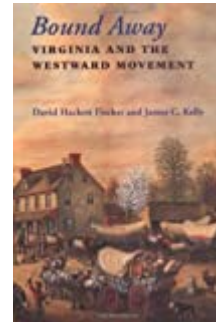




David Hackett Fischer, James C. Kelly. *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000. xvi + 366. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1774-0.



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Old Frontiers

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It would be best to begin by telling potential readers what this book is and what it is not. This book is an expanded version of an essay the authors wrote to accompany an exhibition catalog (Fischer and Kelly, *Away, I'm Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* [Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1993]). I have seen an excerpt from that catalog, published in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 101:4 (October 1993) under the title “‘Good Night Old Virginia’: Virginians and Their Cultures Move West,” but I have not been able to obtain a copy of the catalog to compare to the book. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that the thinking behind the original essay has not changed substantially. A careful examination of the footnotes reveals that the research and reading that informs this book reflects, for the most part, the scholarship available to the authors up until the time that the original essay was published. Unfortunately, that reinforces the somewhat dated feel of some of the authors’ arguments. In addition, the text retains the character of an accompaniment, with many short sections within each chapter. Some readers

might wish that the authors’ observations and claims had been drawn from a more sustained examination of various subjects. On the other hand, the stories and anecdotes gathered here make the book an easy read and are often fascinating and revealing. The book also contains 120 illustrations (including maps).

As to the substance of the book, the subtitle of the book deserves clarification. This book is not primarily about Virginians and their cultures in the West, a subject that certainly deserves further work. The authors state in the introduction that their purpose is to “consider successive westward movements from Europe and Africa to Virginia, then the westward movement that happened within Virginia, and finally the westward movement from Virginia to the Mississippi Valley and beyond” (p. 11). That would be a tall order for any book. The chapter that does treat the movement of Virginia’s peoples beyond the Old Dominion is the least satisfying in the book. It is reminiscent of Lois K. Mathews’ older volume on the *Expansion of New England* (Boston, 1909), primarily a compilation of names and numbers without much in the way of historical explanation.

The authors' true focus is Virginia itself. Their inquiry is bracketed by a consideration of Frederick Jackson Turner. (The original exhibition marked the centennial of Turner's famous paper.) What does the story of Virginia's creation and expansion suggest about the validity of Turner's thesis, and how did the westward movement of men and women, free and enslaved, out of Virginia affect the Old Dominion? Not surprisingly, the first two chapters on the migration to and within Virginia draw from and extend the work of Fisher's *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Fischer and Kelly, emphasizing origins over destination, suggest that Virginia's story is one of "cultural persistence" and "continuity in the midst of change" (p. xv). Rejecting both Turner's materialist model of environmental transformation and the idealist model—*Altlandschaft* or germ theory—that Turner rebelled against, Fischer and Kelly argue for the "mediating model of *Albion's Seed*: a multiplicity of hegemonic cultures that maintain communications between the core and the periphery and preserve their separate identities by adapting old folkways to a new environment" (p. 306). In Virginia, the frontier produced not a new democratic culture, but a conservative, hierarchical, and inegalitarian society. On that last point, the authors cite the work of scholars such as Nieboer and Domar who argued that an abundance of free land on various world frontiers led more often to unfree labor systems. "Free land alone," Fischer and Kelly observe, "did not create free institutions or slavery." "Institutions and values that regulate access to the land" make the difference (p. 299).

None of these ideas are particularly new. The new western historians that the authors rather quickly dismiss in their introduction have long since rejected Turner's environmental determinism and been busy producing books that take cultural origins and contexts quite seriously. Although they acknowledge the new cultural history, Fischer and Kelly do not seem much influenced by it. Readers who found much to criticize in *Albion's Seed* will have a similar reaction to this book. Though I profited from my reading of Fischer's earlier book, I quickly tired of phrases such as "British border stock" in this book. In Fisher and Kelly's hands, cultural transmission has an old-fashioned essentialist cast, cut off from the flow of historical narrative. (This is less true when the authors are discussing Virginia's great migration and the long tenure of Sir William Berkeley.) The authors also have little use for the work of those scholars who see various American frontiers as "zones of interaction," suggesting that in Virginia, "one culture rapidly established

a hegemony which persists to this day" (p. xvi). Be that as it may, there is a lot of history missing here that would help us to understand how that hegemony was achieved. Indian peoples have virtually no place in this book. The nuanced readings of cultural change and continuity on the frontier to be found in books such as James Merrell's *Into the American Woods* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) and John Mack Faragher's *Daniel Boone* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992) might serve as more useful models for younger scholars.

The idea that Turner's thesis may have adequately described the northern expansion into the Midwest, but cannot explain the conservative and inegalitarian conditions to be found on Virginia's frontiers is also an old one. Thomas Perkins Abernethy made similar observations over half a century ago. Recent monographs such as Stephen Aron's *How the West Was Lost* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and Woody Holton's *Forced Founders* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) provide detailed analyses of how frontier conditions in Kentucky and Virginia affected and were managed by elites.

Though they reject Turner's thesis, the authors embrace his question: How did an open society develop on the frontier? (Here is the source of their main objection to the new western historians. Fischer and Kelly argue that this "Vietnam-Watergate generation" of historians rejected both Turner's answer and question, preferring to write histories that emphasize "environmental destruction, economic exploitation, social inequality, and cultural disintegration" [p. 10].) Their own answer to Turner's question downplays the frontier environment and substitutes the Toleration Act, "imposed from abroad" (p. 107), and "a union of principle and interest" (p. 105) that drove some land speculators to encourage the immigration of new groups such as the Germans and Scotch-Irish who subsequently expanded in the backcountry. Cultural diversity and toleration, they suggest, then led to "more spacious conceptions of freedom" (p. 107) among Virginians of the Revolutionary era.

But in Virginia, the authors note, the notion of freedom included the ability to own slaves. One of the merits of the book is that it includes the story of African migration and African-American westering—voluntary and involuntary. Indeed, chapter 5 includes a fascinating section on "Virginia's African Frontier: Liberia." Here and in a later section on how the profound loss of people and resources to the West impacted the Old Dominion, the authors are at their best. After a wonderful sketch of

John Randolph of Roanoke, Fischer and Kelly conclude that westward expansion operated as a safety valve for slavery in various ways and also helped produce a more homogeneous population back home in Virginia. These final Turnerian ironies in place, the authors drive home their main point: As the line from the folk tune “Shenandoah” suggests, “Away! I’m bound away” best describes the frontier experience in and out of Virginia—a movement of people bound by cultural traditions and for some,

by the shackles of slavery.

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