



Introduction

Closing the Frontier and Opening Western History

Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time. . . .

The aim of history, then, is to know the elements of the present by understanding what came into the present from the past. For the present is simply the developing past, the past the undeveloped present. . . . The antiquarian strives to bring back the past for the sake of the past; the historian strives to show the present to itself by revealing its origin from the past. The goal of the antiquarian is the dead past; the goal of the historian is the living present.¹

—Frederick Jackson Turner, 1891

IN 1883 NANNIE ALDERSON married, left her home in Virginia, and traveled to her new life on a ranch in Montana. Reminiscing about those years, Mrs. Alderson noted a particular feature of Montana cuisine and landscape. "Everyone in the country lived out of cans," she said, "and you would see a great

Miners at dinner. The men themselves might move on, but the evidence of their presence would remain. *Courtesy Colorado Historical Society*

heap of them outside every little shack."²

Hollywood did not commemorate those heaps in Western movies, and yet, by the common wisdom of archaeologists, trash heaps say a great deal about their creators. Living out of cans, the Montana ranchers were typical Westerners, celebrating independence while relying on a vital connection to the outside world. More important, the cans represented continuity, simply by staying in place. The garbage collector never came. And the evidence of last week's—last year's—meals stayed in sight.

When Western historians yielded to a preoccupation with the frontier and its supposed end, past and present fell apart, divided by the watershed of 1890. But Western reality followed other patterns. Matter, issues, memories, and dilemmas were all conserved. In the mountains of Colorado, miners dug shafts, worked mines, and then gave them up. The miners left; their works remain. One walks with some caution in these historic regions; land that appears solid may be honeycombed, and one would not like to plunge unexpectedly into the legacy of Western history.

The conquest of Western America shapes the present as dramatically—and sometimes as perilously—as the old mines shape the mountainsides. To live with that legacy, contemporary Americans ought to be well informed and well warned about the connections between past and present. But here the peculiar status of Western American history has posed an obstacle to understanding. Americans are left to stumble over—and sometimes into—those connections, caught off guard by the continued vitality of issues widely believed to be dead.

Like slavery, conquest tested the ideals of the United States. Conquest deeply affected both the conqueror and the conquered, just as slavery shaped slaveholder and slave. Both historical experiences left deep imprints on particular regions and on the nation at large. The legacy of slavery and the legacy of conquest endure, shaping events in our own time.

Here, however, we reach a principal difference: to most twentieth-century Americans, the legacy of slavery was serious business, while the legacy of conquest was not. Southern historians successfully fought through the aura of moonlight and

magnolias, and established slavery, emancipation, and black/white relations as major issues in American history. The Civil War, Reconstruction, the migration of Southern blacks into other regions, and the civil rights movement all guaranteed that the nation would recognize the significance of slavery and the South.

Conquest took another route into national memory. In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness. These adventures seemed to have no bearing on the complex realities of twentieth-century America. In Western paintings, novels, movies, and television shows, those stereotypes were valued precisely because they offered an escape from modern troubles. The subject of slavery was the domain of serious scholars and the occasion for sober national reflection; the subject of conquest was the domain of mass entertainment and the occasion for lighthearted national escapism. An element of regret for "what we did to the Indians" had entered the picture, but the dominant feature of conquest remained "adventure." Children happily played "cowboys and Indians" but stopped short of "masters and slaves."

When the history of conquest lost solidity, the history of an entire region suffered the same loss. Just as black/white relations and slavery were particularly associated with the South, so conquest was particularly associated with the West. Of course, the entire New World had been conquered; the West was hardly unique in this regard. But if the American West was mentioned to an American—or, perhaps even more, to a European—frontier wars and pioneering came immediately to mind. For various reasons, the West acquired an identity as the focal point of conquest. In that character, the West enjoyed its few moments of celebrity in mainstream American history as the necessary stage setting for the last big sweep of national expansionism. But when conquest reached the Pacific and filled in the areas in between, attention returned eastward. Historical significance had been a tourist—visiting the West for the peak of adventure and heading home when the action slowed down.

