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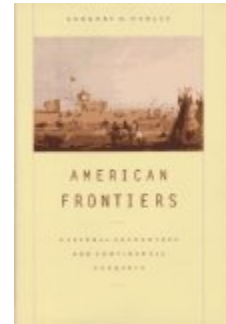
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gregory H. Nobles. *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1997. xvi + 286 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-2471-1.

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Following Turner

Yet another historian has gone to the mat with one of our most maligned and celebrated hobgoblins, Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *American Frontiers* is Gregory Nobles's effort at "an interpretive thesis of recent scholarship" that has revised if not debunked our most celebrated mythology (p. 251). Nobles is not, however, a western historian such as Patricia Limerick, interested in revisiting those myths that lay at the core of the field. He is instead a scholar of early America whose past work has focused on the edges of late colonial Anglo-American settlement, particularly "Breaking Into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800" (*William and Mary Quarterly*, Oct. 1989, pp. 641-70), which dealt with the Appalachians and Ohio Valley. *American Frontiers* reaches farther in time and space to match (and therefore illuminate revisions to) Turner's study. Unfortunately, Nobles's worthy goal is also the ultimate, underlying weakness of his book, for in dogging Turner's footsteps he has fallen into some of the same potholes.

Nobles emphasizes how recent scholarship has recast the North American frontier as a zone of interaction between groups. While Turner treated Anglo-America as nearly homogeneous, Nobles begins by emphasizing that there were "many frontier experiences among the European colonizers of North America, not just the English but also the Spanish and the French" as well as "other, less prominent European players" (pp. xiii-iv). And while Turner cast the frontier as "the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and

civilization"—a crucible where individual Europeans became Americanized—Nobles paints it as "a much more complex process of mutual exchange in which neither culture, Native American or Euro-American, could remain unchanged" (p. 12). This vision, if pursued and expanded throughout the book, would have performed the double *mitzvah* of harnessing recent, scattered scholarship to a comprehensive thesis, and helping to forge a new American mythology to supplant older, myopic, more destructive fables. Well, one can hope.

Following an introduction to Turnerian controversies, *American Frontiers* begins with an overview of pre-contact Native woodlands culture and ends, 250 pages later, with the hopeless resistance by Plains Indian to American political and cultural power. These book-ends highlight the strengths and the weaknesses of this book—many of which, deliberately or not, he shares with Turner. As had Turner, Noble has written a broad sketch that captures the power and tragedy of American expansion. In fact, seemingly in order to retain the power of his narrative, as well as to retain the sense of this work as "an interpretive synthesis" (p. xv), Nobles omitted citations or notes, relying on a bibliographic essay—a decision that some would appreciate, but I find quite troublesome, particularly since he frequently quotes other writers. And while he has improved on Turner, and performed quite a feat by covering complex issues of gender, race, ideology, consensus and conflict in so many places and times, as with Turner there are large holes in his narrative. Such absences are inevitable over such a sprawling study. Nobles's goal was not "to tame it all...(but) to emphasize and

analyze what I take to be the most significant issues in the history of the North American frontiers” (p. xiv). But of course this practically requires reviewers like me to point to significant issues that are ignored or barely mentioned.

For example, Nobles’s first chapter, on colonial cultural contacts, is a remarkably comprehensive sketch of early Native encounters with the Spanish, French, English. But while he provides an excellent overview of Native precontact cultures, and the effects on the colonial encounters on those cultures, he offers no parallel analysis of the colonists’ cultures—a strange omission given his theme of the frontier as a region of “mutual exchange.” In the following chapter, Nobles describes the complex, crosscutting struggles for control within, as well as the wars between, Europeans and their Native allies for the eastern half of the continent. While his incorporation of revisionist work by Francis Jennings, Richard White, and other Indian historians is welcome, the local nature of this frontier conflict needs more emphasis than a brief mention.

Next, Nobles’s chapter on the strange development of early U.S. western land and Indian policies stresses the significance of elite land speculators in frontier expansion and land policies, provides a rich description of “backwoods” society and culture (although I prefer his 1989 *WMQ* article on this topic), and analyzes the early republic’s political strife that was shaped in part by the conflicts between those frontier settlements and coastal authorities. This is, of course, a correct counter to the Turnerian myth of the rugged individualistic pioneer squatters who gave way to “the more steady farmer” drawn by cheap land—both of whom outdistanced the reach of government. At the same time, we must recognize that Turner’s larger work, *The Frontier in American History*, also discussed conflicts between coastal authorities and inland settlers, as well as the multiplicity of religious and ethnic groups along the Appalachians. Of course, Nobles deals with these issues, along with an economic and social analysis, in a far more sophisticated manner than Turner. But while this is one of the most powerful chapters in Nobles’s book, it also signals his failure to move beyond Turner’s parameters of inexorable westward expansion to a truly new vision of the North American frontier, for contemporary and possibly parallel developments in Canada, Spanish America and among Native groups (as White discussed in *The Middle Ground*) are not even mentioned. What about the effects of the transcontinental fur and buffalo trade, and the “domino effects” of Indian groups forced east of the Ohio by American backwoods settlers and their govern-

ments?

