INTRODUCTION

“WHILE WE ARE IN THE WORLD, WE MUST CONVERSE WITH THE WORLD”:

The Significance of Ohio in World History

Andrew R. L. Cayton

I was born in Ohio because my Kentucky-born parents happened to be living temporarily in Cincinnati in 1954. As I grew up, even after my immediate family moved back to Ohio in 1963, relatives regularly reminded me that the location of my birth was insignificant. More critical was the fact that my personal and cultural roots lay south of the Ohio River, in the soil in which my ancestors were buried. “Wherever you go and whatever you do, always remember that you are a native Kentuckian,” wrote a family friend when I graduated from high school. “It’s a fact to be proud of and one to challenge a person to do his best.”

I dutifully accepted this and other encomiums to Kentucky. But I identified strongly with Ohio, and for reasons that went beyond the accident of birth. The state always intrigued me, in no small part because I was constantly being told it was different. No one seemed to know exactly how it was different, but they were quite confident that it was different. Going “over the river” into Cincinnati was a major adventure when I was child. My grandmothers worked in department stores on Fourth Street, a canyon of giant buildings lined with businesses and restaurants. My grandfather took me to baseball games in Crosley Field, which, illuminated at night and filled with the likes of Frank Robinson, Willie Mays, and Stan Musial, was a larger-than-life arena. Objective observers might conclude that life south of the Ohio River was substantially similar to life north of it. But I learned to imagine the state of Ohio as a different kind of place from the one in which I lived.

Many Ohioans seemed to have a similar attitude about Kentucky. They mocked the supposed stupidity, vulgarity, poverty, and lack of restraint displayed by their neighbors across the river. A “virgin in Kentucky” was
either “the ugliest girl in the fifth grade” or “the sister who can outrun her brothers.”

The Ohioans who told these jokes were not unusually mean or intolerant; rather, they were defining themselves against “others,” deciding who they were by deciding who they were not. Demeaning “hillbillies” allowed Ohioans to affirm their own discipline, sophistication, and prosperity. These differences were largely imagined, of course. But that is precisely the point. Our identity originates and evolves in conversation; we create place by telling stories that locate ourselves in relation to other peoples and environments.

In this essay, I will try to exploit and expand on this insight in order to offer an introduction to Ohio’s history as a global rather than a regional conversation. I want to do more than argue that place is constructed. I also want to rethink the popular image of Ohio as a bastion of American normalcy, the comfortable heartland of the United States.

From the mid-eighteenth through the mid-twentieth century, Ohio was at the forefront of most major developments in the Americas and Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people migrated to Ohio because they saw it as a land of possibility on the cutting edge of human history; others visited to observe in microcosm the development of public culture, urbanization, industrialization, and civic reform. Ohio fascinated in ways hard to fathom today, when we generally see the state as an oasis of comfortable provinciality. Nineteenth-century Ohioans saw themselves as anything but provincial, however. Obsessed with questions about human nature and the ways in which we organize our lives, they were committed to the great cause of human progress. It says a good deal about what has happened since that the title Ohio and the World, which would have made perfect sense in 1803 or 1903, was an unlikely juxtaposition of words in 2003.

THE CHALLENGES OF OHIO’S HISTORY

Politics and water combined to establish the borders of the seventeenth state admitted to the Union. To the south, east, and much of the north, the existing states of Kentucky, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, along with the Ohio River and Lake Erie, made the choice of boundaries straightforward. The west and northwest were far more problematic. Why should a line drawn north from the mouth of the Great Miami River divide Ohio from the Indiana Territory? Or why should a line drawn west from the southernmost point of Lake Erie distinguish Ohio from what would eventually become the Michigan Territory? Imagine the difference if Congress had chosen to delay
statehood by making the western border of Ohio start at the mouth of the Little Miami River, thereby locating Cincinnati within the Indiana Territory.

Or can we imagine any difference? Do state borders really affect the citizens of the United States in any serious way? Fewer than ten miles from my office on the campus of Miami University is the village of College Corner, a crossroads notable for being in both Ohio and Indiana. The state line runs through the center of College Corner. Is this an important fact? Does it affect the quality of life? People in College Corner, Ohio have different license plates on their cars, pay different taxes, obey laws that are occasionally unique or idiosyncratic, and vote in different elections than their Hoosier neighbors. Columbus looms larger in shaping their world than Indianapolis. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that College Corner, Ohio shifts to Daylight Savings Time every spring while College Corner, Indiana does not; from April to October it is always one hour earlier in the eastern part of the town.

The time differential reflects the nature of the division, which is largely political and legal. People move freely between Ohio and Indiana with little consciousness of crossing a border. They shop in both states, although taxes may shape their choices. They visit doctors and lawyers in both states, although, too, licensing may shape their choices. They read newspapers from both states, listen to radio stations in both states, and watch television stations in both states. Because American popular culture respects no political boundaries, they see the same movies, own the same videos, listen to the same CDs, and follow the same sports teams. Their allegiance is likely greater to the United States or to their city or county than to Ohio or Indiana.

