
Chapter 2

THE FRONTIER IN
AMERICAN THOUGHT
AND ACTION

INTRODUCTION

Go west, young man, and grow up with the country.

HORACE GREELEY

Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.

Bulletin of the Superintendent
of the Census, 1890

West is a country in the mind, and so eternal.

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

IN EUROPE "frontier" originally meant "border," referring to that section of a country that "fronts" or faces another country — the marches or border regions. The term also once meant the advance guard of an army, that part of the army that first comes into contact with the enemy. In America the outermost boundary or fringe of civilized settlement — the region where white settlers confronted the wilderness and "savagery" — came to be called the "frontier." This region was thought of as either the actual "edge" of settlement, even including towns or villages, or as a vague, undefined region between civilization and the wilderness, a constantly shifting area. The

term "West" has been used in the same ambiguous way throughout our history; indeed the West and the frontier often mean the same thing.

Other countries have had, and still have, frontiers in the sense of borders with neighboring countries that are more or less undefined and unorganized. But the American frontier experience has been a special one, mainly because for at least 250 years the frontier continued to move — usually westward — from one line or region to another; yesterday's frontier became today's civilization, and yesterday's wilderness became today's frontier. As a result, almost all Americans have "family" knowledge of



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"The Frontier"; lithograph by G. W. Hillman, 1868

what the frontier meant — a grandfather who journeyed west and was never heard from again, a great-grandmother or great-aunt who rode a Conestoga wagon, a bonnet on her head (we see her in imagination still) and a rifle across her knees, through the dust of some unexplored region where now there are farms and roads and factories and prosperous cities. And even the newest arrivals seem to absorb the experience almost with their naturalization papers.

The frontier is not only a border line; it is not only a border region, an area between civilization and savagery; it is also, as Archibald MacLeish put it in an article for *Collier's* in 1955, "a country in the mind." In fact, this is probably the most important meaning of the term for Americans. The frontier is an idea as well as a place, and what is more a mythopoeic idea — an idea that, in some sense a myth itself, is also a creator of other myths. Because of this, the word has potent force in all of its metaphorical uses. We speak of new (political) frontiers, of the frontier of space, of the frontier of affluence (or of poverty) — and imply hardship, and challenge, and triumph

over insuperable odds. Thus the word "frontier," with all of its rich and manifold meanings, is one of the great contributions of America to the world. Other countries have borders, as we have noted — but only America has had a frontier with all of its congeries of implications and images.

In this chapter we will try to reflect the various meanings of "frontier" as they have been expressed in the writings of Americans. We will start with the land, the "wilderness" that the first settlers met and conquered. We will take account of the people who confronted the rigors and dangers of the frontier, attempting to assess their character and motivations. We will consider the several waves of settlement that swept across the continent and their effects on American history and institutions. We will discuss the major theory — that of Frederick Jackson Turner — about the significance of the frontier in America, along with the vigorous controversy to which it has given rise. We will treat the present and possible future meanings of the frontier in an era — our own — in which there is no more free "virgin" land. Finally, we will try

to deal with the frontier as a subject of American literature, in the process attempting to describe the myth that the frontier has become.

1. THE FIRST FRONTIER

THE FIRST AMERICAN FRONTIER was the Eastern Seaboard — Europe's western outpost. Here — in Florida, in the Carolinas and Virginia, in New England — occurred the first confrontation of European explorers and settlers with the new land and its inhabitants. Their accounts give us a twofold, seemingly contradictory impression of the New World: first, that it was a beautiful, idyllic place, a second paradise or Eden; and, second, that it was a terrible wilderness, a place of grim privations and struggle for life.

In these early accounts it is often difficult to disentangle romantic exaggeration and advertising claims from actual experience. Starting with Columbus' account of the Caribbean islands, we get a continuous litany of praise for the natural beauty, luxuriance, pleasantness, and plenty of the New World. Spaniards spoke of Florida as a new Eden. An Englishman in 1650 described Virginia as "the Garden of the World," "an unexampled Countrey," with its gentle, fructifying sun and mild winters, a place of "perpetual verdure" and "unwearied fertilitie." Francis Higginson, in the same era, provided an enthusiastic account of the abundance of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where the soil was extraordinarily fertile and brought forth a wide variety of tasty vegetables and fruit, as well as beautiful flowers. Besides the plenteous forests, sea fish, and fowl, there was delicious fresh water and, above all, the clear, dry air of New England that made sick men well and the melancholy sanguine. "Hardly a more healthful place is to be found in the world," Higginson declared.

This impression of a paradisiacal land of plenty was repeated in later reports by the frontiersmen who pushed into the Kentucky country and other interior regions and by Spaniards who moved westward into the Mississippi Valley. Colonel Croghan's account in 1765 of his journey from Fort Pitt to Detroit and Niagara repeated almost ritualistically such terms as "fine," "rich," "plenty" (also "very plenty"), and "good." He described the new country as a juicy, well-nigh infinite stretch — "like an ocean" — of rich soil, good water, and plenteous game. Daniel Boone (or his ghost writer, John Filson) emphasized in 1784 the sheer pleasure to be found in the natural beauty and variety of the region, the impression of "inconceivable grandeur," and the accompanying feelings of "profound calm" and "astounding delight" — even though he was in a situation of constant danger from wild beasts and Indians in the "howling wilderness." So moved was he that he resolved to bring his family into this "second paradise" at any cost. And in a poem describing Boone's first view of the new region, Kentucky was called "The Garden of the West," perhaps to match Virginia as "The Garden of the World."

At the same time, many of the early accounts reflect an awareness of the harsher aspects of the New World wilderness. It was not merely, or wholly, a "second paradise" where, as Michael Drayton wrote in his ode "To the Virginian Voyage,"

Nature hath in store
Fowle, Venison, and Fish
And the fruitfull'st Soile
Without Your Toyle.

The heartrending story of Cabeza de Vaca's eight-year odyssey (1528-1536) from Florida to the western shores of the Gulf of Mexico on foot — as retold by Haniel Long in *The Power Within Us* (1936) — reveals the hardships that even the conquis-

tadors could suffer. Both New England and Virginia (despite its softer climate) had their "starving time," in which famine, disease, and other privations killed off a large part of the settlers. According to official reports, the early Virginians were at times reduced to eating "dogs, cats, rats, snakes, toadstools, horsehides," and even human corpses. Moreover, a ferocious attack by the Indians — portrayed as gentle, timid, and friendly in many early accounts — exterminated about a quarter of the colonists. Meanwhile, back in England, Virginia was being extolled in advertising blurbs and poems as the land of plenty — "There is no feare of hunger here" — and reports of famine and other ills were ascribed to malice and envy.

