Frederick Jackson Turner, New Historian


Do not be misled by the subtitle of Bogue’s new biography of Turner (1861–1932). This is not another bashing of the man and his famous “frontier thesis.” The title phrase, which comes from a favorite poem of Turner’s by Rudyard Kipling, is meant to signal the restless and exploring spirit that propelled his intellectual life. Bogue writes that Turner “provided an explanation of American development and character that was not to be matched in popularity during his lifetime or later” (464). Turner addressed the big questions confronting historians at the beginning of the century, and Bogue credits him with leaving an imprint on the practice of history greater than that of any other American historian.

Bogue is appropriately respectful and fair-minded, if considerably more critical than Billington, whose 1973 biography of Turner still sparkles with wit and charm.1 Both Bogue and Billington fully utilized the massive collection of Turner papers at the Henry E. Huntington Library, but Billington’s laudatory tone, as well as his self-conceived role as defender of the frontier thesis, seriously dates his book, especially in light of the sustained critical commentary of the past decade. By highlighting Turner’s limitations along with his contributions, Bogue’s scholarly and readable study sets a new standard.

Some of the freshness of Bogue’s biography comes from his use of new materials. Consider the question of Turner’s relations with his graduate students. During a career that spanned four decades, he worked with dozens of men and women, many of

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whom became eminent historians and leaders of the profession. Turner invariably comes across in their recollections as dedicated and caring, ready and willing to produce the necessary letter of recommendation or offer a bit of sage advice. His students also remembered him as a mentor with the ability to strike intellectual sparks. Louise Phelps Kellogg, who studied with him at the University of Wisconsin, described his seminars as a “clash of mind on mind,” and praised Turner’s genius at creating a sense of “comradeship” and an atmosphere of “intellectual democracy” (64, 124).

Bogue’s research also turned up exceptions—notably the case of Orin G. Libby, one of Turner’s first graduate students, a brilliant scholar who developed the technique of mapping electoral data in his still valuable 1895 dissertation about the geographical distribution of the ratification vote on the Constitution. Turner arranged for the publication of Libby’s work in the university’s monograph series, and, pronouncing his student “full of earnestness and vigor,” hired him as an instructor in the department. Libby held that position until 1903, when he accepted a professorial appointment at the University of North Dakota (171). Libby’s papers, however, reveal a bitter young man who believed that Turner took the credit for his methodology and prevented his promotion at Wisconsin.

In a letter to his fiancée, Libby described a difficult meeting with Turner in 1899: “He said my line of investigation was too much like his for us both to stay in the department. “That I never could be more than an instructor unless I would teach and work in another line. . . . It was dastardly of him to ask me to leave my work for pay and do what I am not fitted to do” (173). Bogue is admirably judicious in his evaluation of this evidence. “The ambitious Turner saw Libby as evidence of the quality of a history program that he was developing and for which he sought national eminence,” while “the ambitious Libby perceived Turner as unsupportive, even parasitic” (175). These details neither surprise nor shock—such conflict is the ordinary stuff of academic life. Yet, nothing of it was apparent in Billington’s book. The story contributes to both the credibility and verisimilitude of Bogue’s.

This same critical stance shows up in Bogue’s treatment of Turner’s infamous “writer’s block.” His fame rested on a handful of important essays, which he later republished in two collections:
The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920) and The Significance of Sections in American History (New York, 1933), which posthumously won him the Pulitzer Prize. He published one monograph, The Rise of the New West, 1819–1829 (New York, 1906), but despite the labors of a quarter-century, he was unable to complete its sequel. It was patched together by loving disciples after Turner's death and published as The United States 1830–1850: The Nation and Its Sections (New York, 1935).

No major American historian before or since published so little, and there has been a great puzzle over Turner's lack of productivity. One decisive factor was the devastating deaths of two of the Turners' three children in 1899, which drove him into a depression that lasted many months. Writing remained painfully difficult ever after. Billington argued that Turner also was diverted by the pressures of university administration, by his dedication to his students, and by his unstinting round of public lecturing. But Bogue counters that many other successful historians operated under similar constraints. Indeed, during his final years at Harvard, where Turner taught from 1910 to 1924, he negotiated an arrangement that relieved him from teaching one semester each academic year.

The solution of the puzzle, Bogue believes, is simply Turner's "lack of self-discipline" (256). Despite the fact that he signed a half-dozen publishing contracts (and eagerly collected the advances), he and his wife rarely missed the opportunity to travel or spend summers at their cabin on the Maine coast. Turner was an avid fisherman, and he always made time for the outdoors. Bogue quotes Caroline Turner, after her husband's death, musing that "perhaps he is more beloved just because of his qualities which prevented his buckling down to work" (451).

Nonetheless, the slim publication record was a sore spot for Turner. Imagine his feelings when, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1917, he was present to hear William A. Dunning of Columbia University remark on "how potent has been the influence, and how disproportionately scanty, alas! the historiographic output of our own Turner" (349). He had to carry the psychological burden of hitting the heights early in his career and failing ever to match that mark again.