Professional historians of the American West thus became a people locked in an identity crisis, given to brooding about their

place in the profession. Reasons for brooding appeared in a variety of forms: the failure of universities to replace older Western historians when they retired; the reluctance of East Coast publishers and reviewers to pay attention to Western history; the occasional remarks revealing that well-established American historians did not have much respect for the field. In 1984, at a conference on American Indian history, I sat in the audience and heard one colonial historian confirm the Western historians' worst fears:

Yet how important is the "West" (minus California and urban population clusters in the Pacific Northwest) in the twentieth century or even in the nineteenth century? . . . For, in our role as scholars, we must recognize that the subject of westward expansion itself no longer engages the attention of many, perhaps most, historians of the United States. Surveys of college and university curricula indicate a steady decline in courses dealing with "history of the west"; significant numbers of graduate students no longer write dissertations on this subject; and few of the leading members of our profession have achieved their scholarly reputations in this field.³

What had happened to Western history?

Paradoxically, the problem stemmed from the excess of respect given to the ideas of the field's founder, Frederick Jackson Turner, ideas presented in Turner's famous 1893 address, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner was a scholar with intellectual courage, an innovative spirit, and a forceful writing style. But respect for the individual flowed over into excessive deference to the individual's ideas. To many American historians, the Turner thesis *was* Western history. If something had gone wrong with the thesis, something had gone wrong with Western history.

The center of American history, Turner had argued, was actually to be found at its edges. As the American people proceeded westward, "the frontier [was] the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization" and "the line of most effective and rapid Americanization." The struggle with the wilderness turned Europeans into Americans, a process Turner made the central story of American history: "The exis-

Fred. J. Turner

tence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." But American development came to an unsettling close when the 1890 census revealed that no vast tracts of land remained for American conquest. "And now," Turner noted at the conclusion of his essay, "four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."⁴

Turner, in 1893, seemed to have the field of Western American history fully corralled, unified under the concept "frontier." Exploration, fur trade, overland travel, farming, mining, town founding, merchandising, grazing, logging—the diverse activities in the nineteenth-century West were all supposed to fit into the category. In fact, the apparently unifying concept of the frontier had arbitrary limits that excluded more than they contained. Turner was, to put it mildly, ethnocentric and nationalistic. English-speaking white men were the stars of his story; Indians, Hispanics, French Canadians, and Asians were at best supporting actors and at worst invisible. Nearly as invisible were women, of all ethnicities. Turner was also primarily concerned with agrarian settlement and folk democracy in the comparatively well watered Midwest. Deserts, mountains, mines, towns, cities, railroads, territorial government, and the institutions of commerce and finance never found much of a home in his model.

Like many historians, Turner was interpreting the past in light of recent events. This presentism had great benefits and also great risks. History was bound to go on. Any definitive statement on the meaning of the West offered in 1893 would soon show its age. On this count, many of Turner's protégés did him a disservice. Their respect for him left the 1893 thesis set in stone. Turner himself moved on. In his later essays and his courses, he kept adding "more history" as it accumulated, noting, for instance, the Western oil boom that occurred after 1890 and yet showed many frontier-like characteristics. But while Turner moved on, the Turner thesis kept its 1893 form. By definition, the twentieth-century West fell outside the 1893 model. The frontier thesis, Howard Lamar wrote in 1968, "implied that a discontinuity

Lamar

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Western historians had good reason to envy that windfall. The fact remained: the West never went to war for its independence. There is, of course, plenty of revolutionary rhetoric: complaints of exploitation and colonialism; comparisons of the Department of the Interior to the ministers of George III; laments over autonomy lost to meddling bureaucrats—but no confederation of Western states, no war for independence, and thus no watershed comparable to the Revolution or the Civil War.

Left without a major turning point, Western historians had to create one. The opening and closing of the frontier were set up like flags marking the start and finish of a racecourse, to give the West its significant chronology.

There was no conceptual problem in getting the frontier opened—with the arrival of white people in territory new to them or with the discovery of unexploited resources. The problem came at the other end. There is simply no definition of “the closing of the frontier” that is anything but arbitrary and riddled with exceptions and qualifications.