The most graphic and moving portrayals of the grimmer aspects of life on the first frontier came from the early governors of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies, William Bradford and Thomas Dudley. Poignant indeed is Bradford's narrative of the sufferings of the Plymouth Plantation colonists during their first winter, after surviving the perils of "the vast and furious ocean," which now shut them off "from all the civil parts of the world." Utterly alone on a bleak coastland, save for "savage barbarians," and with no ready-built houses to shelter them, they had to face the rigors of the "cruel and fierce storms" of a harsh, cold winter, and the terrors of "hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." During the starving time that followed, half of the colonists died of scurvy and other diseases brought on by the lack of provisions. Yet somehow the character and unselfish service of the few healthy persons brought the first colony through this time of trial.

The descriptions of our first frontier combine, then, accounts of a paradisiacal land of plenty with records of terrible sufferings and privations. This combination is repeated over and over. The men who came to this

country and those who pushed on to further frontiers looked forward to and apprehended their new experiences with minds stocked with various images, including the myth of an earthly paradise or Golden Age that might be recovered at some remote place and time. Anyone who really expected America to be a place where the land yielded its fruits without human labor, where the climate was constantly mild and gentle and nightingales sang everlastingly in the trees, was due for an unpleasant shock — especially if he came to New England. Yet it was fact, and not fiction, that the New World was full of great stretches of fertile land that had never been tilled before, were relatively uninhabited, and were to be had for the settling. There were indeed great forestlands that had never been touched by an axe, a wide variety of plants, vegetables, and flowers in great abundance, and a profusion of wild animals — "game" for human nourishment, clothing, and other purposes.

The exploitation of these untapped natural riches and the conquest of the continent would involve much suffering, danger, cruelty, and brutishness, but to men from crowded Europe, where land was scarce and overused, this must indeed have seemed a land of plenty, and they no doubt experienced the wonder, joy, and exuberance that are expressed in their writings. Thus David M. Potter, a mid-twentieth century historian, interpreted the whole story of America in terms of the abundance so incessantly hymned by the early explorers and settlers, and considered "plenty" a more exact and inclusive concept than "frontier" to explain the American character and way of life.

Land and men are the two elements that make up a frontier. We have seen something of what the land was like in the "brave new world" of the first frontier. What were the people like who settled it, and why did they go there? Did they go seeking adventure, quick riches, a good



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"Pocahontas Saving the Life of Capt. John Smith"; lithograph by G. H. Wood, 1870

place to live — or did they go seeking religious and political freedom and a place to found a society based on the demands of the gospel?

The answer seems to be that they went for all of these reasons — that often a wide variety of motives influenced a particular group of immigrants (or, properly, emigrants, as they were usually called until the beginning of the nineteenth century). Even in the accounts of men such as Columbus and De Soto, and in Richard Hakluyt's hardheaded, real-political program for "English colonization of the New World," which dealt mainly with the economic benefits of settlement and with the solution of England's perennial unemployment problem, the main purpose was said to be "to plant Christian religion." And although there is some basis for making a clear distinction between the motives of the Virginia and the New England settlers, the stereotypes of pleasure-loving Cavaliers and God-loving Puritans are far from accurate.

On the one hand, the First Charter of Virginia incorporated a joint-stock-company

venture by "certain knights, gentlemen, merchants, and other adventurers," who agreed to pay the Crown a royalty on "the gold, silver, and copper" that they should find and dig up for their "use and benefit." However, the reason given for the settlement was simply the "propagating of Christian religion" among the "infidels and savages living in those parts." Even if this be taken as pious window dressing for a commercial venture, the code of religious and moral behavior spelled out in "Dale's Laws" of 1612 smacks of a rigor and harshness that we usually associate with Puritan New England instead of Cavalier Virginia; and the more lenient reform legislation of 1619 still tried to prevent "idleness, gaming, drunkenness, and excess in apparel," to insure the "reformation of swearing," and also to lay "a surer foundation of the conversion of the Indians to Christian religion."

On the other hand, although Bradford insisted that the Puritans' settlement of New England was not motivated by "curiosity or hope of gain," but by the need to find a place where they could live a righteous life

and worship in the proper way, and although Dudley called on "godly men" who were imbued with spiritual ends alone and zealous to serve "God's glory" to come out to Massachusetts Bay, the early records reveal a mixture of worldly and spiritual aims, of prudential considerations and self-sacrificing devotion among our Puritan forefathers. Bradford's account shows the Puritans in Holland soberly balancing the advantages and disadvantages of going to America, and finally being moved by economic considerations. They had religious liberty in Holland but found it hard to make a decent living there. They sought "a better and easier place of living . . . a place where they might have liberty and live comfortably." These solid, prudential reasons, as well as the undeniable zeal to spread the gospel and extend Christ's kingdom, impelled them to consider moving to "those vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful and fit for habitation."

Moreover, we know from Bradford and Dudley that some of the settlers of New England were impelled largely by materialistic motivations. There was, for example, the group called "Weston's Men," who, "coming not for so good ends as those of Plymouth," ended up badly. Even among the Plymouth settlers, many moved away to more fertile ground, "not for want or necessity so much . . . as for the enriching of themselves." Many Massachusetts Bay colonists returned to England because they could not endure the privations and the restrictions of Puritan government. Many indentured servants had to be sent home because there was not enough food. And there were all kinds of rascals and criminals, including a coin-clipper and a bigamist, who had to be deported.

These concrete details about the various types of persons and motivations that played a role in the settling of New England should restrain the tendency to simple, hasty generalizations. Economic motiva-

tions played an important role among English settlers, just as among Spanish conquerors and French traders; among New England Puritans as well as among Virginia knights and gentlemen. And economic motivations figured prominently in the surge to succeeding frontiers. Abundant land, metals, furs, forests, and game were an essential part of the whole complex of influences that continually impelled the colonists and later the Americans into new country. But they were only a part, and understandable only in the context of all the impulses revealed in the selections in the ANNALS: adventure, for example, and freedom, pleasure, room, openness, getting close to nature, and religious zeal. Material wealth, or "plenty," was usually but one element among many in the dream of a good new country, where life would be dignified, independent, free, pleasant, and comfortable.

