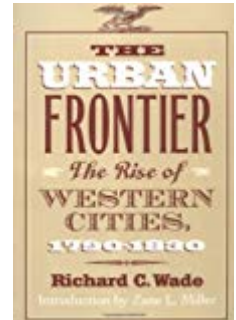


Richard C. Wade. *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. xx + 360 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-06422-7.



Reviewed by Carl A. Abbott

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As the United States entered the 1950s, highway engineers were eagerly completing plans for Middle Western toll highways and anticipating national freeway system. Automobile stylists were turning Studebakers into rocket ships and dreaming of ways to turn rear fenders into tailfins. Meanwhile, Richard Wade was determinedly following the route of the early Ohio River boatmen. His itinerary took him downriver from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati to Louisville and then to St. Louis on the Mississippi, with side trips to Lexington and the limestone soil of the bluegrass country. His stops over several years of research were the local history rooms of public libraries, city and state historical societies, newspaper archives, and dusty rooms full of early municipal records in the city hall basements and municipal annexes. At least in Pittsburgh, home of political boss and king-maker David Lawrence, Wade's budding career as a Democratic Party activist helped to open records that were still carefully guarded after 150 years.

The result of sweltering summers of note-taking and writing was a Harvard University Ph.D.

dissertation for Arthur Schlesinger, published by the Harvard University Press as *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* in 1959. In the 1960s it entered the paperback world as *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis*. Now the University of Illinois Press has reissued this American history classic under its original title with a valuable preface by Zane L. Miller, one of Wade's most accomplished and influential students.

The Urban Frontier propounded a simple and startling thesis. Cities were the spearheads of the Anglo-American frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner had gotten the order of events mixed up. Urbanization didn't follow the farmer—it made the development of agriculture possible. On successive frontiers in the Ohio Valley, around the Great Lakes, at the margin of the Great Plains, on the Pacific Coast, and in the western mountains, urban settlements provided the necessary foundation for intensive resource development. They processed and marketed crops, timber, and minerals; they furnished merchandise and supplies; they

mobilized capital and management expertise to build roads, canals, and railroads; they provided the refinements of civilization that westering Anglo-Americans so desperately wanted.

Obvious as this point may seem to H-Urban subscribers, it contradicted the strongest trend in regional history in the 1950s. A few years before *The Urban Frontier*, R. Carlyle Buley won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815-1840* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1950). Buley's book is a thick, nearly unreadable compendium of tidbits about farm life and pioneer society in the early Middle West. It assumed that Middle Western history was rural history and it romanticized the quaint practices of the folk. For fiction readers, Ross Lockridge's immensely popular *Raintree County* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948) offered the same message in a novel set in the Cincinnati hinterland of southeastern Indiana. The full title of the Lockridge book shows the power of the romanticizing impulse: *Raintree County ... which had no boundaries in time and space, where lurked musical and strange names and mythical and lost peoples, and which was itself only a name musical and strange.*

The Urban Frontier in this context was a wakeup call. "Get real!" it says. Take a look at social and economic realities. Look at the way that cities expressed and promoted the commercial capitalism that lies at the heart of the American experience. Wade's study thus extended the historical understanding of American growth that was being outlined in Louis Hartz's brilliant *Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1955), David Potter's equally powerful *People of Plenty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), and the studies of state economic development policy by Oscar and Mary Handlin, Hartz, and others.[1]

Wade's insight rang true for me when I read the book as an undergraduate who wanted to be a historian but was not quite sure what to study. Wade was writing about my part of the country,

for I was a fifth-generation Ohioan. He was also writing about my ancestors, who had been townspeople--storekeepers, telegraph operators, artisans, clerks, land speculators (quite unsuccessful, I might add). I decided then, and still believe, that Wade managed a great conceptual feat. The book confirms that Fred Turner asked the right questions about the process and meaning of American expansion, but just needed his answers turned inside out.

A key concept in *The Urban Frontier* is "urban imperialism," a historical-geographic framework for understanding the ways in which urban commercial networks organize and develop hinterlands through trade and investment. The concept has been applied successfully in other regions from Texas to California. It resonates with geographer James Vance's model of a mercantile pattern of settlement and it underlies William Cronon's recent sophisticated analysis of Chicago's interactions with its region.[2]

The concept assumes that the United States was born in commercial capitalism. In Wade's Old Northwest we find no gradual coalescence of rural subsistence society into a more complex economy. Rather the Great West grows as an outpost of New York, London, and Hamburg, striving from the start to reach distant markets and fertilized by investment and migration. The mentalite of this Middle America was *improvement*, not stasis. As has been true for two centuries, the battles were over the right sharing of the fruits of growth, not the possibility of economic modernization.

Also basic to Wade's interpretation is the role of cities in the transit of culture. Wade's Cincinnatians and Louisvillers were a conservative bourgeoisie, interested in recreating the society that left behind. They borrowed street names from Philadelphia, filled churches and meeting halls, and looked for guidance to east coast communities. Here Wade's interpretation extended Daniel Aaron's previous study of Cincinnati society and complemented Earl Pomeroy's argument about

the social and cultural conservatism of far western settlement.[3]

Like most other historians of the 1950s, Wade looked for patterns in the written record. In using public records, newspapers, and published documents, he engaged in very traditional historical research. He did not explore quantitative data sources, the built environment, or other sources of information that could have enriched his interpretation—although he certainly encouraged his own students to do so and later used such sources to great effect in *Chicago: The Growth of a Metropolis* (University of Chicago Press, 1969), co-authored with geographer Harold Mayer. Nor did he explicitly test social theory in the way that his second book, *Slavery in the Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) would test sociological generalizations about the effects of urbanization on social institutions and individual freedom.

Covering forty years of growth in five cities, Wade's study is necessarily broader than it is detailed. It is a sketch map of a vast intellectual territory drawn from the most accessible sources. An explorer like Henry Schoolcraft or William Clark, he mapped broad contours and described large patterns that later intellectual surveyors and entrepreneurs could fill in. Those broad patterns, however, included all of the core topics of urban development, from economic growth to the differentiation of social classes to the creation of political and cultural institutions.

Wade's study triggered a vast literature including case studies of individual western cities and comparative discussions on other urban frontiers and imperial realms. A generation of urban historians learned that the way to do urban history was to explore a theme across a multitude of cases. The result was outstanding studies by Ken Jackson, Howard Rabinowitz, Blaine Brownell, David Goldfield, Don Doyle, Timothy Mahoney, and many others.[4]

The Urban Frontier is a study of the public city—that is, the ways in which early city builders

conceived and promoted their communities as economic engines and civic entities. The book describes ethnic differences, the presence of free and enslaved African-Americans, and the stirrings of class divisions, but these are secondary to the theme. Many questions that we would now pose about the roles and experiences of women went unasked. Nevertheless, Wade's book remains the most accessible study of the founding of an urbanized nation. It still carries the excitement of intellectual discovery that has made it so influential.

Notes:

[1]. Oscar Handlin and Mary Handlin, *Commonwealth: A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861* (New York: New York University Press, 1947); Louis Hartz, *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

[2]. James Vance, *This Scene of Man: The Role and Structure of the City in the Geography of Western Civilization* (New York: Harper's College Press, 1977); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991).

[3]. Daniel Aaron, *Cincinnati: Queen City of the West, 1819-1939* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992); Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (March 1955): 579-600.

[4]. This lesson I learned in Wade's University of Chicago seminar and tried to apply in my dissertation. Published as *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981) it was a self-conscious effort to take Wade's study into the next generation of Middle Western history.

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