



PROJECT MUSE®

Frederick Jackson Turner and the Dream of Regional History

John E. Miller

Middle West Review, Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 2014, pp. 1-8 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2014.0027>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/565584>

JOHN E. MILLER

Frederick Jackson Turner and the Dream of Regional History

Deep ironies abound in the storied career of frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner. While in the thinking of general audiences and that of many of his professional colleagues his elevated reputation derived almost entirely from his advocacy of the frontier thesis of American history, in actuality he largely abandoned his frontier investigations in favor of a sectional (or regional) interpretation quite early in his career. His quick rise to public attention and influence after 1893 was based primarily upon his considerable rhetorical skills, his willingness to make large claims on the basis of scattered evidence, and his reliance upon a polemical mode of argument that smoothly papered over conflicting claims and contradictory information. Yet throughout his long career as a practicing historian, archival researcher, and mentor to armies of graduate students, he remained personally committed to and preached the virtues of digging out facts, carefully weighing evidence, following leads, and amassing mountains of data in order to test the validity of historical hypotheses. In truth, he was much enamored of what he referred to as the “multiple hypothesis”—the idea that historical events and individual actions are influenced or motivated by numerous and often conflicting causes—a notion that militated against any kind of simple explanation that would have posited a single or overarching cause for historical events, such as economic factors, technological change, intellectual currents, or, for that matter, the moving frontier.

That Turner’s frontier thesis captured the fancy of a large general public as well as that of a rapidly expanding and increasingly self-confident contingent of professional historians during the early decades of the twentieth century thus was not only ironic but also somewhat tragic. By 1907, he was

devoting most of his energies to his sectional hypothesis. Nevertheless, he continued to return frequently to the frontier thesis when called upon to give talks, speeches, and commencement addresses and when he wrote for popular audiences in publications such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Yale Review*. A number of these occasional, popular, and largely rhetorical offerings were collected in a 1920 volume published by Henry Holt and Company under the title of *The Frontier in American History*, a tome whose generally favorable reviews pleased Turner and reassured the profession that he was still on his game. Meanwhile, the years quickly passed by, and no new volume emerged from his office in the History Department at Harvard University. The tragedy of Turner's situation lay in the fact that the sectional hypothesis on which he had labored for so long was ill-suited to make much of an impression on the professoriate, which had many reasons to reject his arguments for a sectional interpretation, rather turning its attention to other subjects and methodologies. Its members were satisfied to think of him as the "frontier guy."

Over time, friends and colleagues who knew what he was about began to refer to the magnum opus that he was working on as "the Book," secretly wondering whether it would ever come to fruition. After the publication in 1906 of *The Rise of the New West, 1819–1829* in Harper and Brothers' American Nation Series—the only real book Turner ever completed in his lifetime—the erstwhile historian devoted the bulk of his energies to "the Book," which was intended to test his sectional hypothesis during a specific period of time. He never managed to finish the project, but the energetic labors of a former student of his, Avery Craven, and his former secretary, Merrill H. Cressey, succeeded in bringing to publication in 1935, three years after his death, *The United States, 1830–1850: The Nation and Its Sections*. Unlike a book of essays entitled *The Significance of Sections in American History*, which came out the year after he died and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize, Turner's patched-together analysis of the decades of the 1830s and 1840s not only failed to persuade an increasingly skeptical audience of his former colleagues; it actually hindered the cause that he had so ardently pursued. According to Turner's admiring biographer Ray Allen Billington, the book

showed unmistakable signs of its troubled background; it was often poorly written, marred by a lack of transitions, and lacking in the sense of drama that it might have possessed if brought to the intended conclusion. Throughout were evidences of hasty preparation,

needed corrections, out-of-date conclusions, and inadequate analysis. An earlier generation of historians might have accepted these inadequacies for what they were, but those living in 1935 would not.¹

Beyond that, the timing for such a book was inauspicious. In the midst of the worst economic crisis the country had ever experienced, people's attentions were focused on the breakdown of capitalism, the desperate need for social and economic reform, and looming international challenges. Thus, another irony complicating the intellectual career of Frederick Jackson Turner inhered in the fact that the cause he largely devoted himself to during the last quarter century of his life—a sectional interpretation of American history—was no doubt set back by the book that he had worked so diligently on for most of that time. But there were also many other factors that conspired to make sectionalism unappealing as a putative master key to unlocking the meaning of the course of American civilization.

Nationalizing forces of many kinds came to the forefront during the decades after the Civil War, only accelerating after the turn of the twentieth century. An integrated rail system linked the nation from coast to coast even as telegraph lines provided instantaneous communication, which in turn facilitated a national news network supplemented by a growing array of national magazines and periodicals. The intellectual life of the nation was abetted by the rise of higher education and a research system based on the German model that connected intellectuals from Cambridge, New Haven, and Baltimore to those in Ann Arbor, Chicago, and Madison, as well as in Berkeley, Stanford, and Los Angeles. By the early 1900s, movies, then radio, and finally television knitted together a national popular culture that increasingly displaced the kinds of localized cultures that emanated out of what historian Robert Wiebe memorably labeled “island communities.” In sum, the rise of an urban-industrial order buttressed by expanding bureaucracies, professionalism, volunteer organizations, governmental bodies, popular culture outlets, and social networks all contributed to render local and regional identities less and less salient for large numbers of people.

