

History:

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## CHANGING FRONTIERS

One important measure of a nation's cultural health is its tradition of historical inquiry. From colonial times, with the first accounts of English settlements, to the 20th century, with unflinching examinations of our most cherished institutions, American historical writing has brimmed with energy, imagination, and controversy. John Barker, a practitioner of the craft, here explains how some of the great historians have variously interpreted the American past and, in doing so, given us a sense of national identity and purpose—even in troubled times.



by John Barker

Native American Indian tribes had their own histories, which they searched to explain the European's arrival, but history conceived as an inquiry starts in America with Western man's attempt to describe his first sight of the new continent, so striking to him in his cultural isolation. The early Spanish reports spread the news of islands different from anything in Europe, luxuriant, extraordinarily rich in exotic animals, plants, and minerals. The simple life of the inhabitants recalled to Europeans the life of a golden age which Latin poets had portrayed.

"In the beginning all the world was America," wrote the English philosopher John Locke, nearly two centuries after Columbus's landfall, and a sense of wonder continued to characterize the European response to the New World.

When the Spanish, French, and English settled in the continent's northern half, they brought their European heritage with them; since the English colonial experiment was ultimately the most successful in forming the United States, the English origins of an American national historiography hold our attention. The first account of English settlement was John Smith's *A True Relation . . .* (1608), chronicling the first year of the Virginia Company's plantation, a brief work he later expanded into *The Generall Historie of Virginia*. Smith frankly recorded the settlers' difficulties, their starvation, and their hostile encounters with

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Indians—though the story of how his life was saved by Pocahontas may be a fabrication—but he ended both his books on a note of mercantile optimism. His works anticipated numerous similar tracts, promotional histories really, written by Englishmen and published in England, arguing from the record why a particular colony offered most chance of gain to its investors.

Though America does not have Europe's depth of historical background, it has a rich heritage of its own thought on leading historical issues. The Puritans of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, convinced that God had sent them on an errand into the wilderness, self-consciously justified their emigration in light of biblical teaching and the events of the Reformation: Their mission to plant a "city of God" would further reveal God's guidance of his elect.

But when governors and divines like William Bradford and Cotton Mather wrote the history of their colony, they valued history for reasons of classical humanism besides those of Augustinian Christianity. They read and followed the models of Thucydides, Plutarch, and Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, as well as John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of the Christian Martyrs*. Puritan historical thought, with its respect for accuracy and learning, with its capacity for self-analysis and public defense, with its sense of a large argument, gave future American historical writing some of its finest qualities.

The Enlightenment came to the American colonies both from Europe and from the colonies' own resources, when, as in Benjamin Franklin's case, Puritan religion was shed but certain Puritan habits and humanistic attributes were kept. American historians began to apply rationalist standards to their studies, but whereas Voltaire urged men to select from the past to build a better future, American society—as Voltaire himself observed of Pennsylvania—had already through design or circumstances abandoned many evils which the philosophes attacked. Free of aristocracy, feudalism, bishops, and luxury—free, indeed, of the dark European past—Americans visibly lived in an immense, wild Eden, mastering nature and prospering. When the Revolution occurred, some of the ablest historians were Tories (conspicuously Thomas Hutchinson), being respectful of tradition, but the leading American patriots conceived the Revolution to be a moral and political struggle in Enlightenment terms as well as a legal and cultural search for identity. When it succeeded, it provided clear proof of the power of man's agency in human affairs and of secular progress. In 1782, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a French surveyor who once settled in New York State, a self-described "farmer of feelings," posed the question that in

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spirit has governed American national historical inquiry ever since: "What then is the American, this new man?"

The attempts of American historians to answer this question begin after the Revolution with the topic of the Revolution itself. Americans had as yet no national history told by themselves, only local histories in which colonies pressed their claims against England and sometimes against each other. Biographies of leading revolutionaries, especially of George Washington, partly met this need, and "Parson" Weems's imaginative anecdotes, notably the cherry-tree story, taught virtues appropriate to republican citizens.