2. FRONTIER LIFE AND CHARACTER

THUS FAR WE HAVE CONSIDERED the earlier settlers or "colonists." Let us now turn to the "pioneers," the "backwoodsmen" as they were sometimes called, who advanced from the Eastern settlements into the regions beyond the Appalachians around 1800. "American histories assume," wrote Walter Prescott Webb, "that the frontier process began with the English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607." But whatever the historians may say, the first American frontier or "West" of our imaginations begins, for most of us, in the trans-Appalachian region about 1750. And the one man who is probably impressed on our minds as the central figure of the pioneer saga is, of course, Daniel Boone. He is the incarnation for us of what Timothy Flint called "the buckskin hero," that noble character who ventured into the wilderness of beasts and barbarians and overcame all dangers through his dauntless courage, shrewd ingenuity and inexhaustible energy. James

Hall in 1828 told how Boone, "a respectable farmer of North Carolina, was led by a restless, migratory spirit" to enter the wilderness called for good reason "the Bloody Ground," and how, with his five companions, "cut off from society — with scanty means of defense, and no hope of retreat," he somehow survived, beat off the Indians, and explored the country. Boone's own narrative (as told to Filson) also described this adventure, as well as Boone's stoical reaction to a situation in which he "was constantly exposed to danger and death." John Bradford's sober, factual account in 1826 of the role of Boone and others in the exploration and settlement of Kentucky may be compared with these more colorful narratives.

Certain marked characteristics of the Boone of saga and legend are typical of the popular image of the pioneer; for example, the "restless, migratory spirit," which supposedly always kept frontiersmen on the move to ever new lands and made them dissatisfied with a place once it began to be settled, civilized, and "crowded." James Fenimore Cooper mentioned Boone in the opening pages of his novel *The Prairie*: "This adventurous and venerable patriarch was now seen making his last remove, placing the endless river between him and the multitude his own success had drawn around him and seeking for the renewal of enjoyments which were rendered worthless in his eyes when trammled by the forms of human institutions." Natty Bumppo, the pioneer hero of the book and of Cooper's whole "Leatherstocking" series, was modeled on Boone and other historical "foresters." He too feels impelled to get away from the restrictive life and rules of the "clearings" and prefers the openness and unconstraint of "life in the woods." As Cooper says of Bumppo, so could it have been said of Boone, that "the sound of the axe has driven him from his beloved forests

to seek a refuge, by a species of desperate resignation, on the denuded plains that stretch to the Rocky Mountains." And like the Boone of legend, he is the model of natural wisdom without booklearning, and natural virtue without artificial social forms and "corruptions."

However, Boone and his fellows are portrayed not only as refugees from civilization but also as its precursors, who claim the wilderness for civilized society. Hall praised "the sturdy woodsman, who, as the pioneer of civilization, first laid the axe to the tree and made smooth the road for others." Filson presented Boone as "an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness," consciously and deliberately from the start. And the poet Daniel Bryan in 1813 imagined Boone looking forward to the eventual expansion of "Commerce, Wealth, and all the brilliant Arts," into the "dark Barbarian World" of the Indians.

So much then for the model — the archetype — of the pioneer or backwoodsman. How is the life of ordinary frontier people described and evaluated in contemporary accounts? The Rev. James B. Finley, who knew the Kentucky and Ohio frontiers at first hand, provided a vivid and concrete portrait of "life in the backwoods" in his autobiography, subtitled "Pioneer Life in the West" (1854). He described this life from the days when the first settlers nearly starved to death to the time when store-bought clothes and furniture and Eastern culture made their appearance. He conveyed an impression of the remarkable ingenuity and resourcefulness of the pioneers in adapting to an environment with almost none of the customary conveniences of civilized life. Hunting and manual skills were obviously necessary where almost all of the articles of everyday life had to be home-made. Animals were used not only for food but for clothes and many necessary household articles: the deer seems to have ful-

filled as many uses for the frontiersman as Armour's pig in later times, of which only the squeal was not utilized.

Yet, according to Finley and many others, pioneer life was happy and healthy. Finley emphasized the simplicity, the sharing, the cooperative unselfish spirit of backwoods life, which he contrasted favorably with the more effete and self-centered existence of Easterners or of those living at a later time. He portrayed a good-hearted, resourceful, levelheaded, sturdy people; "a more hardy race of men and women grew up in this wilderness," he declared, "than has ever been produced since." James Hall regarded the backwoodsmen as a special elite group, who were adventurous and hardy enough to undergo the uncertainties, privations, and hard work that went into clearing the wilderness and making it fit for civilization.

Other writings, however, express a less favorable view of frontier life and character. Crèvecoeur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), found the frontier settlements lacking in the essentials of law, order, and civilized life, and populated by a brutish type of men who could not bear social restraints — the "offcasts" of orderly communities. Zerah Hawley, writing about the northeastern Ohio frontier in 1822, pictured the pioneers as primitive, crude, degenerate louts. He recorded an overheard remark to the effect that "when people get there they appear to think that they have got away from all restraint of law and conscience."

The classic attack on the ideal of the noble frontiersman came at about the same time from the pen of Timothy Dwight, an eminent scholar, theologian, and university president. According to Dwight the pioneers were shiftless, lazy, undisciplined, and uneducated, the sort of men who "cannot live in regular society" and hence "leave their native places and betake themselves to the wilderness." There they lived in crudely

built dwellings and scratched out a bare living from the soil, supplemented by hunting and fishing. The frontier only became fit for really human habitation, he declared, when the inefficient forester took off for a new wilderness and was succeeded by the sober, industrious farmer, the kind of man who would never chance the foolhardy enterprise of starting out in an "absolute wilderness." Still, the wilderness had a salutary, stabilizing influence on civilized society, in Dwight's view, for it provided a lure that drew off the disorderly, subversive elements that would otherwise make trouble. This notion of the frontier as a "safety valve" to relax social pressures exerted by the discontented goes back at least as far as Richard Hakluyt and appears in many subsequent writers.

Timothy Flint in 1826 directly opposed "the bitter representations of the learned and virtuous Dr. Dwight." Flint, a Massachusetts missionary and writer who lived in the Ohio and Mississippi Valley frontier area for ten years, maintained that the maligned pioneers went out to the frontier because there was rich land open to settlement that promised a better life for them and their families — not because they were lazy and restless. As for their character, it was true that their manners were crude and unpolished, but underneath this rough exterior they were sincere, kind, generous people. Their social and religious life, Flint admitted, lacked restraint and the usual formal observances, but this fitted their new condition and was not to be judged by the standards of New England society. As for culture, they were far too busy settling the country to spend much time on reading books and appreciating the arts.

Some reports of life on later frontiers support these early observations of the latter type. Christopher Andrews maintained in 1856 that the venturesome men who came out to the Minnesota frontier in the 1850s

did so because of the greater opportunities offered by the better soil, and also because of the chance to make a profit on the sale of their property back home — not just to keep moving. The main social drawback, he found, was the immoderate drinking of hard liquor, a complaint that was frequently repeated in other accounts of frontier life.