What did Turner and the director of the census mean by the “end of the frontier”? “Population in the West,” Harold Simonson wrote, “had reached the figure of at least two persons per square mile, the basis for calling an area settled.”¹⁶ This is an odd definition. If population density is the measure of a frontier condition, then the existence of a city, a town, or even a small mining camp closes the frontier for that site. One could easily argue the opposite—that a sudden concentration of population marks the opening stage and that a population lowered through, for instance, the departure of people from a used-up mining region marks the end of the frontier and its opportunities. Hinging his definition on population density, Turner referred to the fact that most of the frontier had been transformed into individually owned property; and yet in the Far West of 1890 one-half of the land remained federal property.

On a solely agrarian frontier, Turner’s definition might make some sense. One could say that when every arable acre was privately owned, if not yet in cultivation, the frontier had closed. In mining or grazing, though, use was never dependent on conventional ownership. Mineral claims on federal lands tended to be

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existed between America’s rural past and its urban-industrial present.” Stressing discontinuity and the end of “the first period of American history,” the thesis was by its own admission, Lamar pointed out, “useless as a guide for the present and future.”¹⁵

The rigidity of the Turner Thesis left it particularly vulnerable to a great expansion of scholarship, accelerating in the 1960s and afterward. Individual historians simply set aside the Thesis and studied particular Western places, people, and events. The diversity and complexity those studies revealed, especially in the history of the West’s “minorities” (some of whom were, in earlier phases, majorities), represented an intellectual revolution. Few of the findings fit the Turnerian conceptual model. Thus, a central irony: the very vitality of Western research, by exploding the model, made mainstream historians declare that the field was dead.

Teachers often encountered the problem in the classroom. If they tried to keep up with the field, read new books and articles, and synthesize those findings for the students, they had no clear way to organize the course. The old Turnerian model of Anglo-Americans purposefully moving westward provided no help. The new Indian history alone rendered old course outlines untenable; the recognition of tribal diversity and of the active role Indians played in shaping history made for a much richer story, but also for one without a simple chronological shape. The breakdown of the old organizing idea fostered chaos; the corral built to contain Western history had been knocked apart.

Conceptual change in Western history occurred slowly: the Turner corral served a variety of functions. Since Turner had given the American frontier national significance, abandoning him threatened the West’s place in the mainstream of American history. The Turner concept also was tidy. In identifying an 1890 watershed, Turner labored to create what colonial historians and Southern historians got without effort. The American Revolution periodized colonial history. The Civil War and emancipation periodized Southern history. Both events provided writers of history with graceful ways to begin and end. Historians proceeded with a safe conviction that 1776 and 1865 were real watersheds.

transitory, subsurface rights often being detached from surface ownership. Similarly, nerve, enterprise, and finally leasing—not ownership—determined grazing rights on the public domain.

Regardless of the percentage of land in private ownership, opportunity in the discovery and development of natural resources reached no clear terminus. If the frontier ended in 1800, what was going on when prospectors and miners rushed to the southern Nevada mining discoveries—in 1900? What of the expansion of irrigated farming following the passage of the Newlands Reclamation Act—in 1902? How does one dismiss the 1901 Spindletop gusher and the boom in Western oil, irregular but persistent through the century? How can one discount the uranium rushes of the late 1940s and 1950s? Are Geiger counters and airplanes less frontier-like than picks and shovels?

The effort to exclude twentieth-century events from the category "frontier" immersed the Western historian in conceptual fog. Hinging the admissions requirement on simple technology seemed arbitrary. Frontiers involve mules, horses, and oxen but not jeeps; pickaxes and pans but not air drills and draglines; provisions in sacks and tins but not in freeze-dried packets; horse-drawn plows but not mechanized combines with air-conditioned drivers' modules; bows and arrows but certainly not nuclear tests in Nevada; amateurs but not engineers. This is at base a judgment of sentiment and nostalgia—in favor of tools controllable by one person, and supposedly closer to nature, and against the intrusion of modern machinery. The distinction says a great deal about the emotions of historians but little about Western history.

