just beyond, besides Turner there appeared Buffalo Bill Cody’s show, Theodore Roosevelt’s “magnificent” four-volume *The Winning of the West*, Owen Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian*, and works by the artists Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell. All of them had “made the story of the West into America’s story.” But not without a shadow, according to Hutton. “[E]ven as the Western story triumphed on all fronts it was increasingly burdened with a melancholy nostalgia. The West was won—now what? Enter Turner and his 1893 “Significance” essay. Hutton believes that it “revolutionized the teaching of American history [and made Turner] the godfather of the academic field of Western history.” No doubt about that. Thus he concludes, “There is a powerful truth in the story of the American frontier that is far too valuable to our country to ever be cast aside.”<sup>16</sup>

Turner wondered himself about “now what”? In correspondence late in his life (he died in 1932), he lamented that the frontier, the force that shaped America and Americans’ character, was over. What would come next? He did not know and did not predict. He also realized that the frontier thesis was not perfect, and that some of its critics were correct. The criticisms, of course, broadened and deepened as the

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16 Hutton’s communication, and those from Anne Hyde, William Deverell, Stephen Aron, and Virginia Scharff are e-mails I received from them in late November 2018.

New Western History developed in the 1980s and onward. Yet it was still a fair statement in 1998, as Allan G. Bogue wrote in his biography of Turner, that “of American historians only Francis Parkman and Henry Adams left an imprint upon American history comparable to that of Turner, and theirs were less varied than his.”<sup>17</sup> Penetrating assessments of Turner’s understandings of American democracy and nationalism appear in the final chapter of the other major biography, by Ray Allen Billington.<sup>18</sup>

The hegemony of the Turner thesis, so all-encompassing among professional historians and history teachers and so resonating and echoing among the general public, began to erode about a decade before it reached its centennial. Some reasons for that have already been mentioned—the near-disappearance of anything like the frontier homestead, the steady increase of the country’s metropolitan population and the thinning of rural and small-town population, the mass media and social media and the fading away of TV and movie Westerns. Important too was the rise, overall, of a very different national agenda dating from the 1970’s, not to say from the early twentieth century or 1893, the year of Turner’s epochal essay.

Yet aspects and remnants of the frontier idea do linger on. To many Americans, this country is not just different, it is exceptional—something Turner affirmed in 1893. “Make America Great Again” is a manifestation of that. And it has been not only from the Right; Barack Obama clearly repeated the exceptional idea. Whether “exceptional” means just “different,” or something unique and privileged, is another discussion. Despite the fact that Americans shoved aside the indigenous peoples of North America and practiced their own form of settler colonialism, as various European nations did elsewhere in the world since 1500, they have not wavered—in their popular culture—from believing that they have been exceptional, a people guided and motivated by lofty, humane ideals. We are unique, we are the best, and we have been destined by God—so say many Americans.

So is Turner’s frontier thesis dead or is it alive? To academic historians, it’s pretty dead. Yet it is very much alive to fans of the History Channel and other consumers and conveyors of popular culture. They may not think much about free land, its recession westward, and the line between savagery and civilization, but in a real sense, they are Turnerians still. A

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<sup>17</sup> Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 451.

<sup>18</sup> “XVIII: The Persistence of a Theory: the Frontier and Sectional Hypotheses,” in Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*.