

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

February 1993

Review of *The End of American Exceptionalism:
Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* by
David M. Wrobel

Frederick Luebke

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Luebke, Frederick, "Review of *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* by David M. Wrobel" (1993). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 111.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/111>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal. David M. Wrobel. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993. x + 233 pp. Notes, bibliography. \$27.50 cloth.

This slender volume, a revision of a recent doctoral dissertation, is an exercise in intellectual history that examines attitudes, concerns, and beliefs

about the passing of the frontier and its consequences for American civilization. It is a study of elite opinion; common folk and their ideas are not treated here. Of the many intellectuals discussed writers, journalists, academicians, prominent politicians none receives more attention than Frederick Jackson Turner, the eminent historian who synthesized his famous frontier thesis exactly a century ago.

Turner's memory has not fared well lately. Young scholars eager to revitalize the field of western American history have dismissed his ideas, which were virtually ignored as irrelevant by mainstream American historians for several decades, as nationalist, chauvinist, sexist, and elitist. Ironically, these beatings of a partially decomposed equine corpse have also generated new interest in the idea of the frontier and its importance in the history of American civilization. It is likely that David M. Wrobel would never have written his book if the latest anti-Turnerian revisionists had not swept the field before him.

Wrobel writes in the tradition of Henry Nash Smith, whose *Virgin Land* (1950) interpreted Turner brilliantly within the context of 19th-century cultural and intellectual history. Thus Wrobel does not ask whether the frontier really closed in the 1890s; instead he offers a history of perceptions. Americans believed that the extent and quality of a vast area of free or cheap land in the West was what made the United States exceptional; its gradual disappearance was therefore a legitimate object of concern.

Wrobel first treats the frequent expressions of anxiety that pre-date the Census Bureau's official announcement that there was no longer an unbroken frontier line. Crèvecoeur, Tocqueville, John Wesley Powell, Henry George, and others less famous receive due attention, and all demonstrate that when Turner formulated his frontier thesis he naturally drew on fairly common ideas and attitudes.

Anxiety about the frontier intensified during the 1890s. It was manifest in literature, including the novels of Hamlin Garland, William Dean Howells, and Owen Wister. Its ally, nostalgia, permeated the art of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell. It began to shape public policy. Politicians offered both internal and external solutions to the problems created by the closed frontier: demands for restrictions in both land law and immigration were followed by imperialist adventures described as efforts to find new frontiers overseas.

Finally, Wrobel treats "postfrontier anxiety" the impact of the closed frontier on American thought after the 1890s. Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Richard T. Ely, William Smythe, Edward A. Ross, Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl, Jack London, Algie Simons, Zane Grey, and Willa Cather all find

places in the passing parade. A look at the back-to-nature movement is followed by an engaging analysis of the rugged individualism (typified by Herbert Hoover) and the neo-Malthusianism of the 1920s. Wrobel concludes his study with an effective analysis of frontier anxiety in the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt.

Like Turner, Wrobel provides us with a synthesis. Much of what he says is not new, but his achievement is to organize and interpret a huge quantity of evidence popular, polemical, literary, and scholarly which demonstrates that the idea of the frontier and its passing was a major component of American culture during the past century. Wrobel has reason to be pleased with this his first book. **Frederick C. Luebke**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.