

# The Western Historians: Don't Fence Them In

By Alan Brinkley

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**F**ROM the 1930's to the 1950's, Walter Prescott Webb was one of the most eminent historians of the American West. So it came as something of a surprise to his many admirers when, after spending a year teaching in England, he published an essay in *Harper's Magazine* in 1957 that seemed to repudiate much of his own life's work. The West, he complained, was an unpromising and unrewarding field of study. "What," he asked, "is the biographer going to do for a region that has so few men of distinction? What is the historian going to do with a country almost without chronology or important battles or great victories? . . . How can he make a thick history out of such thin material?"

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Webb's lament was evidence of how far Western American history had fallen in the 1950's from the position of eminence it had occupied just 20 years before. Beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and continuing until at least

the early 1940's, the settlement of the West had served as a paradigm for the writing of American history as a whole. Turner's "frontier thesis" had identified a process — "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward" — that seemed to explain American development — and American democracy — in the 18th and 19th centuries.

But after World War II, as historians turned to other, less optimistically progressive interpretations of the American past, the Turner thesis went into a broad retreat, and with it the history of the region it had done so much to promote. Webb's essay seemed to acknowledge the end of an era.

Were Webb alive today, however, he would discover a scholarly landscape radically different from the one he described in 1957. Western American history, transformed by a new generation of ener-

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# Western Historians

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FROM THE CATALOGUE TO "THE WEST AS AMERICA"  
A detail of "American Progress," by John Gast, 1872.

getic revisionist scholars, is staging a vigorous and important revival. The appearance within the last year of several important books by leaders of the self-proclaimed "new Western history" (university presses have played a major role in promoting these revisionist studies, publishing many of the most influential texts) provides an opportunity to assess both the bold claims those working in the field are now making and the harsh criticisms they have begun to receive.

**F**EW groups of scholars have been more energetic in explaining and promoting themselves than the new Western historians, as two recent anthologies, "Trails: Toward a New Western History," and "Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past," suggest. These collections bring together reflections on the state of the field by most of the leading figures within it. There is considerable disagreement among them, to be sure. But almost all agree — some jubilantly, some ambivalently — that the history of the American West will never look the same.

Central to almost all descriptions of the new history is an obligatory, almost ritualistic repudiation of Frederick Jackson Turner. The "frontier thesis" may long ago have lost its allure in other areas of American history, but it retains a perverse hold on students of the West. Turner, who was born in the frontier town of Portage, Wis., in 1861, and who taught history at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard University, was in effect the founder of Western historical studies. He is, the revisionist historians believe, the idol who must be toppled if the

field is to revive and grow. The new historians fault Turner (and his latter-day disciples) for many things, but most of all for what they consider his ethnocentrism, his triumphalism, his emphasis on individualism and his insistence that Western history as a distinct field of study ends in 1890. The essence of the new Western history lies in its effort to challenge the Turnerians on each of those points.

Where Turner saw the 19th-century West as free land awaiting the expansion of Anglo-

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American settlement and American democracy, the new scholars reject the concept of a frontier altogether (and go to considerable lengths to avoid using the word). They emphasize, instead, the elaborate and highly developed civilizations (Native American, Hispanic, mixed-blood or "métis" and others) that already existed in the region.

In their view, white English-speaking Americans did not so much settle the West as conquer it. That conquest, moreover, was never complete. Anglo-Americans in the West continue to share the region not only with the Indians who preceded them there, but also with the African-Americans, Asians, Latin Americans and others who flowed into the West at the same time they

"End of the Trail," by James Earle Fraser, about 1894.



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did. Western history, the new scholars maintain, is a process of cultural convergence, a constant competition and interaction — economic, political, cultural, and linguistic — among diverse peoples.

The Turnerian West was a place of heroism, triumph and above all progress, a place where Anglo-Americans spread democracy and civilization into untamed lands. The West the new historians describe is a much less happy place — a land in which bravery and success coexist with oppression, greed and failure; in which decaying ghost towns, bleak Indian reservations, impoverished barrios and ecologically devastated landscapes are as characteristic of Western development as great ranches, rich farms and prosperous cities.