Ohio’s somewhat arbitrary boundaries, in short, bring together land and people whose relationships with each other are hardly instinctive or inevitable. More than one observer has commented that the state consists of four relatively distinct quadrants that meet at Columbus, a capital city that sometimes seems to have little to do with any of them. Interstate 70, running parallel to the old National Road, bifurcates the state in more ways than one. South of the expressway, the rolling terrain drains into the Muskingum, Hocking, Scioto, and Miami rivers, all of which empty into the Ohio, the Mississippi, and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. To the north, the generally flatter landscape drains into the Maumee, the Sandusky, the Cuyahoga and eventually Lake Erie. If drainage is destiny, then drainage literally pulls Ohio apart.

Patterns of immigration and settlement have reinforced the centrifugal tendencies of geography. The prairie of northwestern Ohio, punctuated with swamps covering reserves of oil and gas, has more in common with
northern Indiana and Illinois than the rest of the state. The hilly river valleys of the southeast are an extension of western Virginia and Kentucky; they support a rural agrarian culture dotted with small farms and villages and founded on corn, tobacco, and cattle, abetted in the late nineteenth century by mining.

Cincinnati, the most important American city west of the Appalachians in the first half of the nineteenth century, thrived as the commercial nexus of northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana as well as the Miami Valley. In addition to southerners, thousands of Germans, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, driven out of Europe at mid-century by economic and political turmoil, flooded Cincinnati, making it one of the most ethnically diverse urban areas in the world, as well as one of the most contentious. Religious and racial divisions rent the fabric of community; discrimination and repression existed side by side with commercial and cultural achievements.

Canals and then railroads (in New York as well as Ohio) opened the northeastern corner to development. In the second half of the nineteenth century, nearby reserves of oil, iron and minerals helped transform sleepy Cleveland into a major industrial center. A region founded by Yankee Protestants and nurtured by Germans became the home of Italians, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and Slavs. Working in steel and other factories, they congregated in Youngstown, Lorain, Canton, and Toledo, as well as Cleveland. Northeastern Ohio had more in common with eastern New York and Pennsylvania than with southeastern Ohio, whose commercial and cultural links were to the mid-Atlantic and the Mississippi Valley.

Cincinnati, a commercial river city like Louisville, Memphis, and Nashville, peaked in the mid-nineteenth century. Cleveland, an industrial lake city like Buffalo, Chicago, and Detroit, peaked in the early twentieth century. It is hardly coincidental that the politics of the two cities has come to symbolize the bifurcation of Ohio. Almost from the beginning, the people of southern Ohio, perhaps because so many were southern and/or German, tended to be conservative. Except in times of economic crisis, they generally supported parties who promised minimal government, little reform, and low taxes, meaning Democrats until well into the twentieth century and now Republicans. Northeastern Ohio, on the other hand, has long been a reliable stronghold of activist reform. Anti-slavery and temperance thrived with Republicans in the nineteenth century; labor unions, Progressive policies, and the New Deal with Democrats in the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century, race reinforced and reconfigured social and cultural divisions. The Great Migration of Southern blacks and white Appalachians constituted the largest influx of peoples in the history of Ohio. Because they tended to settle in urban neighborhoods with low hous-
ing costs, areas abandoned by the sons and daughters of nineteenth-century immigrants who had moved to suburbs, they competed for the same limited resources. Major cities, with the exception of Columbus, embodied the decay of nineteenth-century life. Twentieth-century Ohioans saw themselves as black and white, as the various permutations of European Americans collapsed into one great mass of white people.

Since the citizens of Ohio seem to have little in common beyond their government, historians concentrate on politics and law and search for the significance of the state in the degree to which it represents developments in the United States as a whole. Ohio was shaped by conflicts with Native Americans and the implementation of a federal territorial policy. Ohio sent more men per capita into the Union Army than any other state and more women into the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Immigration, urbanization, and industrialization have played major roles in Ohio's history. The state has produced any number of celebrated Americans, from Thomas Edison and the Wright brothers to Annie Oakley and Clark Gable, to Toni Morrison and James Thurber. These factors are hardly unique. What state does not embody larger developments in the United States? Which does not have a long list of famous sons and daughters? Still, historians emphasize the essential normalcy of Ohio. Other states represent similar developments, but few represent them so well. Scholars use evidence from Ohio to illustrate points they wish to make about American political parties; American capitalism; American social reform; American industrialization; American labor; American ideas about race, gender, and class. Ohio is at once everywhere and nowhere, a bland place of no particular character where quintessentially American things happened.