In addition to these broad patterns of institutional evolution, a series of historical processes promoted nationalizing tendencies while reducing regional alignments: the drive for political reforms, such as women's suffrage, central banking, and a federal income tax; two World War mobilizations; efforts during the modernizing decade of the 1920s to resist parochial and provincial forces like Prohibition and the Ku Klux Klan; the Cold War; and the rise of suburbia and the spread of urban sprawl dur-

ing the late 1940s and afterwards. Beyond these broad social, economic, and cultural factors, however, I would suggest that internal professional imperatives also functioned to discourage sectional/regional interpretive frameworks. In the first place, while there were intuitive or logical reasons for developing and sustaining sectional historical consciousness in other regions of the United States, the bases for nurturing a strong midwestern historical consciousness were much shakier. New England after 1620 was one of three major destinations in the future United States for European immigrants—along with the middle and the southern colonies—and later on it became one of the major cultural hearths from which westward migration flowed. The original Puritan culture, as evidenced in religion, education, intellectual life, small town political institutions, and social patterns, would spread its influence westward, across the northern parts of the Middle West and eventually all the way to the west coast. The middle colonies, especially as manifested in New York City and Philadelphia, provided somewhat of a different form of influence, with their more diverse and cosmopolitan populations, but they would always be in the vanguard of economic, political, and cultural development.

The South, set apart from the other regions by its slaveocracy, provided a counternarrative to the development of free and bourgeois cultures in the North, and much of the historical story told about the colonies and then the new nation through the Civil War revolved around the poles of North-South antagonisms and then, tragically, armed conflict. This sectional rivalry certainly planted the seeds in many minds of a sectional interpretation of American history that seemed irrefutable in its basic outlines. Eventually, the West—difficult as it was (and is) to define, since the frontier constantly migrated westward across the continent—emerged as a fifth section or region (the Middle West being the fourth), and it would contain its own identifying markers: most prominently, perhaps, its astonishing and sometimes foreboding terrain—from imposing mountain peaks and magnificent river valleys to barren deserts and strange badlands. Beyond all that, the romance and frequently the terror of overland wagon trains, encounters with Indians, cattle drives, mining regions, and desert oases rendered the region, even more than areas further to the east, a place of adventure and myth. Whereas the Middle West often became a way station for migrants passing through the region from eastern locations, the West (and certainly the west coast) served more as a final destination for these people, thus conferring upon it a sort of teleological cachet that the Midwest lacked.

The Middle West—defined as the twelve states ranging westward from Ohio to the eastern fringes of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas—attracted its own kinds of mythologies: its Mike Finks, Paul Bunyans, Huckleberry Finns, Tom Sawyers, and Laura Ingalls Wilders. But as time went by, somehow, the region seemed to flatten out, both literally, in terms of its frequently level terrain, and historically, in terms of its seemingly more mundane social and cultural development. Images conjured by its name include waving fields of grain, silos and water towers on the horizon, trains belching smoke, farmers at their plows, housewives hanging out their wash to dry, small town Main Streets, Saturday night band concerts, Fourth of July orations, baseball games, county fair pie contests, Chautauquas, spelling bees, one room country schools, and church basement suppers. Why these images seem more homogeneous than those attached to other sections of the country is not entirely evident to the outside observer, but nevertheless that seems to be the case.

It is clear from the vantage point of this cultural observer that the Midwest in fact is considerably culturally, socially, and environmentally heterogeneous, although to many eyes it may not seem that way. While Cleveland, Detroit, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Omaha, Milwaukee, and the Twin Cities eventually emerged as industrial, financial, and cultural centers, to a large degree the peculiar culture of the Midwest came to be defined by its small towns, which, in turn, existed largely to serve the farmers whose agricultural activities were central to the economic prosperity and development of the region. Up to a point, the Midwest fed upon the historical evolution of the nation, as migration spread westward from the three eastern cultural hearths during the early 1800s. As the historian Jon Lauck has so ably demonstrated, the section played major and sometimes decisive roles in many national developments: the liquidation of French claims on the interior of what later became the United States and the rise of British control of the region; the coming of the American Revolution; the reproduction of republican governments and constitutional principles in new states as they entered the Union, based upon similar arrangements in states to the east; the outcome of the Civil War; the rise of populism and other democratic political movements; the expropriation of lands from Native Americans and the opening up of the continental land mass to European settlers; and the development of the United States as a world power.

It is no wonder that Frederick Jackson Turner was usually thinking of his own Midwest when he talked about “the West” in general and that he

felt justified in allocating more pages to the region than he did to its counterparts in his writings. For instance, in his big book on American development between 1830 and 1850, ninety-nine pages of text were devoted to the Middle West, sixty-six to the south Atlantic states, and no more than fifty-three to any other region. Throughout his career, Turner's attention, whether developing his original frontier thesis or later on when he was pursuing a sectional interpretation of American history, was first and foremost on the Midwest.