A frequent, less sentimental strategy for frontier definition involves a focus on symbolic events. This is an intellectually stimulating exercise, but it serves only to accent the intractable diversity of Western events. For this exercise, one selects first a defining characteristic of the frontier and then an associated event. If contiguous territorial acquisition is the key process, 1848 and the acquisition of Oregon and the Mexican territories (or, alternatively, the Gadsden Purchase in 1854) mark the end of the frontier. If individual opportunity is preeminent, the Comstock Lode in the 1860s stands out, signaling the consolidation of industrial underground mining and the shift in aspiration from

windfalls to wages. If the workability of the West as a refuge for distinctive societies is deemed essential, the 1890 Mormon concession on polygamy signals the closing. If unrestricted use of the public domain is crucial, the frontier ended in 1934, with the Taylor Grazing Act and the leasing of grazing rights on the public lands. If political dependence in the form of territorial organization is the representative factor, the frontier ended in 1912, with the admission of New Mexico and Arizona to statehood—or, if one includes the noncontiguous territory, in 1959, with the admission of Alaska.

My own preferred entry in the "closing" competition is the popularization of tourism and the quaintness of the folk. When Indian war dances became tourist spectacles, when the formerly scorned customs of the Chinese drew tourists to Chinatown, when former out-groups found that characteristics that had once earned them disapproval could now earn them a living, when fearful, life-threatening deserts became charming patterns of color and light, the war was over and the frontier could be considered closed, even museumized. My nomination has a problem too—it does not come with clear divisions in time. Let the car break down in the desert, or let the Indians file a lawsuit to reassert an old land claim, and the quaint appeal of nature and native can abruptly vanish. The frontier is suddenly reopened.

Frontier, then, is an uns subtle concept in a subtle world. Even so, the idea of the frontier is obviously worth studying as a historical artifact. The idea played an enormous role in national behavior, but so did the ideas of savagery and civilization, concepts that are currently not well respected as analytic terms. I certainly do not discount the power of the concept "frontier" in American history. My point is that the historian is obligated to understand how people saw their own times, but not obligated to adopt their terminology and point of view. That one may study how Westerners depended on the Colt repeating revolver is not an argument for using a gun in professional debate.

If we give up a preoccupation with the frontier and look instead at the continuous sweep of Western American history, new organizing ideas await our attention, but no simple, unitary model. Turner's frontier rested on a single point of view; it

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required that the observer stand in the East and look to the West. Now, like many scholars in other fields, Western historians have had to learn to live with relativism.

A deemphasis of the frontier opens the door to a different kind of intellectual stability. Turner's frontier was a process, not a place. When "civilization" had conquered "savagery" at any one location, the process—and the historian's attention—moved on. In rethinking Western history, we gain the freedom to think of the West as a place—as many complicated environments occupied by natives who considered their homelands to be the center, not the edge.

In choosing to stress place more than process, we cannot fix exact boundaries for the region, any more than we can draw precise lines around "the South," "the Midwest," or that most elusive of regions "the East." Allowing for a certain shifting of borders, the West in this book will generally mean the present-day states of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota and, more changeably, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. (Many patterns explored here apply also to Alaska, but limits of space and time have prohibited its full inclusion.) This certainly makes for a complicated package, but the West as a place has a compensatory, down-to-earth clarity that the migratory, abstract frontier could never have.

Reorganized, the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences. In these terms, it has distinctive features as well as features it shares with the histories of other parts of the nation and the planet. Under the Turner thesis, Western history stood alone. An exciting trend in modern scholarship leads toward comparative history—toward Western American history as one chapter in the global story of Europe's expansion. Studies in "comparative conquests" promise to help knit the fragmented history of the planet back together. Western American history can be a prime contributor to that endeavor.

Deemphasize the frontier and its supposed end, conceive of the West as a place and not a process, and Western American

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history has a new look. First, the American West was an important meeting ground, the point where Indian America, Latin America, Anglo-America, Afro-America, and Asia intersected. In race relations, the West could make the turn-of-the-century Northeastern urban confrontation between European immigrants and American nationalists look like a family reunion. Similarly, in the diversity of languages, religions, and cultures, it surpassed the South.