This interpretation is not so much wrong as incomplete. What was it about this state between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River in the center of the eastern half of North America? Why was it at the forefront of nearly everything American in the nineteenth century, when America was at the forefront of nearly everything that was happening in the Atlantic world—immigration, the market revolution, industrialization, urbanization, religious experimentation, social reform, the triumph of a middle-class mentalité? Why was Ohio a peculiarly apt example of the confluence of global revolutions in a post-colonial setting: the formation of democratic states, capitalist economies, liberal politics, romantic notions of place and identity, cultural contests to define space and memory, and bourgeois values?

If we want to understand how the world was different in 1903 from what it was in 1803, we could do worse than study Ohio. For its history helps us to do much more than describe what happened in an American state. We must ask why and how certain kinds of change happened in certain
kinds of ways in certain kinds of places. We must consider why and how particular human beings produce particular configurations of power and culture in particular places at particular times. If Susan Morgan is correct that “ideas, terms, concepts, critical theories, all emerge from and take their illuminating power from particular locations,” then why did Ohio illuminate so much so well in the nineteenth century?4

**OHIO HISTORY AS WORLD HISTORY**

**The Eighteenth Century**

The Ohio Country was at the far margins of the Atlantic World in the eighteenth century, but its significance was obvious to anyone with access to a map. The expansion of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had initiated an unprecedented degree of contact among the diverse peoples who lived around the Atlantic basin. More human beings were migrating to faraway places than at any other point in the history of the world. They had established a remarkable regular exchange of goods, diseases, artifacts, language, clothes, customs, and people. And they were confronting cultural differences on a grand scale.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Native Americans, including the Iroquois, the Shawnee, and the Miami, were powerful players in trade and diplomacy with the French from the St. Lawrence River Valley through the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River as well as the English-speaking colonists who hugged the western shores of the Atlantic from the gulf of Maine to the Sea Islands. All these peoples were engaged in a struggle for the interior of North America. The Seven Years’ (or French and Indian) War began with the failure of a 1754 Virginia expedition to take control of the forks of the Ohio River (now Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), one of the major portals into heart of the continent. From the 1750s through the 1810s, Europeans, Americans, and Native Americans fought regularly for the right to claim the Ohio Country—the well-watered, fertile land between the Ohio River and Lake Erie. Long before Ohio was Ohio, we learn from R. David Edmunds, the place was as hotly contested as any area in North America.

Pennsylvanian Benjamin Franklin explained in 1754 that the “natural advantages” of the Ohio Country ensured that it would become “a populous and powerful dominion; and a great accession of power, either to England or France.” He was still dreaming of that future two years later in a letter to his friend, the Anglican minister George Whitefield. Together, they should “set-
tle a Colony on the Ohio. . . What a glorious Thing it would be, to settle in that fine Country a large Strong Body of Religious and Industrious People!” Britain would benefit, and so would Native Americans, who would meet “a better Sample of Christians than they commonly see in our Traders, the most vicious and abandoned Wretches of our Nation[.]”6

Franklin never went to the Ohio Valley, but victory in the Seven Years’ War, which secured Great Britain’s claim to Canada and the Great Lakes, allowed English-speaking peoples to transform the region. Western Europeans tended to believe that the major process of cultural encounter and conquest had come to an end and was now a fit subject for study. The contest for the Ohio Country took place in a period “of consolidation and categorization, synthesis and incorporation.” Its major themes—the displacement of native peoples, the transformation of exotic landscapes, the mobilization of labor, the formation of creole identities, the tension with the imperial center, and the evolution of a multi-cultural society—were familiar to Europeans and Americans. In fact, Ohio was a highly visible variation on colonialism at a time when discussion of the nature of conquest, settlements, and cultural diversity was becoming more formal and self-conscious.

Throughout the Atlantic World, the idea of a nation as a voluntary association of citizens defined by residency and shared purpose was displacing empires constructed around hierarchical ranks of dependency. Americans had to define the borders of citizenship as well as the borders of their nation. Nowhere was this challenge more explicit than in the expansion of their republican empire. The ways in which the United States would conquer, colonize, and deal with issues of difference were first and most fully worked out in the federal territory north of the Ohio River and the first state carved out of it, Ohio.

While for Native Americans the revolution that gave birth to the state of Ohio in 1803 represented disaster and destruction, for some Europeans and many Americans it heralded the possibilities of a post-colonial order. Ohio was at once a refuge from the tumult of revolutionary change and a potential model of revolutionary change. “We hope soon to arrive at our new territory, where we shall find things in their original state, as God made them and not perverted by the ungrateful hand of man,” wrote a French participant in the Scioto Company’s settlement at Gallipolis in the early 1790s. “France shall find herself renovated in the western world, without being disgraced by the frippery of kings or seeing the best blood of the nation split to gratify the ambitions of knaves and sycophants.” The inventor of the guillotine imagined migration to “the Ohio region” as an escape from France, “this poisoned land where a man can only find trouble, disgust, worry, disappointment, and danger.”
Americans had similar visions. The founders of the Ohio Company of Associates settlement at Marietta projected it as the future capital of the United States. Ships would connect via the Ohio and Mississippi rivers with the Atlantic World, encouraging the “prospect of a prodigious trade and commerce.” With regular commercial and intellectual engagement with the rest of the world, Ohio would become “the garden of the universe, the center of wealth, a place destined to the heart of a great Empire.” A Pennsylvania Quaker contemplated “the future grandeur of this western world—when this Stream [the Ohio River] should be covered with vessels spreading their canvass to the wind, to convey the produce of this fertile country to New Orleans and across the Atlantic Ocean.”