This shortcoming is particularly baffling considering how Nobles does such a wonderful job in the following chapter in portraying Texas as a zone of contact between the Spanish-Mexican and U.S. frontiers, and ties the movement for Texas independence to developments in both countries. This chapter also highlights how slavery played a major role in America’s expansion—again correcting the (long discredited) Turnerian myth that slavery was but “an incident” in the larger question of western settlement. I was also impressed at the sophisticated sections on wilderness art and western literature. On the other hand, Mexicans vanish after the Mexican War, and Nobles does not even mention efforts by southerners to push slavery farther south by taking Cuba and parts of Central America.

Nobles directly addresses issues of gender along the frontier in Chapter 5, in the context of the Trans-Mississippi West, beginning with the diary of Jane Gould along the trail to California in 1862. He discusses how women had different motives for going than men, were more reluctant about it, and worked longer and harder along the trail. This chapter is devoted, in fact, to puncturing a number of American myths about the west, including the fact (featured in Ken Burns’s recent series on the West) that far more pioneers were killed or wounded by their own guns than by Indians. Nobles also discusses the lawlessness of mining camps and the rapid rise of corporate mining, the cultural clash between cowboys and townspeople in cattle towns, and ethnic communities in the west. But he does not deal with the effects of the west’s boom and bust economy, its society, nor the effects of mining, timbering, and farming on its environment and territorial politics (including making life worse for the Indians and the U.S. Army, which was forced to defend the miners against retribution). He discusses the transcontinental railroad, but says little about how the railroads dominated the west.

But the shortcomings of *American Frontiers*, resulting from Nobles’s effort to follow Turner’s track, are best seen in his final chapter (before a brief epilogue) on “Indians and the Enclosing Frontier”. As Nobles acknowledges, this is largely a condensed version of Robert Utley’s classic *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1984), beginning with the 1862 Minnesota Sioux uprising, and ending (as usual) with the killing of Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee massacre. This chapter is clearly designed to bring the story up to Turner’s presentation in 1893. But it adds

nothing to Utley's work, and completely ignores how the cultures and societies of western Indians were shaped by the horses brought by the Spanish, the "domino" invasions of other Indians forced out of the east by French and English conflict or American removal policies, trade with Americans, English, and Spanish, or—most apparent of all—warfare among themselves and with the newcomers. Much has been published on these issues which clearly molded the human ecology of the region, and not only set the stage for but also shaped the nature of the U.S. "conquest."

Nobles has apparently written *American Frontiers* to introduce the larger public and perhaps undergraduate students to recent research into race, gender, class, internal conflicts, and the gaps between images and realities of frontier encounters in American history. All of the ingredients of a revisionist synthesis are seemingly here—even the proper tone of irony. I particularly appreciated Nobles's comment at the beginning that "(o)ne might well revise Turner's definition to describe the frontier as the meeting point where otherwise civilized people often exhibited savage behavior" (p. 12). Unfortunately, this is a missed opportunity for a reconceptualization of the American frontier. In the end, Noble seems more interested in using recent work to modify the path blazed by Turner, instead of truly recasting our understanding of the continent as a zone of contacts between many different cultures, on many levels, at many different times. He embraces not only Turner's end date of 1890, but also his ultimate sense of the frontier as the

edges of the tide of Anglo-American influence. While there are occasional flashes of a more unusual (and useful) story, *American Frontiers* ends up as a highly linear narrative of the growth of Anglo-American power, spreading across the North American continent—a movement which reshapes native and newcomers (this time including reds, blacks, and women as well as white men), ending with the crushing of the Ghost Dance and the death of Sitting Bull.

Turner's "Frontier" paper is now over a century old, and is still good for more pummeling. Noble's effort makes a good signpost along the trail that Americans (particularly scholars) have traveled since. Hill and Wang has done well with the book, choosing a large, quite readable type (too many publishers are determined to sacrifice their readers' eyes for the bottom line). Each chapter begins with a map, showing the region covered by the chapter and contemporary to the time period discussed, and also managing to drive home one of the points that Noble makes at the beginning, that maps are intellectual as well as political documents. *American Frontiers* is a very readable, dynamic narrative, if a bit choppy in sections (like the Oregon Trail). Unfortunately it tends to fall into the all too-worn ruts of the familiar road blazed by Turner.

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