Bayard Taylor found new qualities of character developing during the 1849 Gold Rush, previously cautious persons becoming daring and even reckless, and their new rashness paying off in the new conditions. According to Taylor, social life on the California frontier was open, frank, marked by equality and fraternity, boisterous, withal attended by such "dangerous excesses" as drinking and gambling. Yet he concluded that "the main stock of society was sound, vigorous, and progressive," as demonstrated by the successful settlement and social organization of the new country.

Hamlin Garland, describing his family's participation in the move of wheat farmers from Iowa to South Dakota in 1881, recognized that the rational motivation — their crops had been destroyed by insects — was accompanied by deep emotional urges and lures. "Our going was all of a piece with the West's elemental restlessness. . . . The border line had moved on, and my indomitable Dad was moving with it." Although now the westward movement was by railroad train, Garland felt somewhat the same emotions as the first frontiersmen as he looked upon the beauty of the unplowed Plains, with their "deep, rich soil," imagined the farms of the future, and vowed "to make this land a garden."

At the same time, other undesirable traits of the frontier character have been pointed out by many commentators. Not only was frontier life violent (naturally so, perhaps); the frontier also seems to have applauded violence, to have respected and extolled it more than did other sections. Nowhere else except on the frontier would an eye-gouging contest have been spoken of sym-

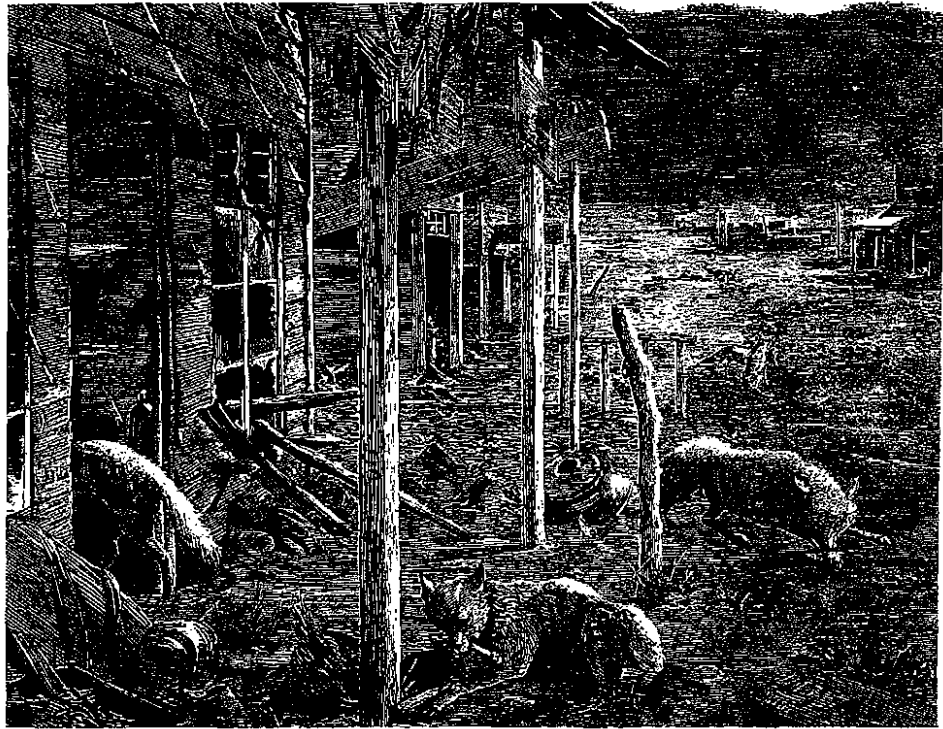
pathetically; only on the frontier were white men shot down in cold blood without an outcry being raised, and only there were Indians killed just for the sport. The streak of violence that is said to be an important element in the American temperament — it was discussed by many writers in the years after the assassination of President Kennedy — may owe its origin to this frontier love, or at least acceptance, of savagery and brutality.

It has also often been observed that the frontier obsession with bigness, power, strength — all qualities somehow associated with violence — have had an important influence on the character of present-day Americans. Carl Sandburg's famous description of Chicago —

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's
Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders —

fits the frontier image; the words thrill Chicagoans still, although perhaps they are just a little ashamed of them too. But to be praised for their "big shoulders" would probably not please the denizens of any European city, at least in modern times; instead, they would prefer to have their intellectual and artistic achievements respected.

Indeed, the dearth of intellectual achievement of the frontier has been pointed to by a number of writers. It is all very well to say, as Timothy Flint did a century and a half ago, that frontiersmen were too busy to pay much attention to "culture." But the charge is made that the inhabitants of those old frontiers — the Middle West, the Plains, the Far West — continue to be un-intellectual or, rather, anti-intellectual, as if they had gained a habit in those faraway days that they cannot break. Van Wyck Brooks and Ralph Barton Perry are but two of the influential critics who have de-



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"Busted!"; engraving in "Harper's" of a deserted railroad town in Kansas, 1874

cried the bleakness and philistinism of the frontier, and suggested that the bitterness of the frontier experience — for it was undeniably bitter for many — helps to explain the "American malady" of joylessness. [For more on the frontier character, see Ch. 1: NATIONAL CHARACTER.]

3. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF THE FRONTIER

PERHAPS THE MOST REMARKABLE FACT about the American frontier experience is that it was constantly repeated, in "the westward sweep of successive generations across the continent," as Rev. Josiah Strong termed it. Unlike European border-frontiers, the American frontier was constantly shifting and never clearly limited or definitely closed, not even by the Pacific Ocean; for after the Pacific Coast was settled in the 1850s the intervening Plains region became the frontier of the next generation. With no other nations or peoples (save for a relative-

ly few Indians) standing in their way and no really impassable natural barriers, the Americans kept pouring into new lands and setting up ever new frontiers of settlement. Even the Great Plains region west of the 98th meridian, which was once considered an uninhabitable wasteland — "a natural barrier of desert to the extension of our population in the West," in Cooper's words in 1827 — became the frontier of the cattlemen and the dry farmers. No human or natural force was able to stop this drive.