The construction of Ohio as a place where the manifold problems of humanity might be wiped away persisted into the nineteenth century. No one saw Ohio as “a promised land” of freedom more than did African Americans. Thanks to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Ohio Constitution, slavery was illegal in the state. For enslaved African Americans, the Ohio River became a North American Jordan and the region north of the river a Canaan. Thousands of enslaved blacks crossed the Ohio River in the early nineteenth century, although not necessarily with the intrepid ingenuity of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Eliza, who made her way by leaping onto ice floes. “[O]nce they were infected with the spirit of freedom, they would try again and again, until they succeeded or were sold south.”

What better symbolized the progressive possibilities of Ohio than the abolition of slavery?

On the other hand, what better symbolized the failure of human beings to deal with difference than the issue of race? Increasingly romantic notions conjured up a competing image of Ohio—the face of North America in the early nineteenth century—as a place where all the horrors of conquest and colonization flourished. The violence that punctuated decades of intermittent warfare reminded even the most naïve of emigrants that the region was anything but virgin land. The origins of the United States in a colonial rebellion against the British Empire obfuscated the character of Ohio as a colony of a new republican empire.

Still, the insistence on silently erasing native peoples that characterized so many visions of the Ohio Country could not erase the fact that the state was founded in the aftermath of a brutal assault on Native Americans. Despite their defeats of American armies in 1790 and 1791, they were forced to recognize after the Legion of the United States smashed them at Fallen Timbers in August 1794 that the Ohio River was no longer a barrier to white settlement.
Tales of wilderness savagery as exaggerated as idyllic dreams of global commerce suggested that human beings were regressing rather than progressing. Far from metropolitan London, Paris, or even Philadelphia, the Ohio Country seemed rife with anarchy and confusion. It was a wilderness without order and replete with danger. For centuries, Europeans had approached these marchlands of their notion of civilization with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Eighteenth-century *philosophes* such as the Comte de Buffon and Abbé Cornelius de Pauw asserted that the settlement of the Americas would lead inevitably to disaster for mankind. De Pauw claimed that the New World was “so ill-favored by nature that all it contains is either degenerate or monstrous.” According to de Pauw, “the conquest of the New World” was “the greatest of all misfortunes to befall mankind.”

The treatment of Native Americans and blacks in the Ohio Country seemed to confirm such fears. The new state was a social laboratory, an experiment in human behavior. Would the citizens of Ohio be able to nurture a new kind of society held together by ties of affection, empathy, and respect? Would they prove the natural order of democracy and capitalism? Or would they degenerate into selfishness and vulgarity in a dissolute, diffuse environment characterized by violence and brutality? Could human beings living side by side overcome differences of race, religion, and tradition and organize themselves into a stable, prosperous society?

These were not rhetorical questions, nor were they peculiar to Ohio. They were projections of people eager to justify their conquest of others in cultural as well as military terms. Describing Native Americans as savages entailed a refusal, or an inability, to understand them on their own terms, let alone two centuries of complicated interaction of Native Americans and Europeans in North America. But this concern went beyond the presence of Native Americans. It also involved anxiety that life in a brutal borderland would reduce Europeans to a state of savagery marked by selfishness and degeneracy. Settlers in Ohio were as eager as European colonists in Barbados to demonstrate their integration into the larger Atlantic world and to dispel any impression of degeneracy.

**The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

Ohioans’ conquest of Native Americans and their hostility to blacks made it difficult for them to persuade others that their cultural development matched their material development. As Ohio blossomed in the early nineteenth
century, it became both a beacon of abolitionism and a bastion of racism. The absence of slavery solidified the state’s reputation as a remarkable place. Alexis de Tocqueville, one of many Europeans who examined the United States in search of the secret of its success, marveled at the impact of free labor on the development of Ohio. Invoking a favorite trope of travelers, Tocqueville cited the Ohio Valley as evidence that “slavery, so cruel to the slave, was fatal to the master.” He attributed the “sparse” population and underdevelopment of Kentucky to slavery. In Ohio, “a confused hum proclaims from afar that men are busily at work; fine crops cover the fields; elegant dwellings testify to the taste and industry of the workers; on all sides there is evidence of comfort; man appears rich and contented; he works.” The “differences between ancient and modern civilizations” that separated Kentucky and Ohio were rooted in the fact that labor was “degrading” in the former and “honorable” in the latter.19

