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Review of Closing the Frontier: Radical Response in Oklahoma, 1883-1923

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Closing the Frontier: Radical Response in Oklahoma, 1883-1923. By John Thompson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 262 pp. \$18.95.

Any historian declaring his commitment to the tradition of Frederick Jackson Turner must assume that he will encounter controversy and challenge. In Turner's own essays, and in all the durable arguments provoked by his grand thesis, the precise meaning of the rubbery term *frontier* has been a matter of much confusion and difficulty. John Thompson has made a fresh attempt to use Turner's theory to explain the spontaneity and effervescence of the agrarian and labor insurgencies so strikingly present in "progressive" Oklahoma.

Boldly and vigorously presented, Thompson's long interpretive essay unfortunately ends up muddying matters more than it clarifies them. Choosing to refract Turner's theory through the larger lens of Fernand Braudel's vision of capitalist expansion, and then coloring his interpretation with the moral pessimism of Donald Worster's view of capitalist agricultural waste, Thompson finally produces the familiar tableau of oppression and misery that is depicted in James R. Green's *Grass-Roots Socialism* and Danney Goble's *Progressive Oklahoma*. Employing concepts of class and culture, these writers, too, suggested that rapidly developing Oklahoma communities tasted bitter draughts of "economic depression, class conflict, and ecological disaster" (p. 223). Far from reflecting Turner's optimistic spirit and progressive reformism, Thompson's *cri de coeur* accentuates the kinds of exploitation, suppression, and radical defeats that Green and Goble have, at great

length and with greater dexterity, already lamented. That he should rely so much upon their version of class conflict serves only to vitiate Thompson's claim to neo-Turnerian originality.

For it should be recalled that Turner found more democracy, not less, on his frontier. He saw in expanded marketplaces and growing communities more individual opportunity, not less. He might not entirely deny the presence of greed and rapacity in the new west, but meanness was the exception, not the rule. Thompson's, in contrast, is a frontier of dark despair and fruitless effort. If the western part of Oklahoma occasionally prospers, it is largely because farmers and oil men rape the resources. Once the agrarian movements are disrupted and betrayed, "no political party espoused a significant ideology," and only "orthodox and inoffensive political programs" passed capitalist muster (pp. 214, 222).

The author does a creditable job of interpreting the distinctive culture, politics, and radicalisms of eastern and western Oklahoma. But no amount of sympathy with the depressed segments of each section can turn them into majorities who would join Thompson in denouncing capitalism. Examining the plight of struggling, discontented minorities only by slighting the hopeful expectancy of larger majorities still seeking advancement on this late frontier, Thompson truly marks himself as an apostate from Turner's legacy.

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