British General Thomas Gage noted this irrepressible tendency as early as 1770, remarking on the American settler's "natural disposition to rove in search of good lands, however distant," undeterred by the Crown's prohibitions or fear of Indians. Senator Samuel White of Delaware, even as he spoke against the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, pointed to "the adventurous, roving, and enterprising temper of our people," who would flow into the new country as naturally as fish swim in the sea, once it became ours. And Joshua Pilcher in 1831

scoffed at the widespread opinion that the Rocky Mountains were an impassable barrier to our westward movement. Anyone "who supposes they can be stopped by anything in the shape of mountains, deserts, seas, or rivers," he said, understood very little about the American people. Besides, he knew on the basis of his own experience that the Rockies were easily passable.

Nevertheless, not everyone approved of the incessant movement to new frontiers. We have already noted how critical some Easterners were of the cultural and social condition of the new frontier settlements in the early decades of the republic. With the carving of new states out of the frontier territories, there also arose the dismaying prospect that these backward pioneers would secure the balance, or even the preponderance, of political power, and would influence the course of national policy in a direction opposed to Eastern values and interests. Senator White foresaw an inevitable separation of the new Western territories, which would be far removed from the seat of national government. Thomas Jefferson tried to allay these Eastern fears of an alien confederacy in the new West, saying that the people of the new states would be intimately bound to the people of the old states, whether they had a common national government or not.

A generation later William Ellery Channing, in opposing the annexation of Texas, objected to the constant westward expansion on the grounds that such rapid growth was a danger to the country's institutions and moral character. Civilization, he maintained, is a matter of slow growth, of attachment to known and familiar places and ways. Americans, he went on to say, had been subject to this restless, nomadic drive ever since their ancestors migrated from Europe; but, he declared, the time had finally come to put a stop to this drive and lay down some roots. The American people al-

ready had enough land for ages to come; there was no need to occupy any more.

Edward Everett, however, insisted, like Jefferson, on the common bonds linking East and West. Just as England, "the mother country," had promoted culture and civilization in the colonies, so the old Eastern states must now help the new Western states. Everett conceded the increasing political power of the West and the certainty that it would continue to increase and eventually dominate national policy. "The balance of the country's fortunes is in the west," he said in 1833. "There lie, wrapped up in the folds of an eventful futurity, the influences which will most powerfully affect our national weal and woe." However, he regarded this prospect not as posing a threat to the old East and its values but as a call to Easterners to foster culture and civilization in "this mighty region," which is part of "our common country." He saw in the westward advance of the American people an opportunity to bring civilization to the wilderness, to transport "the language, the manners, the principles," and "the household gods" of the Eastern seaboard "to the foot of the Rocky Mountains." Here again we see repeated the notion of the frontiersman as the pioneer of civilization.

The New Englander Everett's hospitable reaction to the increase in political power of the new "Northwestern" states — such as an increase from one to nineteen in the congressional representation for Ohio in one generation — was not shared by spokesmen for the Southern states. The admission of new states from the frontier territories brought these areas directly into the mounting conflict between the "free" and the "slave" states. In his famous speech on slavery of March 4, 1850, John C. Calhoun decried the fact — as he saw it — that slavery had been barred from the territories possessed by the United States before the Constitution was adopted and had been ef-



Museum of the City of New York, Harry T. Peters Collection

"A Halt by the Wayside"; lithograph by Currier and Ives, about 1870

fectually excluded from three-fourths of the new territories acquired by the United States since independence.

Calhoun's opponent, Daniel Webster, observed in his equally famous reply that it was "the law of nature, of physical geography," not human law, that had prevented the expansion of slavery into California and New Mexico. The twentieth-century historian Walter Prescott Webb, in his study *The Great Plains* (1931), extended this observation to include the whole semiarid, subhumid Plains region west of the 98th meridian. According to Webb, the Cotton Kingdom, which had acquired twice as much area as the North in the new territories up to 1850, was finally limited by the Great Plains region, which was not amenable to cotton culture. Those prairie lands became allied to the North in the struggle between free and slave economies.

The treatment of the Indians, as well as the presence of Negro slaves, indicated that the freedom and equality supposedly fostered by the frontier were not extended to all its inhabitants. The opportunity and independence attained by the white settlers

usually came at the expense of the original people of the land. The "virgin" areas of the New World were of course not empty, and the frontiersmen, in their inexorable drive across the continent, often encountered resistance from the old inhabitants, who wished to remain undisturbed in their traditional ways of life, living spaces, and hunting grounds. And that resistance was overcome as decisively as were natural obstacles and political impediments.

No matter what action central authorities took to solve the Indian problem, the solution soon became anachronistic under the continuing inroads of frontier settlement. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 proclaimed that "the utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians," who were assured protection of "their property, rights, and liberty." However, the tough frontiersmen were not to be stopped in their westward surge by impressive words in government documents. Later, President Thomas Jefferson proposed that the Indians be persuaded to give up hunting for agriculture and to patronize trading posts for their household needs so that they

would become assimilated to the (white) American "civilized" way of life and be willing to sell their hunting grounds. Nevertheless, tribes that were civilized enough to practise agriculture and the mechanical arts, such as the Cherokees, were ousted from their lands when they stood in the way of the Southern frontier advance. President Andrew Jackson proposed to settle the hapless Cherokees and other tribes on a "reservation" west of the Mississippi, land that was "forever" guaranteed to them and prohibited to white settlers. Here, as in so many other federal guarantees, "forever" turned out to be a very short time, indeed, and a supposedly permanent solution was soon undermined by the push of settlers toward the Pacific.

Throughout our history, various views have been expressed justifying or condemning the dispossession of the Indians, and various attitudes have been taken toward the federal government, the white settlers, and the Indians themselves. Almost all of the earlier commentators regarded them as uncivilized and hence as culturally inferior. True, Jefferson, the Enlightenment humanist, considered them "in body and mind equal to the white man," but he thought they would be bettered by being civilized, like the whites. Jackson also proposed to teach the Indians farming and the mechanical arts, but, unlike Jefferson, he held that they could "not live in contact with the civilized community" and must be separated from "our citizens."

As to the moral guilt involved in taking away lands from the Indians, many writers denied that the Indians ever owned them or had any conception of property until the white men came. This was Timothy Flint's position at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and it was also Theodore Roosevelt's at the end of it. The latter, speaking as an historian of the frontier, maintained that the Indians had no tenable claim to

land ownership, since they were nomadic wanderers with vague, uncertain areas of tribal residence or hunting. Against this argument we have the Cherokees' petition to Congress in 1829 claiming their land to be an inheritance from their fathers, to have been bequeathed to them, and to be sacred as containing the bones of their beloved dead. "Permit us to ask," they wrote, "what better right can a people have to a country than the right of inheritance and immemorial peaceable possession?" Moreover, according to historian Alden T. Vaughan, the New England Indians, who were farmers as well as hunters, had definite ideas of private property in land, and hence sold land they were not using to the Puritan settlers, who recognized the Indians' property rights either explicitly or implicitly.