As James O. Horton reminds us, however, blacks were restricted by legal codes, segregated into separate schools and churches, and regularly attacked in the streets of Cincinnati. Living in a “borderland between slavery and freedom,” Ohio’s white citizens “could not accept the permanent presence of slavery, neither were they anxious to welcome free African Americans into the state.”20 Blacks who migrated to Ohio full of hope “found every door closed against the colored man in a free State, excepting the jails and penitentiaries, the doors of which were thrown wide open to receive him.”21

The fact that whites treated blacks badly is in some ways less interesting, and certainly less surprising, than the fact that growing numbers of whites in Ohio and other parts of the Atlantic World were becoming committed opponents of slavery. The emergence of immediate abolitionism was a product to some extent of a new emphasis on human freedom, of refined human sensibility, and of an evangelical commitment to social justice. Slavery was antithetical to the workings of a liberal society, a vestige of the triumph of dependency in an ancient world. What about Ohio made it a place where some people confronted the evil of racial slavery even as they refused to confront the idea of black men and women as equal citizens? Where did Ohio fit into the movement in Western Europe toward an amelioration of the legal status of Africans and other peoples subjugated in the process of conquest and colonization?22

The tensions inherent in the abolitionist crusade led people throughout the Atlantic World, black as well as white, women as well as men, to formulate questions that went to the heart of the workings of a liberal society. Eric Foner identifies those questions in his essay. “What should be the balance of power between local authority and the national government, who is entitled to American citizenship, what are the concrete meanings of free-
dom and equality in the United States?” (see page 73 below). Foner reveals the “central role” played by “Ohio and Ohioans” in the development of the anti-slavery Republican Party, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction of the Union with a new legal commitment to equality before the law as well as the retreat from that commitment. The contradiction between the drive to
end slavery and the reluctance to accept blacks as full citizens played itself out fully in Ohio.

Foner argues that “the war era also witnessed sweeping changes in Ohio itself,” that Ohio “was a far different state when the Civil War era ended than it began” (see page 74 below). Not all those changes were wrought by the war or the debate over slavery and race. Ethnicity, religion, and class were just as important. Of the millions of people who migrated long distances to new homes, hundreds of thousands of Germans, Italians, Irish, Poles, Slavs, and Russians ended up in Ohio. Like Birmingham, Glasgow, Liège, and Frankfurt, Cleveland and Toledo exploded on the backs of the industrial revolution. Ohio was full of inventors: the residents of Dayton filed the most patents per capita in the United States in 1900. The state produced the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison, and Charles Kettering. John Patterson revolutionized corporate organization with the National Cash Register Company. Ohio’s factories were state-of-the-art, as were its unions: both the United Mine Workers and the American Federation of Labor were founded in Ohio.

Meanwhile, in the midst of remarkable diversity and change, the middle-class citizens of the state’s towns and cities engaged in an orgy of pietistic reform designed to inculcate character and ensure continuous moral improvement. Ohio was among the leaders in the Atlantic World in the proliferation of voluntary reform societies (especially temperance) as well as in the establishment of private denominational colleges and public universities. Kathryn Sklar’s essay stresses the strength of a “civil society” in which citizens voluntarily choose to try to “synthesize public and private good.” Ohio at the turn of the twentieth century had a “pattern of valuing commonality over difference.” Sklar examines the use of federal troops in Newark to suppress the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 as well as the careers of Columbus Congregational minister Washington Gladden, Cleveland mayor Tom Johnson, president of the Ohio Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Hallie Q. Brown, and secretary-treasurer of the National American Woman Suffrage Association Harriet Upton Taylor. If the western world was “antidemocratic” in 1900 because it excluded women from power and segregated people by race, it had more than a few citizens, female as well as male, black as well as white, “who used public space to build a more inclusive society. And Ohioans did more than their share of that important work” (see page 121 below).

Indeed, Ohioans were everywhere. We know they were in the White House and Congress. But they were also traveling the world, learning about other places. The novelist William Dean Howells was among the first in a

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long list of creative Buckeyes who sojourned in Italy, France, and Germany, soaking up the newest developments in European culture and returning to the United States full of new ideas. Artists such as John Henry Twachtman were captivated by Impressionism. Businessmen and politicians traveled to European cities or read about them. Former President Ulysses S. Grant went on a round-the-world trip between May 1877 and December 1879, visiting sites and talking to leaders of other countries.

Trans-Atlantic conversation was commonplace by the turn of the twentieth century. Cleveland’s Progressive mayor, Tom Johnson, visited Glasgow, as did Brand Whitlock, who succeeded Samuel M. “Golden Rule” Jones as mayor of Toledo. Devoting their careers to building community in Ohio’s crowded cities, they marveled at what Whitlock called “the most wonderfully governed city, that is, from the standpoint of democracy, in the English speaking world.” They recognized that Ohio’s problems and Scotland’s problems, especially municipal ownership of transportation and utilities, were similar, and that they might be susceptible to similar solutions. Whitlock’s fear that “we are so cocky over here that we won’t learn anything from the experience” was at that time somewhat misplaced.23 Cleveland lawyer and councilman Frederick C. Howe wrote a series of books and articles urging Americans to imitate British and German urban models.