When, in 1893, he first presented "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," he was a young assistant professor.
In that famous essay, he advanced a pathbreaking environmental argument: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” Before this thesis found its audience, it required what Turner later described as a good deal of “hammering” on his part. Within a decade, however, with Turner still a man in his early forties, the piece had been reprinted in numerous venues—including the International Socialist Review, the editor of which, Algie Martin Simons, hailed it as “the greatest contribution yet made in the application of the materialistic interpretation of history to American conditions.” Turner’s bold interpretation soon found its way into textbooks, public discourse, and popular thinking about American history.

Contrary to the impression created by Turner’s later critics, however, he was not content to ride that frontier hobbyhorse for the rest of his career. Instead, he moved on to the troubling implications that his thesis raised. If the frontier had produced a distinctive American culture, what should Americans expect with its passing? In an insightful essay about Turner’s scholarship, White argues that this was a problem that he could not resolve. He “never reconciled himself to American ideals being as transitory as the free lands he believed had produced them.” White suggests that a preoccupation with the means of preserving the country’s cultural heritage inclined Turner toward the study of America’s regions, or, as Turner called them, sections. Although American values had been born in the crucible of the frontier, Turner sought to demonstrate that they had matured in the context of the nation’s developing regions. To him, the country’s future health depended on the continuation of vibrant regional cultures.

Bogue supplies evidence that, as early as 1897, a sectional emphasis had displaced the frontier as the centerpiece of Turner’s scholarly concern. In 1904, Turner delivered the first version of his sectional manifesto (which he later included as the opening essay in The Significance of Sections). Unlike his frontier thesis,
however, this interpretation failed to rouse the enthusiasm of his colleagues. It must have been a major disappointment. Yet, Turner did not make a record of his feelings; he rarely did. For the next three decades he struggled to convince a mostly apathetic public and a skeptical scholarly community of the importance of sections. As Bogue notes, it is ironic that modern-day Western regionalists direct criticism at Turner’s frontier thesis, since he devoted the bulk of his intellectual energy to the study of regionality.

Turner’s move from frontier to section was a consequence of his insistence that historians be responsive to the concerns of the present in their choice of subjects and questions. His first published essay, “The Significance of History” (1891), featured a strong argument for what has come to be called a “useable past”: “The antiquarian strives to bring back the past for the sake of the past. The historian strives to show the present to itself by revealing its origin from the past. The goal of the antiquarian is the dead past; the goal of the historian is the living present.” It followed that historians should address themselves to a broad public—through extension classes, public lectures, and popular essays: “Historical study has for its end to let the community see itself in the light of the past to give it new thoughts and feelings, new aspirations and energies. Thoughts and feelings flow into deeds.” This activist impulse, argues Breisach in his useful study of early twentieth-century American historiography, was one of the hallmarks of the “New History,” which traditionally dates from the publication of James Harvey Robinson’s *The New History* (New York, 1912). Although the movement is not generally thought to include Turner, Bogue rightly treats him as the principal New History prophet.

In this regard, “The Significance of History” is a remarkable document, a full two decades ahead of its time. Published in an obscure Wisconsin journal, it had little immediate impact, but it became something of a classic among historians chafing at the limitations of a strictly empiricist history dedicated to recapturing the past *wie est eigentlich gewesen*, as it really was. (Years later Fritz Stern reprinted an abridged version in his widely used reader, *The

Varieties of History [New York, 1956], bringing its wisdom to the attention of my generation.) The essay includes Turner’s famous presentist pronouncement, “Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time” (italics in original). He would repeat this dictum numerous times, most notably in his presidential address to the AHA in 1910, which he devoted largely to an analysis of the fundamental social and economic transformation that was reshaping the country in the early century. “A comprehension of the United States of to-day, an understanding of the rise and progress of the forces which have made it what it is,” he told his colleagues, “demands that we should rework our history from the new points of view afforded by the present.”

Turner’s presidential summary of contemporary historical trends makes bland reading today. According to Limerick, he missed the opportunity to push into unexplored territory, and “reneged on the freshness and innovation he had made as a young man.” But that was certainly not how the address struck Turner’s contemporaries. Empiricism was the prevailing perspective within the AHA, not historicism. A prominent historian complained to Turner that history simply could not be rewritten “to suit each new fashion of thought and interest . . . in order to please the coming age.” Sound familiar? Plus ça change!

Even more controversial was Turner’s willingness to question the sanctity of “the facts,” the bedrock of Rankean empiricism:

Those who insist that history is simply the effort to tell the thing exactly as it was, to state the facts, are confronted with the difficulty that the fact which they would represent is not planted on the solid ground of fixed conditions; it is in the midst and is itself a part of the changing currents, the complex and interacting influences of the time, deriving its significance as a fact from its relations to the deeper-seated movements of the age.

