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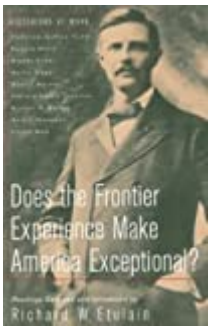

Richard Etulain, ed. *Does the Frontier Make America Exceptional?* Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1999. iii + 132 pp. $12.10 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-18309-7.

Reviewed by Scott C. Zeman (Humanities Department, New Mexico Tech (New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology))

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American Exceptionalism?

In Richard Etulain's fine introduction to this volume, the editor relates how once when he was speaking to a group of students in the Philippines, a student in the audience pointedly asked him, "Why do you Americans think you're so successful?" (3). An excellent question. What does make Americans think they are so special? Are they in fact "special" compared to other nations? And, if so, what is it that makes them exceptional? It is an issue that has engaged observers of American history for some time: the so-called "American exceptionalism" question.

As indicated by the title, this volume in the *Historians at Work* series promises to address the question: Does the Frontier Make America Exceptional? The series is designed for classroom use to provide students with a historical question or debate and essays by historians that offer different perspectives on the issue. The series also endeavors to convey "the intellectual excitement of 'doing history' to students" (iii). Each essay in the series is introduced by one central question and a useful list of "Questions for a Closer Reading." In this volume, for example, the first essay, Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," is paired with the question: "How was the idea of the 'frontier' born?"

No single historian has been so closely associated with the affirmative response to the exceptionalism question as Frederick Jackson Turner. According to Turner, who presented his famous Frontier Thesis in 1893, what made the United States unique was the frontier experience, that movement of European-Americans from the East into the "open" spaces of the West. The crucible of the frontier forged the American character as independent, rugged, and democratic. The frontier experience, Turner maintained, explains America's departure from its European roots. Thus, the stage is set for the inquires to follow.

The second essay, Richard White's "When Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody Both Played Chicago in 1893," carries the introductory question, "How has the idea of the frontier shaped our imagination?" White's intriguing and insightful analysis com-

pares Cody and Turner as chief architects of frontier iconography. White points out that while the image of American Indians in these two versions of the frontier story are markedly different–for Turner they are "peripheral" and for Cody they are central to a story of conflict (52-53)–both helped in constructing a "master narrative of the West" (47) and both "erased part of the larger, and more confusing and tangled, cultural story in order to deliver up a clean, dramatic, and compelling narrative" (49).

Playing off Abigail Adams's famous exhortation to her husband to "remember the ladies," Glenda Riley makes an airtight case that "Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies." Students are asked to ponder the question of "Whose frontier is it?" The strength of Riley's piece lies not in its observation that Turner excluded women from his narrative, but in her detailed analysis of why he did so. For example, Riley maintains that Turner did not harbor a misogynist agenda, but rather his "own words made clear that his view of history had little room for such specific groups as women" (65).

Martin Ridge's essay on Turner, "The Life of an Idea," is paired with the question, "Is the frontier idea still valid for the twenty-first century?" Ridge's answer is a qualified yes. "Turner's essay was anything but provincial in intent and scope," Ridge notes. "He offered a sophisticated holistic interpretation of American history and provided a unifying hypothesis around which to organize the study of the United States in the nineteenth century" (81).

The next essay in the volume is Donald Worster's oft-reproduced, and oft-quoted, "New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History." Worster raises the now well-worn debate among western historians: Should the West be considered as a place, more or less definable on a map (region), or as a process (frontier)? Worster opts for a regional model loosely based on Walter Prescott Webb's pioneering work. In the most memorable part of his essay, Worster admits, and many westerners no doubt agree, that "I know in my bones, if not always through my education, that Webb was right" (93). By looking at the larger historical forces at play in the region, Worster's essay verges on addressing the exceptionalism question, but his purpose lies elsewhere.

The final essay in the volume, "Western History: Why the Past May Be Changing," presents an assessment of the state of western historical interpretation by such leading scholars as Patricia Limerick, Michael Malone, Gerald Thompson, and Elliot West. Limerick is especially adept at chipping away at the Turnerian monolith. A fine discussion of the trend in western history known as the "New Western History" follows, but by now the organizing question of American exceptionalism has all but been abandoned, with the possible exception of portions of Thompson's contribution.

At the end of the volume students are given certain question for "Making Connections." Yet, the works on which they must base their conclusions do not allow them to address several of the questions. For example, students are asked: "Judging from the content of these essays and from what you know about the history of the United States, do you think the exceptionalist argument is valid? Why or why not?" And, "Exceptionalism is a slippery and sometimes badly used concept. Should it be abandoned, or is it valuable in understanding American society and culture?" Very good questions, but students will have to look elsewhere for answers.

Unfortunately, the essays included (except for Turner's) fail to adequately address the central question posed by the volume, or engage the debate in any but the most oblique ways. One problem is that all of the historians included in the volume are specialists in the American West and their works have a different historiographical focus. Contributions from a few non-western historians would have both rounded out the volume and allowed it to more directly address the issue of exceptionalism.

What is needed here are essays that place the question in a broader perspective. The volume might have included the somewhat dated (although the series does include "classic arguments," e.g. Turner's essay) critiques of Charles Beard, or his lesser known student Louis Hacker. Both posed serious critiques of Turnerian exceptionalism.

Charles Beard argued that the frontier did not explain American democracy. He pointed out that democracy "came in England which has not had any frontier recently." Beard also took Turner to task for not examining class: "Strange to say he says very little indeed about the conflict between the capitalist and organized labor which has given us so many important chapters in our legislative and economic history. On this point our orthodox historians are silent. The tabu is almost perfect."[1]

Beard's one-time protege, Louis Hacker, leveled an even more direct attack on Turner's myopia. In a review article in *Nation*, Hacker argued that "the historical growth of the United States, in short, was not

unique....With settlement achieved ... class (not sectional!) lines solidified, competitive capitalism converted into monopolistic capitalism under the guidance of money power, and imperialism the ultimate destiny of the nation ... returned."

Hacker blamed Turner for what he perceived as the stagnation in American historical inquiry. "The unhappy results, for forty years," Hacker maintained, "were the following: a turning inward of American historical activity at exactly the time when all trained eyes should have been on event s going on beyond the country's physical borders; an accumulation of supposed evidences of the development of American institutions entirely in nativistic terms without an understanding of how closely American institutional growth paralleled the European; an almost complete disregard of the basic class antagonisms in American history; and a profound ignorance of the steps by which monopolistic capitalism and imperialism were being developed in the country."[2]

Because of its specialized focus, the volume is of limited usefulness in a U.S. survey course. Nonetheless, the volume, which is well-organized and masterfully edited by Richard Etulain, should prove useful to students in a course on the history of the American West. Perhaps it might have been titled "Does the Frontier Thesis Adequately Explain the History of the American West?" The essays included here do offer a good sampling of critiques, as well as defenses, of the frontier thesis and its applicability to understanding the history of the region.

NOTES

[1]. Charles Beard, "The Frontier in American History," *New Republic* (February 16, 1921), 349-350. Quoted in Gerald Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990*(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 24.

[2]. Louis Hacker, "Sections or Classes," *Nation* (26 July 1933), 109-110.

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