



Allan G. Bogue. *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998. xviii + 557 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3039-2.

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## Turner's Road

No other American historian has haunted the professional imagination quite like Frederick Jackson Turner. Critics and admirers have minutely analyzed his writings. Historians of the American West have declared themselves to be "Turnerian," "antiTurnerian," "neo-Turnerian," and "postTurnerian." Admirers and detractors alike recognize that Turner was a key figure in the development of the American historical profession, so long ago historians made Turner a subject of scholarly study. The most recent sustained critique of Turner's work (the latest in a long line of attacks, Professor Bogue points out) has not erased interest in Turner and his ideas.[1]

Even Turner's failure to produce the long-awaited, magisterial book based on his frontier and sectional ideas has become part of professional lore. I learned about "the book" (Professor Bogue always encloses the term in quotes) in my first graduate seminar. I took away from that experience a memory (perhaps fictive) that Turner on his deathbed had whispered "Finish the book, Max," to his friend and associate, Max Farrand. Bogue is by no means unique in according "the book" special textual identification. Turner himself called it "the Book." Ray A. Billington referred to Turner's unfinished work as "THE BOOK" in his biography of Turner.[2] Historians have long mused about why Turner could never finish "the book." Billington attributed Turner's failure to a weak constitution that rebelled whenever he worked too hard and a streak of perfectionism that kept him tinkering with his manuscript.[3] While Bogue is sympathetic to Turner's infirmities, he takes a more critical view of Turner's failure to publish his great work, as well as other aspects of his career. Bogue also provides an insightful analysis of the historical profession in its formative years.

Turner's star rapidly rose during the 1890s, a time when leading men like John Franklin Jameson laid the foundation stones of the historical profession. Turner's

early work, especially his famous essay on the frontier, and his ambitious development of the history program in the University of Wisconsin, soon made him one of the leading scholars of the day. How did he capitalize on this early success? "Would he continue to build, to develop his ideas further, to recognize and replace faulty materials?" Bogue asks. "Or would he play the lottery winner who chooses to bank his winnings" (p. 118)? The answer, Bogue tells us, is a little of both.

Turner's popularity and scholarly renown made him a very attractive candidate for history chairs. Indeed, American universities from Berkeley, to Chicago, to Cambridge courted the young professor. His responses to suitors were invariably cordial, never dismissive, and always left the door open for negotiation. Turner used these discussions as a lever to improve his position and the history program in the University of Wisconsin. No doubt other prominent professors played this game, but Turner played it as deftly as anyone. As one of the founders of the profession, he helped to establish the tradition of seeking offers abroad to improve one's position at home. Still, it was not as if Turner applied for jobs at obscure normal schools. His carefully nuanced letters and offers that came his way were plausible and appropriate for a man of his stature in the academy. Ultimately Turner accepted a position at Harvard where he finished his teaching career. If he were playing the academic lottery, most bookies would call him a winner.

Turner also staked his reputation on book contracts with various presses which gave advances on his work. "The book" finally emerged after his death, but many of his contracts went unfulfilled like so many I.O.U.s in a big casino. Still, Turner did publish, as Professor Bogue points out, and in his early years he could even make a claim to being prolific (pp. 184-85). His output included encyclopedia articles, scholarly essays, popular articles, and a book (although not "the book"). Surely when Harvard called Turner in 1910 his new colleagues

should have expected that his great work was forthcoming, and in the not-too-distant future. They were disappointed and so was Turner. Failure to produce “the book” in his lifetime left the impression that he had not lived up to his promise. Turner seemed to believe that he worked best at “white heat,” brief periods of intense work when deadlines were nigh. Perhaps, but these are work habits that most professors discourage in their students. Turner had a disciplined mind, but was an undisciplined worker. Still, working under white heat produced memorable essays—even if “the book” failed to fully emerge in his lifetime.[4]

Professor Bogue attributes Turner’s failure to publish “the book” to personal shortcomings. Turner’s health was not robust, but he always made time to take many weeks in the summer to improve his fly casting on mountain streams, teach summer school, and travel. He attempted to write while at his summer house in Maine, but these months were not as productive as he had hoped. During the school year Turner was perhaps too social. He simply did not apply himself consistently to the great work of writing “the book.” The Harvard administration even released Turner from teaching so that he could produce “the book,” but to no avail. His colleagues at Wisconsin and Harvard found ways to grind out their work.

Still, Bogue does not count Turner as a loss to the profession. Far from it. He trained scores of historians who led productive careers, and was a leader who gave much time to professional organizations and journals. As much as anyone of his generation, Turner deserves credit for establishing the University of Wisconsin as a leading institution of higher education and scholarly research. His work at the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Huntington Library helped to make those research institutions’ reputations. He was a great teacher whose students recalled him with respect and affection. Any historian would be justly proud of these accomplish-

ments, with or without “the book.”

In addition to providing an interesting and sensitive account of Turner’s personal and professional life, Bogue weaves a thoughtful assessment of the historian’s work into the biography. He provides the best analysis of Turner’s writing to date. No one can come away from this book believing that Turner stopped thinking in 1893. Rather, he amended his thinking as new information came (while remaining committed to his original ideas). One gets the impression of Turner as a sophisticated thinker who never ceased to wonder about big questions in American history. Bogue also gives a savvy account of the development of the historical profession and the University of Wisconsin. Simply put, *Strange Roads* is a masterful combination of biography and intellectual history.

#### Notes

[1]. Patricia N. Limerick, “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World,” *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995):697716; Michael C. Steiner, “From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (November 1995): 479 501; Wilbur R. Jacobs, *On Turner’s Trail: 100 Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

[2]. *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 384, 390.

[3]. Billington, *Historian, Scholar, Teacher*, 384.

[4]. Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

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