A sense of guilt for the treatment of the Indians was voiced from early times, as indicated by Flint's scornful remarks on the "benevolent harangues" of the guilt-stricken, similar to Theodore Roosevelt's later scoffing at the "foolish sentimentalists," such as Helen Hunt Jackson, who called her book on U.S. Indian policy *A Century of Dishonor*. Tocqueville in 1835 painted a picture of conscienceless robbery and extermination of a weaker people who had the misfortune to be in the way of "the most grasping nation on the globe, while they were still semibarbarian." The wave of the future had rolled over them and they would be washed away: "Their calamities," he said, "appear irremediable."

The 1872 Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Francis Walker, provides an illuminating picture of our Indian policy in the closing decades of the frontier. This policy, he said, was determined solely by what was in the best interests of the United States and "our frontier population." The safety and security of these people, in "their exposed situation on the extreme verge of settlement," and in "innumerable little rifts

of agricultural or mining settlements all over the western country," required peaceful relations with the naturally resentful and hostile "savages," but use of the "military arm" was called for when they obstructed the westward advance. The government was aware of "the conviction of the great body of citizens that the Indians have been in the past unjustly and cruelly treated," and of their wretched state caused by the glorious westward expansion. But, Walker insisted, industrial and social progress was inevitable, and the backward Indians could not be allowed to obstruct it. "The westward course of population is neither to be denied nor delayed for the sake of all the Indians that ever called this country their home," he declared. "They must yield or perish." All that could be done now was to try to preserve "the remnants of the Indian race" from total destruction by protecting them on reservations. U.S. policy, in Walker's view, might be summed up thus: to do as little injustice and to use as little harshness as possible in an inevitable historical process, a clash of cultures, in which U.S. citizens were the beneficiaries and the Indians were the victims. [For further discussion of America's Indian population, see Ch. 12: MINORITIES.]

Others besides the Indians suffered from the frontier's growing pains. Frontiersmen tended to be bellicose, partly because of their tradition of violence, partly perhaps because the wars in which the country was periodically engaged during the nineteenth century never touched them very closely. This was particularly true in 1812, when it was the new "Western" states — for example, Henry Clay's Kentucky — that were the leaders in the agitation that resulted in war with England. It was also true in 1898, when Western jingoism did much to bring on hostilities with Spain. In other cases — the French and Indian War, for example, and the Mexican War — it was the frontier

itself that faced the foe and that demanded, as it were, that the whole country join it in attack or defense. Thus the frontier has been an important factor in the country's international conflicts.

The frontier also was subject to, as well as the cause of, serious economic disturbances during the century or so in which it was one of the dominant elements in the nation's financial history. Frontier booms, which were usually based on speculation by Eastern capital, produced prosperity in the East; and frontier busts had the opposite effect. The slogans on the covered wagons were indicative of the economic situation of the moment. One day, westward-moving wagons would be emblazoned with the motto, "Pikes Peak or Bust"; the returnees would declare: "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted."

Eastern capital was invested not only in frontier land but also in the means of getting to it. The fact is important, for because of it the nation created, in an astonishingly short time, a transportation network — first canals, then railroads, then highways — that was and is the wonder of the world. There was an interesting "positive feedback," as the technologists call it, between the frontier itself and the canals and railroads. When settlers entered a frontier region, they created a demand for a railroad line. This was built, but its existence meant that more settlers entered the region, so that the more adventurous spirits would then move onward, creating a need for further extensions of the railroad. The same mechanism is evident today in the environs of most American cities. Dwellers in the central city move to the suburbs; they demand the construction of new commuting facilities; these result in suburban overcrowding; the first suburbanites move farther out, and the cycle is repeated.

Overall, of course, the frontier's economic effect was beneficial. Many young men



Library of Congress

"Crockett and his pet bear, using up four Indians"; engraving in "Davy Crockett's Almanac," 1846

went west, as Horace Greeley urged them to do, and grew up with the country; and wherever they went they produced wealth and helped the country grow. Henry Adams, looking back from the vantage point of the 1880s, thought that the task of settling and exploiting a continent with the resources available in 1800 should have appeared insuperable to the men of that earlier time. But in fact, as he conceded, it had not appeared so; and in fact the task was not insuperable. The frontier flowed west to the Missouri, leaped the mountains to the Pacific, and returned to fill in the Great Plains. And all the while the country was at the boil — churning, growing, expanding. To most men of the frontier it seemed that this would ever be so. [For further discussion of some of the topics treated in this section, see Chs. 9: EQUALITY, 10: PLURALISM, and 11: INDIVIDUALISM.]

4. THE TURNER THESIS

IN 1890 THE SUPERINTENDENT of the census announced that it was no longer possible to point to "a frontier of settlement," and therefore there would be no further census reports on the westward movement. Three

years later Frederick Jackson Turner used this report as the occasion for his famous paper on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," one of the most influential essays ever written by an American historian. The superintendent's report, he said, marked the close of a unique historical movement, of "the first period of American history," which had decisively determined American character and institutions — especially American individualism and democracy. His thesis in a nutshell was this: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development."

The basic insights on which this thesis was based had already been expressed in earlier writings. What Turner did was to organize these insights into a systematic theory of the frontier process, break this down into its component parts, couple it with a theory of social evolution, and proclaim that this allegedly unique relationship to environment was the central determining factor in American history. The two leading elements in this relationship were, first, the existence of "free land," a constantly available territory into which settlers were free to enter in each succeeding era; and, sec-

ond, the settlers' adaptation to primitive conditions of life, involving a reversion to primitive social organization, followed by a process of development to civilized complexity again.

This pattern of reversion to primitive simplicity, followed by evolution to a civilized stage, was repeated (according to Turner) on each new frontier in a "perennial rebirth" and decisively determined American political and social attitudes and institutions. It made Americans egalitarian, independent, and individualistic and was the main source of American democracy. Hence Turner maintained that the frontier — "the Great West" — was the only proper locus from which to view American history.

Their relationship to the American land transformed Europeans and their descendants into something new and unique. "The wilderness masters the colonist," Turner declared. "It strips off the garments of civilization." It "Indianizes" the new settler, who is compelled, in order to survive, to dress, dwell, farm, eat, and make war like the natives. Later on he in turn "transforms the wilderness" into a new social form, a new product that is American and not European. Even after an area has become settled, it is marked by these frontier, *i.e.*, purely American, characteristics. Hence to study the westward movement, Turner declared, "is to study the really American part of our history."