Nevertheless, the greater want, the surviving Founding Fathers lamented, was for a large-scale record and analysis of the Revolution as a whole, explaining its origins, course, and significance for mankind. The sources for such a work were scattered throughout the 13 states; many were naturally in England. The gathering and publication of indispensable documents slowly proceeded, assisted by the growing national spirit after the War of 1812. The ambitions and labor finally bore fruit when the first volume of George Bancroft's *History of the United States* appeared in 1834.

Born in Massachusetts in 1800, the son of a Unitarian clergyman, Bancroft had studied at German universities after graduating from Harvard, and encountered there Johann Herder's and G.W.F. Hegel's philosophies and the new scientific methods of German historians. Returning to America he was briefly an educator, but, becoming a Jacksonian Democrat, he embarked on a long, distinguished career in public life, which included serving as minister to London and later Berlin. Universally acknowledged in his lifetime as America's greatest historian, he died in 1891. His 12-volume *History*, which finally reached from America's discovery to the adoption of the Constitution, owes much to German thought.

History taught that freedom was unfolding in the world

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under divine guidance, Bancroft believed; the vanguard of this movement, however, could not be Prussia—as Hegel had indicated—but was clearly the United States, where all men enjoyed liberty under a democratic government and the voice of the people was acknowledged as the voice of God. Taking Herder's idea that nations developed organically, Bancroft saw the seeds of the American genius lying in Germany and continuously growing by way of England, and New England. "The spirit of the colonies demanded freedom from the beginning," he wrote. Bancroft oversimplified the colonial story and indulged in flights of language, but despite his faults, by introducing both German techniques of study and nationalist concepts to the United States, he brought order and life to the Revolution's widespread records. He also gave Americans a firm sense of foreordained destiny and a confidence that their history, though brief compared to Europe's, was nonetheless unparalleled.

Francis Parkman, who lived from 1823 to 1893, further developed parts of Bancroft's central theme. A Bostonian—like many 19th-century American historians—he planned early to take the conflict between France and England for the mastery of North America as his subject. Braving physical hardship and seeking firsthand exposure to the frontier, he traveled west as a young man and lived among the Sioux, an experience on which he drew for his first two books, *The Oregon Trail* and *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*. In 1865, he began to publish his seven-volume study of his chosen topic, in which he ranged the absolutism of New France against the liberty of New England.

Parkman saw his whole story as a struggle between titanic forces, in which heroic individuals (not the common man) controlled each colony's destiny—a view for which he had most scope for expression in *Montcalm and Wolfe*. The Indian, who was no noble savage to him, and the French—feudal, monarchist, and Catholic—were inferior to the Protestant Anglo-Saxons, though Parkman admired individual Frenchmen, notably the explorers Samuel de Champlain and the Comte de Frontenac, and the Jesuit missionaries. "A happier calamity never befell a people than the conquest of Canada by British arms," he wrote. His characterization of the pioneer American, virile, living a life of action in the open air, in contrast to Boston's "Brahmin" class, living in comfort on inherited wealth, won many admirers, among them Theodore Roosevelt.

Parkman's distrust of the common man and his call for a reinvigorated elite illustrate that a problem existed—which American historians still share—in assessing America's advance. How could the commonly accepted signs of modern

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progress—the vigorous democracy, the railroads, the North's industrialization, the furious growth of new cities in the West—be reconciled with Thomas Jefferson's firm belief that the community of yeoman farmers with which the United States began represented conditions close to perfection?

The ideas of 19th-century American historians were faced with yet a further challenge. The Civil War was both a breakdown of America's "perfect" political system, and, with its four years of bloodshed and devastation, a blow to Americans' faith in progress. In the years before the war, local historians, especially Southerners, reacted against the broad national history Bancroft and others had devised, and defended the interests of their states and regions against the federal government and New England's claim to superiority. Now the war itself, and the period of Reconstruction afterwards, were strong incentives to historical thinking in North and South alike, raising issues of causation, politics, morality, and the authentic theme of the American story. The Civil War is still the leading topic of American historiography, demonstrating like perhaps no other event the discord between national ideals and realities.

