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## Review of Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians

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*Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians.* Edited by Richard W. Etulain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991. Introduction, index. ix + 370 pp. \$37.50 cloth. \$17.50 paper.

After a couple of decades adrift in the horse latitudes, western history and attendant historiographical debates have sailed smartly into the port of popular interest. Scholars have produced their books and articles; the popular press, sensitive to issues that touch ideas and images of national identity and culture, has given them unprecedented publicity.

At the center of this invigorating turmoil are the ideas of Frederick Jackson Turner, who first expounded his frontier thesis in 1893. This is curious because decades have passed since anyone has claimed to be a Turnerian, pure and simple. Many historians simply dismiss Turner as irrelevant. Nevertheless, Turnerian ideas have been sharply attacked in the last decade as racist, sexist, exclusionary, exploitative, exceptionalist, and triumphalist, most famously by Patricia Nelson Limerick, one of the contributors to this volume. Contemporary anti-Turnerians, it seems, do not fear Turnerian history as such; they abhor the Turnerian interpretive stance—the point of view—that has permeated much popular and professional history of the American West. In their fear of crypto-Turnerism, they grant Turner more importance than he deserves. Instead of treating Turnerism as a cultural artifact, a thing of intellectual history, they create a straw man useful in their promotion of

politically acceptable historiographical models.

Sensitive to all this interest in Turner, Richard Etulain has organized his book around him and his legacy. The first section treats two precursors, Josiah Royce and Hubert Howe Bancroft; the second offers two essays on Turner himself plus four more on classic Western historians whose work offered important extensions or variations on western themes—Frederic Logan Paxson, Walter Prescott Webb, Herbert Bolton, and James Malin; the third part analyzes the work of more recent historians—Henry Nash Smith, Ray Allen Billington, and Earl Pomeroy.

How did Etulain decide who was to be included? He points out in his introduction that he was unable to get contributions on Bernard DeVoto, Frederick Merk, and Paul Gates, among others. The results are a bit uneven. An essay on Royce is surprising; the absence of one on DeVoto more so. One cannot imagine this book without studies of Webb and Malin, but had Paxson been omitted he would not be missed more than Merk. On the whole, this collection is a major contribution to Western historiography and a boon to graduate students.

Collectively, the essays are remarkably well written. Some are brilliant, others elegant, and all are informative. Robert Hine's erudite essay on Josiah Royce (who is better known as a philosopher than a historian) is memorable for its polished style. William Cronon, in his study of Turner, skillfully navigates the tedious waters of repetition. Mercifully, he declares the frontier thesis dead as he defends Turner as one who "codified the central narrative structure" of American history and who demonstrated that the history of an American place "could be written in terms of a progressive sequence of different economic and social activities" (p. 89).

Patricia Nelson Limerick, in an analysis flashing with brilliance and sarcasm, presents Turner's most loyal defender, Ray Allen Billington, as a "remarkable case study in loyalty and persistence" (p. 278). Billington, she ar-

gues, doggedly rationalized the contradictions that historians, himself included, saw in Turner's frontier thesis. Limerick offers her own explanation of Turner's famed writer's block. Not so much hampered by perfectionism, as Billington contends, Turner found it difficult, she argues, to extend his theories of frontier and section to book length. In contrast, the supremely self-confident Billington patterned his *Westward Expansion* and *America's Frontier Heritage* on a cattle-drive model: he drove fragmentary evidence, like balky cattle "always on the verge of breaking away," toward a Turnerian destination. Limerick observes that "Turner, unlike Billington, was simply unsuited to the demands of that kind of intellectual Long Drive" (p. 298).

Although Limerick's interpretation will cause discomfort among Billington's many admirers, one may speculate whether Etulain's volume would be better if more of his authors had been as critical or unsympathetic as she. Would readers acquire a better understanding of Western historiography if all the contributors had displayed a comparable eagerness to discover inconsistencies and confusions? Michael Malone's excellent and informative piece on Earl Pomeroy (the only living historian treated in these essays) might have been even better had he probed Pomeroy's works for their weaknesses as eagerly as he praises their manifold virtues. Pomeroy's role in re-orienting Western history is unassailable, and hence needs no encomium.

Nor is there need for comment on all of the essays. But readers of *Great Plains Quarterly* will be especially attracted to Elliott West's study of Walter Prescott Webb and Allan Bogue's analysis of James Malin. Webb is justly famous for his environmentalist *Great Plains* (1931); Malin, less famous but more penetrating, is best known for his *Grassland of North America* (1947), a difficult and angular book that helped lay the foundations of ecological history. Although West does not make a point of it, Webb had not read Turner before he wrote *The Great Plains*. One suspects that this failure is also its virtue, for Webb brilliantly

described the Great Plains as a specific region, unique in time and place, rather than as a case study in a Turnerian mode.

Allan Bogue's affectionate portrait of Malin as a major Western historian is an important contribution to the reputation of this innovative scholar. As the author of a remarkable series of books, none of them easily accessible to casual readers, Malin developed an ecological perspective, concentrating on the adaptation of human institutions and behaviors over time to the semiarid environment of the grassland. Iconoclastic, defensive, fiercely independent, Malin went his own way throughout his exceptionally long career, spent entirely at the University of Kansas, where he developed new concepts and methods appropriate to the historical problem at hand.

Etulain concludes his book with "Visions and Revisions," a survey of recent interpretations of Western history. Well organized and informed by wide reading, this essay will help ground both professional and amateur students of the American West in current historiography. One may even hope that it will wean them away from the Turnerian formula to more nourishing fare.

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