Turner imaginatively traced out the dynamic transformation of the whole continent wrought by the recurring frontier advance. He broke down the frontier into functional as well as geographical sectors, discerning "the trader's frontier, the rancher's frontier, or the miner's frontier, and the farmer's frontier." He saw these as advancing at different rates of speed and having different characters and effects. He saw the fur trader as the first pioneer of civilization, transforming the Indians into nonprimitives with his stock of guns and goods, and the

trader's trails and "posts" as the germs of our present highways and cities. And he concluded that the repeated frontier experience, shared in common by persons of all origins and from all sections, was the true melting pot that made Americans into one people. Moreover, he held that the American frontier, by its example, fostered economic and political equality in Europe as well as at home.

At the close of his famous essay, faced with the fact that there was no more free land to transform and be transformed by, Turner wondered into what channels the "restless, nervous energy" of the American people would direct itself in the future. The frontier had made Americans what they were, but now it was gone forever, and with it its unique possibilities and opportunities. "Never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves," Turner prophesied; and he warned that Americans must look forward to an entirely new era in their history.

In an essay written ten years later, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," Turner made a few important additions to his original thesis. He discussed (1) the industrial, nonagrarian aspects of the westward expansion; (2) the role of social cooperation and national government assistance; (3) the decisive motivating ideals of freedom, equality, and a rich, full life; and (4) the significant contribution of nonfrontier and non-American cultures to the making of America and the American dream. Moreover, he held out the hope that the new "social tendency" that he saw in the West of his time — a movement toward "industrial democracy" — might replace the free lands of the frontier as the buttress of the American democratic spirit.

Twentieth-century critics have not taken these and other qualifications as remedying what they consider the basic deficiencies of Turner's thesis. One criticism is that the theory is narrowly nationalistic, neglecting

or ignoring the basic European, Reformation, and English sources of American culture and society. According to such critics, American democracy did not come out of the frontier wilderness but out of minds shaped by the thought of Locke, Milton, Montesquieu, and others. A collateral criticism is that Turner's thesis is deterministic and materialistic, making man an empty-headed automaton completely controlled by external forces, a blank slate on which the physical environment writes its message. If that is so, ask the critics, then why did not the Spaniards respond to the "free land" of the New World by becoming egalitarian and democratic?

Others have asserted that the frontier regions were in fact imitative of the political and social structure of the older sections and sometimes accelerated but never themselves originated the trend toward universal (white) manhood suffrage and other democratic measures, and even were citadels of special privilege in some areas. Still another criticism is that Turner's theory only accounts for the agrarian aspects of the American experience and has nothing to say about the urban and industrial aspects, which ultimately turned out to be the most important.

The last two points deserve some comment. It is true enough that the frontier was often imitative of earlier social and political models; one would not expect new social institutions in each of the thousands of towns and cities that blossomed, seemingly overnight, on the prairies and among the forests and mountains. But it is also true that the freedom and isolation of the frontier made possible social experiments that were more radical than anything else in our history. The many utopian Fourierist communities that flourished around the middle of the last century are a case in point. The constitutions of these organizations are often of great interest; several of them are reprinted in the pages of the *ANNALS*.

The frontier also afforded an opportunity for the growth of new, uniquely American, religious forms: the best example is that of the Mormons. Mormonism, with its early advocacy of plural marriage, probably could not have survived in the East or Midwest; indeed, the Mormons were successively driven from one "civilized" community to another, until they finally settled in the Utah desert — a region that no one else wanted. Frontier revivalism was not, like Mormonism, a new religion, but it was a new form of an old one, and it had an important reverse effect — for example, during the "Great Awakening" of the eighteenth century — on the more "restrained" religious practices of the East. And still other religions that may be termed experimental grew up in the frontier environment but did not endure.

The frontier was also the source, or at least afforded the opportunity for, political experiments that seemed radical at the time, even if they do not seem so now. A leading example is Populism, the direct heir of the Granger Movement of the 1870s and 1880s, a protest of the "farmers' frontier" against the control of the country's business by Eastern industrialists. Populism in turn became Progressivism, which was marked on the one hand by a deep and abiding distrust of the new immigrants who were surging through the Eastern ports of entry (and flooding the Eastern labor market), but on the other hand by a spirit of civic and social reform that resulted in such programs as Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism and Wilson's New Freedom, and, ultimately, in F.D.R.'s New Deal, Kennedy's New Frontier, and Johnson's Great Society.

The second point mentioned above — that Turner's theory took account only of the agrarian frontier and ignored the urban frontier — has come in for much recent comment. Historians like Daniel J. Boorstin, in his *The Americans: The National Experience* (1965), have emphasized the impor-

tance of communal effort in the settlement and development of the West, and have shifted from the classic image of the frontiersman as a solitary individual to the image of the frontiersman as one of a group. Once, the picture that came to the mind's eye was of a solitary horseman, clad in buckskins, outlined against the sunset; now, we see a circle of wagons drawn up around a campfire as protection against Indian night attacks. And we recognize that the town "booster" — the man who proclaimed the virtues and predicted the ultimate prosperity of his little "one-horse" town — was fully as important a figure as the lone trapper or ranger. The booster, with all his vulgarisms of style and language, represented civilization; and civilization, after all, was what the frontier was always a step toward.

Turner has been defended against these attacks, of course, for example by Avery Craven, who maintained that Turner had selected the one central factor that explains American history, while not neglecting the other factors, such as urban development, the Industrial Revolution, our European past, and the settled East. He was interested, said Craven, in setting down the "general tendencies," the main lines, the big picture, always aware of the complexities and contradictions inherent in concrete historical life. Similarly, Ray Alan Billington emphasized Turner's view of the frontier as the meeting place of two forces, savagery and civilization — the "region whose social conditions resulted from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land."

Walter Prescott Webb, in *The Great Frontier* (1952), not only defended Turner but also took his thesis and applied it to the whole of modern Western civilization. Webb saw the American frontier as only one part of the great European frontier, that, since 1500, had progressively included North and South America, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. These lands

constituted an inherently "vast body of wealth without proprietors" that offered a frontier of exploitation and settlement to the "Metropolis," or civilized center, of Western Europe. This world frontier, he declared, explains 400 years of Western history, including the development of capitalism, industrial technology, democracy, science, and other aspects of culture. The frontier "boom" lasted until about 1900, and its close presented Western civilization with serious social and human problems. This frontier theory is not open to the charges of narrow nationalism and agrariansim that have been leveled against Turner's thesis. However, it still emphasizes the physical environment — land and resources — as the determining factor, in the same way that Turner did.