10 Billington, Turner, 316
11 See, for example, Leopold Ranke (ed. George J. Igers and Konrad von Moltke), The Theory and Practice of History (New York, 1985).
12 Turner, “Social Forces,” 137
These lines echo the views of Becker, Turner's student, who argued for the relativism of historical truth in a provocative article in The Atlantic Monthly two months before the meeting.\textsuperscript{13} Becker congratulated Turner on his address and later quoted from it approvingly. Was Turner a relativist? Novick flatly denies so in his study of the “objectivity question,” and it is true that Becker and Turner were making different points.\textsuperscript{14} Turner was arguing that new ways of thinking made possible more sophisticated versions of the past, whereas Becker was expressing doubt that object and subject could be separated. Turner was an optimist, Becker a skeptic. Novick’s standard, however, is too dichotomous to be useful. Bogue’s conclusion is more illuminating: “Although Turner was not a relativist as this position was later defined, there was much in his approach that a historian of that persuasion found congenial” (271).

The title of Turner’s presidential address, “Social Forces in American History,” signaled another of his New History perspectives—the notion that silent, powerful forces below the surface of events accounted for historical change. He was to reiterate this theme throughout his career. “Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications,” he wrote in 1893, “lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions.”\textsuperscript{15} In their interpretation of those underlying forces, New Historians relied on evolutionary social theory, and, again, Turner was one of their guides. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” abounds in evolutionary tropes, and evolution was to remain the foundation of Turner’s social theory, although he eventually moved from the sharp formulations of his early essays toward an understanding of the “complexity of things.” As Bogue puts it, “whereas the young Turner had made the frontier environment the basic mechanism of change,” the mature Turner “sketched a more embracing theory of American development,” a history “shaped by the interaction of multiple

\textsuperscript{14} Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge, 1988), 103–104.
\textsuperscript{15} Turner, “Significance of the Frontier,” 31.
social forces within a nation changing in adjustment to its environment” (268).

Turner argued that the analysis and interpretation of these forces demanded that historians come to terms with the theories and techniques of the social sciences. He hinted at this position in his early essays, but as his awareness of historical complexity deepened, his call became much more explicit. “No satisfactory understanding of the evolution of this people is possible without calling into cooperation many sciences and methods hitherto but little used by the American history,” he declared in 1904.16 He urged his graduate students to read widely in both the arts and sciences, joking that historians should read history only when they were too tired to read anything else.

Turner’s appeals for interdisciplinary cooperation provoked a fierce reaction from empiricists. “Under the seductive name of sociology,” one historian complained, “we are here meeting once more the ghost of our ancient enemy, the philosophy of history”—coded language for the grand interpretive schemes of nineteenth-century historians.17 Such complaints formed the centerpiece of Adams’ AHA presidential address in 1908. Lambasting a “recrudescence of philosophy” among historians, he warned against “the controlling influence of the imagination in the new history in comparison with the stricter scientific faculties.”18

Turner’s own presidential address two years later was a calculated response to empiricist reaction. He argued that the historian must “so equip himself with the training of his sister subjects that he can at least avail himself of their results and in some reasonable degree master the essential tools of their trade.”19 A few weeks later, upon joining the editorial board of the American Historical Review, he repeated this point to the editor, J. Franklin Jameson: “In order to bring our work into more vital touch with current interests and needs, we should enter the overlapping fields more—the borderland between history in its older concep-

17 Billington, Turner, 251.
tion, and economics, politics, sociology, psychology, geography, etc."\(^\text{20}\)

Bogue acknowledges that Turner found it difficult to follow his own advice. Although he kept up with the literature in geography, he did not appear to stay current with new trends in sociology, anthropology, economics, or philosophy, and his vol-

tuminous papers provide no evidence that he read or considered Max Weber, Franz Boas, Thorstein Veblen, or John Dewey. Although he called upon historians to abandon ruling theories in favor of “multiple hypotheses,” Bogue agrees with Jacobs that Turner probably did not understand the developing methodology of the social sciences and that his own interpretive inclination was always toward the monocausal.\(^\text{21}\)

It is important to recall, however, that Turner was more important for what he said than what he did. Bogue concludes that his “willingness to cross disciplinary boundaries gave his message an interest, an aura of adventure, and an added legitimacy that younger scholars found attractive” (270). Although most of the scholars associated with the New History movement were unconvinced by Turner’s frontier and sectional interpretations, they thought of him as their methodological mentor. In *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), Beard credited him with being the first American historian to recognize the importance of “material circumstances” on American politics, and in *The Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*, he chose a quote from Turner’s presidential address as the epi-

gram.\(^\text{22}\) Unlike Beard, Turner was no radical, but Bogue’s enlight-

ening biography reveals him as a historian with the courage of his convictions.


\(^{21}\) Wilbur R. Jacobs, *On Turner’s Trail: 100 Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence, 1994).