Mayor Johnson commissioned Chicago architect Daniel Burnham to design “a vast court of neoclassical public buildings,” including government offices, a railroad station, a library, and an auditorium.24 Although Burnham’s plan was only partly implemented, it was inspired by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s famous reorganization of Paris into a city of broad boulevards and public spaces. As in art and literature, prominent Ohioans were engaged in a serious conversation with Europeans about how to deal with problems created by urbanization and industrialization.

Europeans continued to flock to Ohio to check in on the grand experiment in democracy and capitalism, although they frequently complained that a culture of equality produced little more than banality and materialism. Frances Trollope set the tone in her account of her sojourn in Cincinnati in the early 1830s. She came away convinced that every man was “employed in search of that hone of Hybla, vulgarly called money; neither art, science, learning, nor pleasure can seduce them from its pursuit.” The fact that “[a]ll animal wants are supplied profusely in Cincinnati, and at a very easy rate” barely compensated for the “total and universal want of manners.” Trollope had never seen “any people who appeared to live so much without amusement as the Cincinnatians.”25
Novelist Charles Dickens was slightly more charitable during his 1842 visit. Traveling by coach from Cincinnati to Columbus, he had a field day mocking the monosyllabic language of the coachmen, the earnest temperance houses, the predictable villages, and the boring conversation. While Cincinnati was “a beautiful city; cheerful, thriving, and animated” with “intelligent, courteous, and agreeable” society, Ohio as a whole was a very dull place. Like Trollope, Dickens suggested that the state’s rapid rise to eminence was a product of single-minded ambition focused largely on material accumulation and creature comforts.26

Most Europeans spent too little time in Ohio to have anything more than superficial impressions. Still, the idea that Ohio embodied the American predilection to sacrifice its soul on the altars of money and equality was too popular to be ignored. Even in the midst of World War I, British newspaper publisher Lord Northcliffe found Ohioans’ “prosperity” “irritating. Was there ever a land so overflowing with milk and honey? . . . Was there ever so many gloomy, but effective looking plants?”27

A generation earlier, Lord James Bryce was more measured. “Equality improves manners, for it strengthens the basis of all good manners, respect for other men and women simply as men and women, irrespective of their station in life,” he wrote in the 1880s.28 The major downside of equality was, of course, “uniformity.” “Travel where you will,” Bryce wrote, “you feel that what you have found in one place you will find in another.”29 What made Ohio important was its critical political role. Its voters decided national elections. Because it was a “great and often doubtful State,” divided rather evenly between the major parties, its politics were highly competitive and “presageful.” And it was for this reason that so many Ohioans were presidential candidates between 1868 and 1920.30

The most overwhelming evidence for the global character of Ohio in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, lies not in the words of intellectuals but in the decisions of hundreds of thousands of people to migrate to the state. Can we imagine any greater testimony to the significance of Ohio? People talked about Cincinnati in Hamburg and about Toledo in Beirut. Blacks in Alabama imagined life in Cleveland and rural Appalachians discussed Akron. And when they moved, they sent letters and newspapers home, full of information. Migrants from within the United States traveled back to Mississippi and eastern Kentucky by train, bus, and car.

The Mid- and Later Twentieth Century

Until the 1950s, Ohio was at the center of global networks of human migra-
tion and information distribution. It was a destination of choice, a place worth talking about, worth considering, worth imagining. Reality disappointed, of course. People left, moved on, returned home. But whatever they decided, they were examples of a huge number of people who were interested in the possibilities of Ohio.

Among the most significant changes in twentieth-century Ohio was the precipitous decline in that attitude. By the middle part of the century, travelers were ignoring the state—and to some extent the Midwest altogether. Immigrants from the South continued to pour across the Ohio River, but their conversations were more regional than global. Interest in regionalism as a counterpoint to the homogenization of the United States under the pressure of commerce and mass consumer culture largely focused on the South, Appalachia, New England, and the Rocky Mountain West. Even in explicit studies of regionalism, the Midwest was simply invisible.31

Ohio—like the Midwest as a whole—had lost the cachet it enjoyed in the nineteenth century. A symbol of mainstream America, it conjured up images of complacency and security, of domestic refuge from the tribulations and possibilities of the world beyond it.

