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

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

More than a decade before the 1890 Census, some Americans began to perceive that the frontier was disappearing; they worried that, with the closing of the frontier, the country might lose its tough and resourceful individualism, its ability to assimilate foreigners and forge democratic institutions, its safety valve and its future hopes—in short, its uniqueness. Soon this “frontier anxiety” pervaded American writing, speech, and thought. David M. Wrobel traces the theme of frontier anxiety and its variations in American journalism,

political rhetoric and policy, literature and popular culture, and academic discussions from the 1880s to the 1930s. He shows that racists, nativists, and Malthusians used the closing of the frontier to support their arguments; so did conservationists, preservationists, and anti-regulationists; and so did imperialist expansionists, monopolists, labor leaders, Marxists, Progressives, and New Dealers.

Wrobel notes how writers like Cather and Steinbeck explored the human impact of the frontier and its loss. The ghost of Frederick Jackson Turner also stalks through these pages, searching unsuccessfully for a solution to the problem he had raised: without the crucible of the frontier, how were American individualism and democracy to be maintained? While acknowledging Turner’s genius, Wrobel shows that Turner’s was not the only voice and his thesis was not the only problem related to frontier anxiety. While some commentators mourned the passing of the last haven of true masculinity, others insisted that the “Old West” lived on, and still others celebrated the end of the frontier as a sign that a childish nation would finally have to grow up and accept social responsibility.

Wrobel politely observes the debates between Turnerians and anti-Turnerian New Western historians, between individualists and collectivists, between government-interventionists and free-entrepreneurs. His project is not to settle questions about the influence of the frontier; rather, he argues that Americans’ perceptions of this fading influence have had important cultural and political consequences. The book, moving quickly through much material, does not present a startling new thesis but instead provides a valuable synthesis.

As a student of Western American history, I am thankful for the clarity and richness of this study, and especially for the notes, which can easily be used as a guide to further reading. As a teacher, I value the book’s structure and abundant examples, which might easily inspire an interdisciplinary course. As a reader of American literature, I appreciate the interpretive tools Wrobel has provided for

dealing with a theme that is both pervasive and politically important.

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