The same problem of possible national decline intrigued Henry Adams (1838–1918). Born into a family which had given the United States two Presidents, he studied at Harvard and briefly at Berlin, then acted as secretary to his father, who was minister to England during the Civil War. After teaching at Harvard for seven years, he moved to Washington and lived independently, writing and traveling. Adams's most ambitious work, his nine-volume *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, was mainly chronological, but it began and ended by stressing the American national character as the key to interpreting American political history. The evidence suggested to Adams that between 1800 and 1815 the essential American character had become fixed. This character was both visionary and practical, libertarian, secular, and progressive, "a new variety of man." History's chief interest in the United States thenceforward was "to know what kind of people these millions were to be."

In his concern to understand American history, Adams proposed an exact science of history in which the rise of the American empire and the fall of Rome could both be explained by stages of progress analogous to physical laws. Since all energy reaches a peak and declines, "social energy," he argued, must adhere to this scheme. Man had been fired in different eras by different sources of force, but by 1815 the pattern of America's future growth seemed established. But if the national character

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should ever become sluggish, "the inertia of several hundred million people, all formed in a similar social mould, was as likely to stifle energy as to stimulate evolution."

To some extent Henry Adams provides a link between two types of American historian, for the figures we have reviewed so far have all primarily been amateurs—magistrates, clergymen, politicians, or wealthy patricians—and they have all come from the East. In the late 19th century, however, the amateur historian in America lost prestige, as he did in Europe, to the university-based historian who had been professionally trained. These new men were critical of the Romantic nationalists' broad view and novelistic treatment of the American past, though they did not completely discard their predecessors' beliefs, some of which were now reinforced for them by the Darwinian theory of evolution. Instead, they sought limited topics, and by producing detailed monographs referring to all available materials, they claimed that they worked according to the principles of scientific research. Their combined studies, they believed, would enable historians to generalize accurately about the nation.



Herbert Baxter Adams, who helped found the American Historical Association in 1884, led historical thinking on the subject of the American character's uniqueness. Studying institutions comparatively like a philologist studying languages, he analyzed the government of selected New England towns, and he concluded from his research that the "germs" of American democracy lay in the councils of Germanic tribes once described by the Roman historian Tacitus. Out of these primitive councils in forests had evolved the parliamentary system, religious reformation, and the popular revolutions distinctive of all Anglo-Saxon peoples, "the ideas which have formed Germany and Holland, England and New England, the *United States*." "It is just as improbable that free local institutions should spring up without a germ along American shores," wrote Adams, "as that English wheat should have grown here without planting." To Adams, therefore, the influence of Europe and of the Eastern seaboard upon America's development was supreme. In 1893, however, his "germ theory" was radically challenged by a young historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, who proposed instead a "frontier hypothesis."

Turner was born in 1861 in Portage, Wisconsin, the son of a journalist. Describing his boyhood there, he wrote: "I have

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poled down the Wisconsin [River] in a dugout with Indian guides . . . through virgin forests of balsam firs, seeing deer in the river . . . feeling that I belonged to it all." He also once saw a lynched man hanging from a tree, and witnessed gangs of Irish raftsmen taking over the town on wild sprees. These memories of Portage as a place where pioneers and Indians mingled on the edge of the wilderness stayed with him.

After his undergraduate work at the University of Wisconsin, Turner, who aimed to be a professional historian, went to Johns Hopkins for graduate training. Encountering the "germ theory" from Adams himself, he soon rejected the belief that democracy was carried to America by immigrants; it conflicted with what he knew from his own life in the Midwest. "The Frontier theory was pretty much a *reaction* from that due to my indignation," he later admitted. Returning to the University of Wisconsin in 1890 with a doctorate, having chosen the frontier as his field of special study, Turner began to express his ideas in his teaching. Two early papers reveal the direction of his thought, but neither was as provocative as his paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which he delivered before the American Historical Association at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

"Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West," Turner wrote. "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." In the East, familiar institutions had evolved in a limited area, but on the continually advancing frontier line, American social development continually began over again. "The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization," he stated. "The wilderness masters the colonist":

He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs . . . here is a new product that is American.

As the frontier moved from the Atlantic to the Blue Ridge, to the Mississippi valley, to the Rockies, to the Pacific, social and political life had grown less complex and more distinctly American. There were actually several frontiers in each area—the trader's, the rancher's, the miner's—and each line of settlement was affected by different attractions—geological conditions, the

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Indian trade, good cattle ranges, army posts, good soils. "Sections" rather than states came into existence from the relations among the several geographic regions. The society within each section adapted to the particular physical and social environment, and the interacting sections created the American national spirit.