Second, the workings of conquest tied these diverse groups into the same story. Happily or not, minorities and majorities occupied a common ground. Conquest basically involved the drawing of lines on a map, the definition and allocation of ownership (personal, tribal, corporate, state, federal, and international), and the evolution of land from matter to property. The process had two stages: the initial drawing of the lines (which we have usually called the frontier stage) and the subsequent giving of meaning and power to those lines, which is still under way. Race relations parallel the distribution of property, the application of labor and capital to make the property productive, and the allocation of profit. Western history has been an ongoing competition for legitimacy—for the right to claim for oneself and sometimes for one's group the status of legitimate beneficiary of Western resources. This intersection of ethnic diversity with property allocation unifies Western history.

The contest for property and profit has been accompanied by a contest for cultural dominance. Conquest also involved a struggle over languages, cultures, and religions; the pursuit of legitimacy in property overlapped with the pursuit of legitimacy in way of life and point of view. In a variety of matters, but especially in the unsettled questions of Indian assimilation and in the disputes over bilingualism and immigration in the still semi-Hispanic Southwest, this contest for cultural dominance remains a primary unresolved issue of conquest. Reconceived as a running story, a fragmented and discontinuous past becomes whole again.

With its continuity restored, Western American history carries considerable significance for American history as a whole. Conquest forms the historical bedrock of the whole nation, and

recession have long characterized the American economy, and in that long-running game of crack-the-whip, the West has been at the far end of the whip, providing the prime example of the boom/bust instability of capitalism. The encounter of innocence with complexity is a recurrent theme in American culture, and Western history may well be the most dramatic and sustained case of high expectations and naïveté meeting a frustrating and intractable reality. Many American people have held to a strong faith that humans can master the world—of nature and of humans—around them, and Western America put that faith to one of its most revealing tests. A belief in progress has been a driving force in the modern world; as a depository of enormous hopes for

Horses with automobiles: Ute Indians and spectators at reburial of Chief Ouray, 1925. *Courtesy Colorado Historical Society*



Wagon train with railroad. *Southern Pacific photo, courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Department*

the American West is a preeminent case study in conquest and its consequences. Conquest was a literal, territorial form of economic growth. Westward expansion was the most concrete, down-to-earth demonstration of the economic habit on which the entire nation became dependent. If it is difficult for Americans to imagine that an economy might be stable and also healthy, many of the forces that fostered that attitude can be traced to the Western side of American history. Cultural pluralism and responses to race form primary issues in American social relations, and the American West—with its diversity of Indian tribes, Hispanics, Euro-Americans of every variety, and blacks—was a crucial case study in American race relations. The involvement of the federal government in the economy and the resulting dependence, resentment, and deficit have become major issues in American history and in contemporary politics, and the American West was the arena in which an expanded role for the federal government first took hold. Cycles of prosperity and

West
America

progress, the American West may well be the best place in which to observe the complex and contradictory outcome of that faith.

Beyond its national role, Western America has its own regional significance. Remoteness from both New York and Washington, D.C.; the presence of most of the nation's Indian reservations; proximity to Mexico; ports opening to the Pacific Basin and Asia; dependence on natural-resource extraction; the undergoing of conquest at a time when the American nation was both fully formed and fully self-conscious; the association of the region with a potent and persistent variety of nationalistic myth; the aridity of many areas: all these factors give Western America its own, intrinsic historical significance.

In this book, I have undertaken to pull the pieces together, to combine two or three decades of thriving scholarship with a decade of thriving journalism in Western American subjects. Much of the most interesting work in Western history has been done by individuals who consider themselves first and foremost urban, social, business, labor, Chicano, Indian, or environmental historians—not Western historians. Work in these specialties has prospered, but efforts at a regional synthesis have lagged behind. In the same way, journalists and historians often labor in separate spheres, unaware of the themes that unite their work. Their findings fit together to form a revived version of Western history, and this book is therefore an interpretation and a synthesis, not a monograph and not a survey or summary.