**T**O Turner and his disciples, the 19th-century West was a place where rugged individualism flourished and replenished American democracy. To the new scholars, Western individualism is a self-serving myth. They argue that the region was always inextricably tied to a national and international capitalist economy; indeed, the only thing that sustained Anglo-American settlement of the West was the demand in other places for its natural resources. Western "pioneers" were never self-sufficient. They depended on Government-subsidized railroads for access to markets, Federal troops for protection from Indians, and (later) Government-funded dams and canals for irrigating their fields and sustaining their towns.

And while Turner defined the West as a process of settlement that came to an end with the "closing of the frontier" in the late 19th century, the new historians see the West as a region. Its history does not end in 1890. It continues into our own time.

Anyone looking for a clear indication of what the new Western

history actually looks like (as opposed to how its champions define themselves theoretically) would do well to begin with Richard White's "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own," an excellent new synthesis of Western history designed for the textbook market. That market has been dominated for years by one of the monuments of the Turnerian West: "Westward Expansion," by Turner's biographer and indefatigable disciple Ray Allen Billington. (It was recently revised by Martin Ridge.) Mr. White has launched a formidable challenge to it. He is a lively, graceful writer (which by itself makes this an unusual textbook), and he tells a story very different from the traditional picture of the progress of Anglo-American civilization, but no less compelling.

Mr. White emphasizes the complicated interactions among the many peoples of the West, not just the seemingly inevitable triumph of English-speaking whites. He challenges the heavily masculine bias of traditional Western history and makes women (and gender relations) central to the story, illuminating the ways in which the harsh realities of frontier life provided opportunities for women to exert influence far beyond the home.

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He stresses the continual and decisive involvement of the Federal Government in almost every area of Western development. He tells the story of harsh battles over land, water, language and political power — battles that were not confined to (and did not end with) the defeat of the Western tribes. He devotes nearly half his book to the 20th century (Billington's narrative essentially stopped in the 1890's). And he situates the development of the West solidly within the larger story of the advance of industrial capitalism. His book suggests that the "new Western history," which proclaimed its own birth only a few years ago, is

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# The Western Historians

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"Let's face it," Mr. White said recently, at a conference of new Western historians in Santa Fe, N.M., "none of us will ever be as influential as Turner." And so far, certainly, the revisionists have not produced a broad, forceful interpretation of the Western past in any way comparable to the "frontier thesis." Even so, the new Western history has succeeded in attracting a level of public attention (and criticism) unusual for academic scholarship.

The novelist Larry McMurtry, for example, published a long essay in *The New Republic* two years ago maintaining that by their emphasis on the many failures and tragedies that undoubtedly characterized the Western past, the new Western historians overlooked the bold dreams and romantic hopes that drove so many people to "go west" to start anew. The creators of what he called "Failure Studies" had themselves failed, he said, "because they so rarely do justice to the quality of imagination that constitutes part of the truth."

**A**ND in 1991, the National Museum of American Art in Washington mounted "The West as America," a large, ambitious exhibition of 19th-century Western American art accompanied by an extensive commentary that reflected some of the assumptions of the new Western history.

The critical reaction was remarkably harsh. That was, in part, because of the condescending didacticism of some of the wall texts, burdened, Michael Kimmelman of *The New York Times* observed in an article on the controversy surrounding the exhibition, "with forced analyses and inflammatory observations."

But in larger part, it seems clear, it was because the exhibit — by calling attention to the propagandistic quality of the art — debunked some of America's most cherished myths. It was, critics such as Robert Hughes and Benjamin Forgey charged, an exercise in simple-minded "political correctness." It demonized white males and romanticized their victims. It refused to acknowledge that the Anglo-American presence in the West had contributed anything positive to the region. The exhibition (and the revisionist scholarship it reflected) had left no place for the romantic, individualistic West of the Anglo-American imagination.