And what, Turner asked, was the impact of the frontier on the East and on the Old World? The frontier promoted the formation of a composite American nationality; it was a melting pot where immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, "English in neither nationality nor characteristics." The frontier's advance also decreased America's dependence on England for supplies. After the Revolution, "the legislation which most developed the powers of the national government, and played the largest part in its activity, was conditioned on the frontier." The Louisiana Purchase, and most national political action regarding land, tariff, and other internal improvements, resulted from frontier needs and demands. The frontier made the American population as a whole more mobile, altering life in the East and even the Old World. The most important effect of the frontier, however, was the furtherance of democracy in America and in Europe.

"He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased," Turner wrote. "Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves." The ever-retreating frontier had been to the United States and more remotely to Europe what the Mediterranean Sea once was to the Greeks, offering new experiences and calling out new institutions and activities. "And now, 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."

Turner's paper at first received scant attention, but by 1900, after he and his students had propagated its theme, the "frontier hypothesis" had defeated the "germ theory" to become the prevailing view of American history until Turner's death in 1932.

Turner's thesis, often overstated by his disciples, has had many critics since the 1930s. His poetic language and loose terminology obscure his argument, the very words "frontier" and "West" never being made explicit, and statistical evidence shows that the land was not free for most settlers; they bought it from speculators. Turner ignored the coastal frontier; the pro-



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cession through Cumberland Gap was less orderly than he believed, and the pioneer's life was more social. Cities attracted population too, from Europe and from within America, and in times of economic depression the frontier did not act as the discontented population's "safety valve"; migration to it demonstrably decreased. Eastern influence on the West remained strong in matters of government, religion, and cultural and educational ideals; in fact, the frontier encouraged some of the American character's less attractive features, such as lawlessness, wastefulness, careless self-confidence, and ruthlessness toward nature and other peoples. And, if the frontier formed the settler so much, as Turner claimed, why did not an identical way of life develop on other frontiers—in Canada, Australia, Siberia, or South Africa?

Turner's critics have charged him with seeing the frontier as the sole cause of the American identity, though he himself insisted that it was only one aspect of the truth. In the view of Marxist historians, Turner ignores the class struggle and the growth of industries and towns. In its crudest form, it perpetuates myths of the West and reduces American history to the story of cowboys and Indians. But despite these and other objections, it is widely assumed today to be correct in its major assumption—that free land has defined the American experience, and it has proved to be by far the most fertile explanation of the history of the United States.



Turner, though conservative in spirit, was nonetheless one of the Progressive historians who, like the broad Progressive movement in contemporary politics, viewed the American experience in the tradition of democratic reform. Charles Beard, however, whose reputation rose as Turner's fell, was a left-wing Progressive, an activist, and a prolific and versatile author. Beard, born in Indiana in 1874, was impressed in youth by Populist doctrines, and, while studying at Oxford, he lectured on the Industrial Revolution to workingmen.

Appointed to the faculty of Columbia University in 1904, he taught both history and politics. With a colleague, James Harvey Robinson, he announced a fresh approach to history, which they called "the new history." A response to the rapid rise of the social sciences, it sought to cover all aspects of human affairs and make history useful. Beard's interpretation of American history was not as original as Turner's, but it has been almost as

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influential. The chief purpose of his research and writing was to relate economic interests and politics, taking as his guide James Madison's theory of party conflict stated in the 10th of the *Federalist Papers*. Dismissing other historical schools, Beard proposed the "theory of economic determinism" as a new means of understanding American history.

During his career, Beard applied this theory in non-Marxist form to four important historical events. In his first, most hotly debated book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), he statistically reviewed the amount and the geographical distribution of money and public securities held by members of the Constitutional Convention. He found that the Convention was composed of leading property holders, not selfless patriots, who had excluded from their meeting representatives of the propertyless mass of the American population. The resulting Constitution was "an economic document drawn with superb skill by men whose property interests were immediately at stake; and as such it appealed directly and unerringly to identical interests in the country at large." In 1915, Beard published *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*, and argued that political parties in the United States arose from the contest between the capitalist and the democratic pioneer.