English journalist Graham Hutton, surviving World War II in Chicago, observed in Midwest at Noon (1946) that the region of which Ohio was part was changing under the pressure of “national uniformity,” becoming more like the “East,” losing whatever peculiar characteristics it may once have had. Not necessarily in decline, the region was nonetheless no longer on the rise. It had a sense of stability in its “cult of the average” and its “belief in, and even satisfaction with, popular ignorance.” “What pays business must be right. It is ‘what the people want.’ They do not want ideas or culture. They want washing-machines, movies, soap operas.” Hutton thought Cleveland and Cincinnati particularly solid midwestern cities, thanks to events that had happened years before. The “greater sense of civic responsibility” among Cleveland’s leaders reflected the legacy of the New England “cultural revolution in early Ohio.” Cincinnati was more cosmopolitan and efficient than Mrs. Trollope had thought.32

More common was the reaction of the French feminist and writer Simone de Beauvoir during her February 1947 visit to Oberlin. Once synonymous with radical causes such as abolitionism and woman’s rights, Oberlin struck Beauvoir as staid and stagnant. Students she met in “a dreary cafeteria” after her lecture did not discuss “social problems” or “intellectual matters”; rather, they talked about “nothing,” or, rather, “sports or college organizations.” What most discouraged Beauvoir was that the students were
so apathetic while being neither blind nor unconscious. They know and deplore the oppression of thirteen million blacks, the terrible poverty of the South, the almost equally desperate poverty that pollutes the big cities. They witness the rise, more ominous every day, of racism and reactionary attitudes—the birth of a new kind of fascism. They know that their country is responsible for the world’s future. But they themselves don’t feel responsible for anything, because they don’t think they can do anything in this world. At the age of twenty, they are convinced that their thought is futile, their good intentions ineffective.33

Although she was in Ohio for only a few hours, hardly long enough to become an expert on the place, Beauvoir was as condescending as Dickens or Trollope. Nonetheless, her words suggested that Ohio was no longer interesting, not even worth criticizing. One Hungarian-born student at Oberlin spoke to her of returning to Europe—“the only place where it still means something to think.”34 This melodramatic statement embodied the feelings of many young Ohioans who left the state to seek fame, fortune, and stimulation elsewhere.

In popular culture, Ohio was becoming a code word for complacency, comfort, and an idealized past of small towns. A 1950s Broadway musical played on that image in its title. The Wonderful Town was New York City, a place of energy and excitement. Two sisters from Columbus migrate to Manhattan in search of possibilities. When they miss their home (“Why-o, why-o, why-o/did I ever leave Ohio?” they lament), they are missing safety and security. It’s a fleeting sense of longing. To engage the world, they have to go elsewhere. And they know it. Indeed, Ohio had become a place people came from rather than a place people went to. When a Syracuse University professor remarked in 2000 that “There are no trends being set in Ohio,” he was also remarking on a seismic shift in the reputation of the state.35

James T. Patterson stresses “that many trends in Ohio during the era surrounding its sesquicentennial year of 1953 resembled those of its near neighbors, and of trends nationwide.” He quotes historian Carl Wittke’s remark that “what we are doing in Ohio today has also, happily, been going on elsewhere. It is part of the American way, and the average Ohioan is also the average American” (see page 130 below). But it became abundantly clear over the next quarter of a century that that was no longer the case. The state was “less at the center of things after 1970 than it had been,” whether the measure was personal income or personal satisfaction. The optimism of the 1950s became the contentiousness of the 1960s and the relative bleakness of the 1970s, particularly because of “the rise of more open, sometimes violent racial tensions” and “the spread of serious economic problems.” Racial
unrest in cities, the rapid demise of the steel and other heavy industry, and the shooting of four Kent State University students in May 1970—“Four dead in Ohio” chanted Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young—confirmed that Ohio was in the midst of hard times.

LOOKING AHEAD

The progressive story of nineteenth-century Ohio thus turns into one of decline and stagnation. Observing that the state in 1903 “was a destination of choice, a place where Americans went to enhance their economic standing,” Herbert Asher concludes that Ohio is “no longer the heart of it all.” Beyond the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, Asher identifies a “major obstacle” in the inability of Ohioans to respond to challenges collectively. “Ohio as a state has an incredibly difficult time coming together to achieve common purposes.” Somehow, diverse peoples and regions must end “the drift and consciously” choose “to build [a] future in particular directions.” Only then will Ohio “be a destination of choice once again just as it was a century ago.”

It is important to stress that Ohioans have to a large extent chosen their fate. From the middle of the twentieth century, they have generally reciprocated others’ lack of interest. In part, this disengagement reflects the rise during the Cold War of an aggressive patriotism that scorns most of what the rest of the world has to offer, from automobiles to ideas. Never has the utilitarian emphasis in Ohio’s public culture been stronger: foreign ideas and products are often seen as dangerous threats to the well-being of Ohioans. Many citizens of the state, quite happy with the status quo, prefer to live away from cutting-edge change. They enjoy the image of Ohio as an oasis of comfortable provinciality, a symbol of traditional values and heartland normalcy. They spend more time celebrating the past than imagining the future. Where in the early nineteenth century many people came to Ohio because they wanted to experiment, most Ohioans in the early twenty-first century are content with enjoying—and defending—the achievements of their predecessors. Having developed a good society, they have no interest in risking any parts of it on something untried and unfamiliar. They have lost the edge, in all its many meanings, that they once enjoyed.