In fact, the new Western historians are well aware of the role of myth and imagination in the history of their region, but they are wary of its influence. The first major work of revisionist scholarship in the field was Henry Nash Smith's "Virgin Land," published in 1950 — a brilliant exploration of the myths and symbols that shaped American images of the West. Its influence is very much alive

today in the work of the new revisionists, many of whom are centrally concerned with the role of myth and imagination in the Western past. What distinguishes them from most earlier historians (and from their own present-day critics) is their insistence on stripping Western myths of their spurious factual support — of exposing them for the self-serving illusions they usually were.

Shattering the myths of the American West is indeed startling to the millions of people around the world whose image of the region has been shaped by Hollywood and the rest of American popular culture. But to academic historians in other fields, it is sometimes difficult to understand what all the shouting is about. For much of what is new in the history of the West is not new at all to American history generally, which has been preoccupied for years now with issues of racial diversity, class conflict and gender relations, and which rejected the progressive, triumphalist, ethnocentric assumptions of the Turner thesis two generations ago.

Most of the new Western historians share a belief, as the editors of "Under an Open Sky" put it, "that one cannot understand the modern United States without coming to terms with its Western past." Supporting that contention, however, requires looking beyond the somewhat parochial preoccupation of the revisionists intent on banishing Turner's ghost. It requires considering not so much what is new as what is distinctively *Western* about the history they are attempting to explain.

In fact, the emphasis of the new Western historians on their disagreements with Turner serves to disguise some of their most important achievements. For they have also developed an impressive body of scholarship that makes a strong case for the distinctiveness of the Western experience — and for its relevance to the rest of American history — that has little to do with Turner at all. They develop the argument in at least three ways.

First, Western history has been the source of some of the most serious scholarship on the history of the environment — a subject that has played an especially vivid role in the arid lands west of the Mississippi, but one that now has new importance for the rest of the nation (and the world). One example is "Under Western Skies," a collection of articles and essays by Donald Worster, one of the most eminent environmental historians of the West.

Mr. Worster argues here, as he has in several other important books, including "Rivers of Empire" and "Dust Bowl," that the West can best be defined as a "hydraulic" society — "a social order founded on the intensive management of water." Making the desert bloom — building the great

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MARC GLASSMAN/FROM "TRANSFORMING THE WESTERN IMAGE"  
"The Last Outpost," 1983, by Lynn Foulkes.

dams, canals and irrigation systems that have permitted agriculture to flourish in California and great cities to thrive in Arizona — is one of the great achievements of modern Western history (and helps explain why the Federal Government, which has engineered most of these technological marvels, has been so much more important to the West than to any other region). It is also, in Mr. Worster's view, a disaster of epic proportions, which helped create the Dust Bowl of the 1930's and which will, he predicts, lead to far greater catastrophes in the future. "Human domination over nature is quite simply an illusion, a passing dream by a naïve species," he writes. "It is an illusion that has cost us much, ensnared us in our own designs, given us a few boasts to make about our courage and genius, but all the same it is an illusion."

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William Cronon, another important historian of the West who has focused on the history of the environment, makes a similarly powerful — if less misanthropic — case for placing ecology at the center of the story of the region in "Nature's Metropolis," his Bancroft Prize-winning study of the growth of Chicago. "From the heart of the city," he argues, "the frontier history of the Great West looks to be a story of metropolitan expansion, of the growing incursions of a market economy into ever more distant landscapes and communities." The development of Chicago — and of the West — is thus the study of the relationship between a dynamic industrial society and a complex ecosystem — a "tale of people reshaping the land to match their collective vision of its destiny," and a tale of humans, in turn, being shaped by the natural world they set out to tame.

Charles F. Wilkinson, a historian of the land and water laws that have done so much to shape the West, likewise emphasizes the role of the environment in the Western experience. In 12 elegant essays published in "The

Eagle Bird: Mapping a New West," he explores (among other things) recent disputes between environmentalists and developers in the West and calls on residents of the region to develop an "ethic of place" that balances human needs against the ecological and spiritual importance of protecting the West's distinctive (and endangered) natural world.