After resigning from Columbia in 1917 in defense of academic freedom, Beard coauthored *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927) with his wife Mary. The book reached a large popular audience. Taking a comprehensive view of the American past up to the present, the Beards reinterpreted it largely in terms of America's economic growth and the interests of specific groups. England's search for trade and profits had laid the structural base, the colonists had started their own business enterprises, and an energetic minority of merchants had planned and accomplished the Revolution. The hinge of American history, though, was not the winning of independence but the mid-19th-century transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, a deep-running change which culminated in the Civil War.

The war, really a class struggle between Northern merchants and industrialists and the Southern planting aristocracy, was "a Second American Revolution and in a strict sense, the First," a genuine social revolution in which "the fighting was a fleeting incident." Northern capitalism triumphed, only to be challenged in the opening 20th century by new forces making for social democracy. Finally, Beard's concern in his later years to link foreign affairs and domestic policies led to his writing *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941* (which appeared

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just before his death in 1948). In this controversial work, Beard, an isolationist, accused Roosevelt of deliberately leading the United States into war in pursuit of his personal power. Though Beard's findings have since been largely disproved (sometimes from information unavailable to him), his insights stimulated a new generation of scholars to explore and quantify the social and economic evidence of the American past. *The Rise of American Civilization* is also the last major attempt to give all American history a coherent theme or direction.



Americans have seldom been deeply attached to the past, despite its importance to the Puritans and the Founding Fathers. Many immigrated to flee from their own history, and most have charted their lives by the future, partly because, in Emerson's phrase (which Turner copied), "America is another word for Opportunity." Nevertheless, in 20th-century America—and in the Western world—the breadth and freedom of opportunity has narrowed, the effect, according to the American historian Walter Prescott Webb, of the closing of the Great Frontier.

Writing in 1952, Webb argued that the American frontier Turner described was only a fragment of the vast vacant lands in North and South America, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand which began opening up to the European "metropolis" about the year 1500. The first impact on Europe was mainly economic—a sudden excess of land and capital for division among a relatively fixed number of people. The spectacular business boom that followed favored those institutions and ideas adapted to a dynamic and prosperous society, and, especially on the frontier itself, society recrystallized under new conditions which gave the individual a time of maximum freedom. The waves of new wealth in succession led Western man to consider the boom the normal state, but about 1900 the Great Frontier closed down across the globe, the magnificent windfall ended, and, because the boom was a "frontier boom," it is unrepeatable.

Any new, comparable boom will be quite different in form and consequences, and as yet none of the so-called new frontiers has materialized. No Columbus has come in from one of these voyages bringing continents and oceans, gold or silver, or grass or forest to the common man. "If the frontier is gone," Webb concluded, "we should have the courage and honesty to recognize the fact, cease to cry for what we have lost, and devote our

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energy to finding solutions to the problems that now face a frontierless society."

This, I suggest, is the context in which American history, Western history, the Western idea of history itself, should now be reassessed. In the United States, the physical frontier ended in 1890, but the old sense of human possibility it fostered lasted until about 1970, and then the end came in agony. It quickly followed the Kennedy years, when many Americans had welcomed a young President's call to be new pioneers on a "New Frontier" of unfulfilled hopes. History's theme then stood forth as advancing reason and liberty, its contents to be analyzed with detached intelligence, but the unfolding Vietnam War, a war abroad but also a rending of American society, produced instead a sharp sense of human limits. It denied Americans their expected "Great Society," and it shook their faith in their country's fundamental innocence, their trust in its energy, and their hope that, alone among nations, the United States would escape a tragic fate. The war's diverse events revealed that, although the American story had often been told, the true perspective on that story was uncertain.

Such crises herald new histories to replace the old, unsettled views. They force new questions while events are still vivid, and current American questions converge once more upon the "new man's" actual nature. Until the next major American history arrives, Americans will have no modern idea of their whole history, only the ideas previous generations gave them. A new American history, however, affects the world. When any historic nation reinterprets itself, the result affects the rest; sometimes a national experience can help explain the history of mankind. Eighteenth-century Europe, in its expanding circumstances, challenged the historian to sustain "progressive" man. As the approaching 21st century brings the world more knowledge and different human possibilities, its challenge—and its disputed prize—is man's redefinition in another light.