In his concluding essay, William E. Kirwan laments that loss. He advocates state investment in technology programs, especially in areas of biotechnology that could eradicate poverty, disease, and hunger from the world. Assuming the attitude taken by Ohioans in the nineteenth and early
AMERICAN PREJUDICE ABROAD

The Hawaiian National band, stationed at Honolulu, is about to be reorganized—white musicians to take the place of the natives, and the instrumentation to be largely increased.—Brophy's Band Journal.

The provisional government (Americans) of Hawaii is showing its prejudice early in the day. The Hawaiian National band has had for years a reputation for most excellent playing, etc., and the change noted above can only take place as the result of one thing, and that we mention above. Until Americans can rise above their petty color and race prejudice they have no business establishing a protectorate over or backing up any kind of a government for "colored" people. Foreign powers—England, France, Germany and others—should be made to thoroughly understand this by our ex-diplomats, Hon. John Langston, Frederick Douglass, Ebenzer E. Bassett and others. This is a duty they owe the colored people of all countries. There is a great deal our leading men can do if they will, beside patiently waiting until the republican party is in the ascendency in the conduct of governmental affairs and then seeking office. This is singularly true of the few who have amassed handsome fortunes as a direct result of their representing the race in offices with good fat salaries. The duty of the race press is to impress them with a proper sense of their duty in the direction indicated. At the same time our journals will be educating our people to expect and demand something of them. These so-called leaders have already secured entirely too much for which they have made absolutely no return. We want as leaders men who will be watchful and careful of our interests; men who are sufficiently broad-minded to have a care, also, for the interests of all "colored" people, even those of Hawaii. It is true the Hawaiians have never exhibited an acute amount of interest in either our or our southern brethren's conditions, yet we cannot but sympathize with them for obvious reasons. We condemn the reorganization of the Hawaiian National band, as indicated in the article republished above, because it is another exposition of American color prejudice.

"American Prejudice Abroad." In his article, published in the African American newspaper The Gazette in Cleveland, Ohio, on July 1, 1893, editor Harry C. Smith wrote about racism in Hawaii (then an American protectorate). He called for African Americans to oppose racism wherever it occurred in the world and "to have a care, also, for the interests of all "colored" people, even those of Hawaii." Courtesy, The Ohio Historical Society.
twentieth centuries, Kirwan argues for the value of experimentation, development, and public debate. Whether or not we agree with his prescriptions, we should not ignore his challenge to reconsider definitions of the quality of life, the nature of education and its value to society, and the character of citizenship in the Information Age.

In short, Kirwan wants Ohioans to reinvigorate their conversation with the world, a conversation in which Ohioans presently use language more appropriate for 1903 than 2053, and we should start that process with the much discussed and little understood concept of globalization. All too frequently Ohioans, like most Americans, believe that globalization is something new under the sun. They concede that we must learn about the rest of the world, but consent to do so only reluctantly and mainly for economic reasons.

As the following essays try to demonstrate, those assumptions are misplaced. Our current preoccupations echo long-standing themes in the history of the state. “While we are in the world, we must converse with the world,” wrote a 1790 contributor to the Louisville *Kentucky Gazette* in a statement of the sentiment that informed Ohio’s creation. “All mankind . . . are our brethren, and we are interested, in their pleasures and pains, their sufferings, or their deliverances, throughout the world. Accounts of these should produce in us suitable emotions[,] which would tend to the exercise of different virtues, and the improvement of our tempers. We should accustom ourselves hereby to rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn.”36

To mourn and rejoice with others is to do much more than practice benevolence or cultivate virtue. It is, in fact, an act of self-interest. For, as often as not, human beings have thrived as citizens of Ohio to the extent they have also seen themselves as citizens of the world.

NOTES

1. Pearl Buchanan to Andrew Cayton, 28 May 1972, in author’s possession.
Introduction


Introduction


27. Quoted in J. Lee Thompson, ““To Tell the People of America the Truth”: Lord Northcliffe in the USA, Unofficial British Propaganda, June–November 1917,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 2 (April 1999): 258.


34. Ibid., 94.


“The Indians Delivering up the English Captives to Colonel Bouquet near his camp at the Forks of the Muskingum in North America in November 1764.” Peter Canot engraving after a Benjamin West drawing, in William Smith, Historical Account of the Expedition against the Ohio Indians (Philadelphia and London, 1766). The English painter West drew the Ohio Indians with a measure of humanity and dignity, caring for their white “captives” and incorporating them into Native American community life. Smith noted in his text the reluctance of some of these “captives” to return to European civilization.Courtesy, The State Library of Ohio.