This book has taught me why historians might flee the challenge of synthesis. The genre breeds two alternating fears: that one is only echoing platitudes, and that one has gone out on a limb. The second fear has at least a kind of exhilaration; I am sometimes fully convinced that life out on a limb is the only life worth living. Everything I have written here, I believe. But because the field is vital and changing, I anticipate new developments every week; if Western history continues to thrive, I will look back at certain passages and shudder at my shortsightedness.

Despite those moments of exhilaration and because this book, by definition, relies on secondary sources, I am saying some familiar things. Earl Pomeroy has long stressed continuity in Western history and downplayed the frontier. In an essay pub-

lished in 1959, John Caughey carefully explored the distinction between the West as frontier and the West as place or region. My own adviser, Howard Lamar, has long studied the twentieth-century West.⁷ Why repeat their arguments? Because the message has not gotten through. The public holds to the idea of a great discontinuity between the frontier and the Western present. Even in universities, the old perceptions of Western history seem to thrive. Young scholars, hired to teach Western American history, learn that their departments expect their courses to end in 1890. My own courses in Western history at the University of Colorado carry the title "The Early American Frontier" and "The Later American Frontier," while I postpone the labor of going to the committee on courses to explain how the field has changed and why a new title is in order. Others, then, have said much of what I say in this book; nonetheless, the importance of the message and a widespread reluctance to receive it justify the deployment of many messengers.

Just as Turner did, I take my cues from the present. I am thus sure to be overtaken by unplanned obsolescence. A presentist view seems to me, as it did to Turner, worth the risk. In the second half of the twentieth century, every major issue from "frontier" history reappeared in the courts or in Congress. Struggles over Indian resources and tribal autonomy; troubled relations with Mexico; controversy over the origins of Mormonism; conflicts over water allocation; another farm crisis; a drastic swing downward in the boom/bust cycles of oil, copper, and timber; continued heavy migration to some parts of the West, with all the familiar problems of adjusting to growth and sorting out power between natives and newcomers; disputes over the use of the public lands; a determined retreat on federal spending in the West: all these issues were back on the streets and looking for trouble. Historians of the future will find meanings in these events beyond my imagination, but I firmly believe they will find the 1980s to be a key period in Western American history. If the federal government implements the Reagan policy of reversing the historical pattern of using federal money to stabilize Western economies, historians will see the 1980s as a watershed decade.

In countless ways, events in the 1980s suggest a need to re-

evaluate Western history. Consider the case study offered by Louis L'Amour, author of "88 books about life on the American frontier" (as of March 1984). L'Amour is the mid-twentieth century's successor to Zane Grey, a writer still intoxicated with the independence, nobility, grandeur, and adventure of the frontier. He remains true to the plot formula of tough men in the tough land. "A century ago," L'Amour wrote in a commentary in 1984, "the Western plains were overrun by buffalo, and many a tear has been shed over their passing, but where they grazed we now raise grain to feed a large part of the world. . . ." This process of progress through conquest reached no terminus: "We are a people born to the frontier, and it has not passed away. Our move into space has opened the greatest frontier of all, the frontier that has no end."⁸

But only a year later, in 1985, circumstances disclosed a different Louis L'Amour. "Louis L'Amour's Real Life Showdown," the headline in the *Denver Post* read, "Western Author, Colorado Ute Duel over Proposed Power-Line." L'Amour's idyllic ranch in southwest Colorado faced the threat of "a 345,000-volt power line," which would frame his view of the mountains "with cables and towering support poles" and which might also trigger "health problems, ranging from headaches and fatigue to birth defects and cancer." L'Amour fought back with the conventional Western American weapon—the lawsuit—not the six-gun.⁹

If L'Amour recognized the irony in his situation, he did not share it with reporters. The processes of Western development do run continuously from past to present, from mining, cattle raising, and farming on to hydroelectric power and even into space. The power line is a logical outcome of the process of development L'Amour's novels celebrate. But in this particular case, the author was facing the costs of development, of conquest, and not simply cheering for the benefits. "People never worry about these things until it's too late," L'Amour said of the power line in 1985. Eight-eight books later, he was at last hot on the trail of the meanings of Western history.

Part 1

The Conquerors