If the West can be defined in part by the relationship of its people to the environment, it can also be defined by the relationship of Westerners to the idea of their region. The American South has long made the case for its own distinctiveness on the basis of Southerners' own belief in the idea of a regional identity. Some Westerners would like to do the same.

In "A Society to Match the Scenery," a collection of essays, poems, photographs and random reflections, several dozen Western writers and artists, including Edward Dorn, Terry Tempest Williams, William Kittredge and Wallace Stegner, struggle to define what they consider the West to be and what they would like it to become. The eclectic material in this book provides no consistent answer to either question, although conspicuously missing from almost all the efforts is any evocation of the traditional, romantic notion of the hardy, independent West.

What is most significant, however, is that the contributors asked the questions at all — that having rejected the things that have long defined the West as a region for most Americans, they still feel a strong identification with their own region and seek to explain why.

And that is, in effect, part of what many of the new Western historians — most of whom are natives, or at least residents, of the region they study — are doing as well. Their critics have often accused them of being wholly negative, of setting out to destroy the "story" of the West as generations have liked to hear it without offering an alternative. But the revisionists are doing more than showing the inade-

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quacies of the traditional story; they are struggling to construct a new one that is no less distinctive, no less "Western" than the one they have rejected. They are coming to terms with their own sense of themselves as products of a special place. "For those with imagination to find it," Donald Worster writes in "Under Western Skies," "there is plenty of thick history to be written about this region. Within its spacious boundaries and across its sparse, dry expanses, through what is now more than 200 years of European settlement and many thousand of Indian life, this region offers for study all the greed, violence, beauty, ambition and variety anyone could use. . . . We are beginning to know where the true West is, what it has been, what it might have been, what it might still be. We are beginning to know the place for the first time."

**F**INALLY, scholars of the American West have developed a persuasive case for the distinctiveness of their region by drawing attention to its extraordinary cultural diversity. "At its core," John Mack Faragher, the author of "Women and Men on the Overland Trail," asserts, "frontier history is the story of the contact of cultures, their competition and their continuing relations. It cannot be the story of any one side." "Multiculturalism," which is becoming the source of sweeping (and often painful) reappraisals of almost every area of American life, has a special claim to attention for historians of the West. No other region has had so long and intensive an experience of racial and ethnic diversity; no other place displays the imprint of multiculturalism more clearly.

David J. Weber makes that clear in "The Spanish Frontier in North America," an important new study of the Spanish empire's collision with the

native peoples of what is now the Southwestern United States, and of their joint encounter in the 19th century with English-speaking Americans. Spain's "long tenure left an enduring legacy that extended beyond the tangible transformation of peoples and places," Mr. Weber maintains, despite the subsequent efforts of Anglo-Americans to erase it — just as Indian and Hispanic societies have continued to shape Western America despite two centuries of subjugation and white denial. "Indians and Hispanics may have been militarily subdued," Elliot West, the author of "Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier," notes, "but when we start to reconstruct the details we find that . . . those cultures have been remarkably resilient. If much has been lost, much has survived, and there has been a vigorous exchange between the conquered and the conquerors, a cross-fertilization of customs, ideas, material culture, language and world views."

In treating the Southwest anthropologically, in making the case for the survival of Indian and Hispanic culture in a region in which both ultimately faced powerful external challenges, Mr. Weber reinforces an argument advanced several years ago by Patricia Nelson Limerick, a professor of history at the University of Colorado at Boulder, in "The Legacy of Conquest," a book published in 1987 that did much to stimulate discussion of the new Western history. "One lesson of anthropology," she wrote, "is the extraordinary power of cultural persistence; with American Indians, for instance, beliefs and values will persist even when the supporting economic and political structures have vanished."

The persistence of many cultures — Indian, Hispanic, Anglo-American, African-American, Asian, and others — and the interaction among them has long been central to Western American history. As it becomes ever more central to the rest of the nation as well, the new history of the West will have much to teach us all. □