With the region's decisive impact in turning the tide for the North during the Civil War, this period and its aftermath marked the clear rise of the Middle West to national preeminence. The locus of power and cultural vitality had shifted westward over the course of several decades. Between the Civil War and World War I, the Midwest could lay legitimate claim to being the country's ascendant region. Its percentage of the nation's population rose from 28.9 percent in 1860 to a peak of 35.6 percent in 1890, gradually diminishing after that to 29.5 percent in 1950 and 22.9 percent in 2000. Historians Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray have observed that "in the second half of the nineteenth century there was no more dynamic or powerful regional story in the United States than the one that Midwesterners told about themselves."² During the century after 1861, eleven of the eighteen presidents hailed from the Midwest; during the half century after 1961, only two did. Economically, culturally, and politically, the Midwest stood at the forefront of American development during its heyday, but that preeminence gradually withered as the twentieth century wore on.

As a baseball fan who attributes my emergence as a historian to my playing days and enthusiastic fandom of baseball—the game naturally invites historical comparisons, and its slow pace allows considerable time for intellectual reflection between pitches—I find it especially interesting that as late as 1952, seven of the sixteen major league baseball clubs were located in the Midwest. My own life and career were nourished in two outstanding midwestern university history departments—at the University of Missouri and at the University of Wisconsin—steeped in the study of the region. Renowned midwestern historian Lewis Atherton taught at Missouri, and my history advisor there, Richard Kirkendall, had previously been mentored at the University of Wisconsin by Merle Curti—who had been associated with Frederick Jackson Turner at Harvard. At Wisconsin, I also attended a research seminar headed by E. David Cronon, whose son, William, is currently the Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of History there.

It is not the stars or fate or anything as mysterious as that, however, that I think help to explain why the regional history of the Midwest once flourished and why it now has lapsed into something of a limbo. Again, my former student Jon Lauck has deftly advanced a variety of reasons explaining how and why that happened.³ I would just like to add my own speculative twist to that explanation by thinking about the dynamics of the historical profession from the mid-twentieth century onward. Ray Allen Billington and Allan G. Bogue in their biographies of Frederick Jackson Turner effectively describe his academic gamesmanship, including his masterful promotion of his own career through his writing directed at a general audience; his energetic distribution of copies of his articles, essays, and books to colleagues in the profession; his participation in an elite coterie of individuals who dominated the American Historical Association; and his mentoring of dozens of graduate students who spread out around the country to preach the Turnerian gospel at places ranging from Stanford and Kansas to Chicago and Yale.

But let's say you were a newly minted PhD during the late 1940s and 1950s. Long before the explosive rumblings in the historical profession that came along during the 1960s, initiating a major shift toward social history and other "new" histories, it likely would not have made much sense to most aspiring practitioners to follow in the footsteps of the illustrious Turner by trying to research each section of the country in specific detail and formulating a comprehensive, section by section analysis of national development. Look what such a program got him: one "real" book in his lifetime; a collection of swiftly or casually written essays; and one unfinished whale of a book that was left in highly unfinished manuscript form, which, when others put it in shape for publication, probably did more to undermine his reputation than to enhance it.

An alternate track would have been to focus specifically on one region of the country and to forget about a broad-based comparative approach. For western, southern, and New England historians, that has remained a popular paradigm. For reasons that are not self-evident—but which could be speculated about—that did not happen so much in the Midwest. The other regions—with the mid-Atlantic states providing something of an exception—all possessed or developed their own college level courses, textbooks, regional associations and journals, annual meetings, and other venues of providing research outlets and means of disseminating information. But what once had existed in significant measure in the Midwest—a

lively array of conferences, journals, books, and associations—largely dried up during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Lewis Atherton's *Main Street on the Middle Border*, in retrospect, can be seen as more of a last gasp than as a trumpet call for further work.⁴ The transformation of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association into the Organization of American Historians and the change of its journal title from the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* to the *Journal of American History* provided portents of the future. This is not to denigrate all the good work that was and continues to be done on midwestern history, but any casual observation of the relative activity and output of the several regions has to judge the Midwest as emerging in last place in that contest.

While various professional, social, economic, cultural, and educational factors can be advanced to try to explain these developments, it remains true that choices were made along the way, that alternatives always existed, and that different leadership (and followership) might have led to different outcomes. All of that is now becoming evident as a new organization, the Midwestern History Working Group, is working on the scene and a new publication, the *Middle West Review*, has been launched. Historians, of all people, understand that history is made by people, who operate within certain constraints but who at the same time are presented with various opportunities. Many historical forces can be cited, after the fact, to try to explain almost anything. In the end, however, choices get made, and out of the collective force of these choices history is fashioned. What the future will bring for midwestern history only time will tell. Historians in the future will write the story. We are the ones who will make it. The choice is ours.

.....
John E. Miller is professor emeritus of history at South Dakota State University. His new book, *Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America*, was published by the University Press of Kansas in March 2014.

NOTES

1. Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 418.

2. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, "The Story of the Midwest," in *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Cayton and Gray (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 17.

3. Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013).

4. Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954).