5. NEW FRONTIERS

THE REALIZATION that the frontier era is finished — with the single exception of Alaska — has brought forth many prophetic forebodings and proposed alternatives. One side of the problem was presented dramatically by Stuart Chase in 1936, when he showed that we had by then used up almost all of the original virgin forests, defertilized our soil, and doubled the amount of wastelands, replacing much of the original lush soil with areas without any organic life. More recent Jeremiahs have proclaimed new messages of doom for the land, the result of man's misuse of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and detergents. These prophets insist that the original "Garden" of the New World has been laid waste, gutted, and rendered noxious, and that urgent measures are necessary to maintain life itself, to say nothing of the American way of life. One response to this has been the movement to conserve and reclaim our natural resources, which began in 1891 and has been vigorously emphasized by several Presidents, notably the two Roosevelts. Justice William O. Douglas, in his

proposal for "A Wilderness Bill of Rights" in 1965, advocated conservation to recapture the original American experience of an intimate contact with natural life.

Some opponents of the Turner thesis regard conservationist views as wrong in attributing far too much importance to land and an agrarian economy. Like Turner, say such critics, conservationists are obsessed with the "closed space" idea, instead of thinking in terms of modern technology, urbanization, and new forms of social life, and they neglect the remarkable adaptability of Americans to new ways of living and making a living. The abundance that was formerly found in the open lands of the West, say writers like David Potter, is now to be found on the new frontiers of science, technology, and society. They label conservationism and other views based on the Turner thesis as "defeatist" and "hysterical."

The talk of "new frontiers" has been routine among our leading statesmen, business executives, and commencement speakers for over a generation. Herbert Hoover spoke in 1922 of ever new frontiers on the "continents" of social welfare, science, and industrial development, frontiers that would be conquered by the individualistic pioneer spirit. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Dealers saw the new frontiers in social problems that must be handled by government actions, not by the anachronistic — in their view — rugged individualism of the old frontier. And of course John F. Kennedy selected as the slogan of his administration the very term, "The New Frontier."

The most vigorous opposition to this talk about new frontiers has come from Walter Prescott Webb, who, writing on "The Fallacy of New Frontiers," declared that "there is no plural for frontier." The frontier — in American and world history — was and is unique. There will be and there can be no other, he proclaimed. The fundamental requirement of a frontier — vast

open lands — is missing. As for turning now to science and technology, they have only destroyed and laid waste the immense resources that were open to human use four centuries ago. Science, said Webb, "has created nothing, but has been a spendthrift and wastrel of the world's stored energy." Even if science finds new energy sources in the sun or atomic power, American democracy will necessarily be supplanted by a new order that will have none of the quality of frontier freedom and independence. All thoughtful persons, he insisted, must agree that "there is as yet no new frontier in sight comparable to the one that is lost," and that we must therefore "devote our energy to finding solutions that now face a frontierless society."

Other writers continued to resist the pessimistic pronouncements of men such as Webb. C. Merton Babcock, for example, maintained that we are still driving westward, as indicated by the extraordinary growth of population west of the Rockies since 1940. "America . . . is still 'westward-tilted,'" he wrote in 1965, declaring that the frontier spirit is still at work in our constant mobility, ideal of progress, and propensity for building and rebuilding. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick (in a defense of Turner published in 1954) saw frontier attitudes and actions emerging in present-day situations analogous to those in the new, raw communities on the old Northwest frontier — for example, in public housing projects, tract developments, and brand-new communities that face difficult living conditions and are forced to deal with them themselves. The result, according to Elkins and McKittrick, is likely to be an enthusiastic, resourceful, participative, "pure" democratic association, like that on the old frontier.

In any event, as many recent writers have observed, the American frontier was never wholly a matter of geography, of space, of

land; it was also the historical expression of a timeless attitude. The American people display a versatility, a practical ingenuity, and a "rosy faith in the future," as Billington put it in 1959, that are shared by few of the other peoples of the world. "These are pioneer traits," he went on to say — along with some other, less desirable traits, which he also listed. They have been too firmly planted to be eradicated by the changes that have occurred in our century — so far. Indeed, they may never be entirely dislodged — for, in Archibald MacLeish's famous words (they stand as one of the epigraphs of this chapter), "West is a country in the mind, and so eternal." [For a different treatment of some of the points discussed here, see Ch. 5: GENERAL WELFARE.]

6. THE FRONTIER IN ART AND MYTH

WE HAVE SO FAR MADE LITTLE OR NO mention of the frontier as a "country in the mind," but to fail to do so would be a grave error. The frontier is one of the grand themes — perhaps *the* grand theme — of American literature; and it has affected American painting and sculpture as well.

The influence of the frontier has been manifested in a number of ways. The frontier has produced a number of human types that are also fictional characters — one is not sure whether they are characters first and real human beings second, or the other way around. Foremost is probably the cowboy, a real person indeed, but also one of the great figures in American folklore and myth. He is the hero of a thousand "dime novels" — and also of some very good ones. Curiously, he is almost always a "good" character and is usually opposed by another important frontier type, the "bad man." Often the latter is a cattle rustler, which indicates the importance of cattle as property on the frontier. The "dude" or ef-

fete Easterner is another in this congeries of literary characters; he is a complex type, sometimes the butt of ridicule, sometimes the retiring hero who only shows his strength *in extremis* — which is to say in the last scene of the book, movie, or TV show. A fourth type in this literary set is the farmer, sometimes a simple embodiment of virtue, sometimes an ambiguous representative of civilization in that he fences the plains. Then there are the rancher and the lawman; and last but not least is the "frontier mother," an important stereotype as well as a reality.

Other figures are the mountainman or woodsman — one thinks immediately of Davy Crockett, a real person, and of the Natty Bumppo of Cooper's "Leatherstocking" tales, a glorious figment of the imagination (though modeled after Daniel Boone). The fur trader and the trapper are others in this set, as is the Indian scout, the half-savage, half-civilized personage who is at home in both worlds.

New types — both literary and real — emerged at a later day. The most characteristic of these, perhaps, is the maladjust, of whom the first great typical representative is Carol Kennicott of Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920). Lewis drew a memorable portrait:

On a hill by the Mississippi where Chipewas had camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. . . . A breeze which had crossed a thousand miles of wheatlands bellied her taffeta skirt in a line so graceful, so full of animation and moving beauty, that the heart of a chance watcher on the lower road tightened to wistfulness over her quality of suspended freedom. . . . The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are deader now than Camelot; and a re-

bellious girl is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest.

Another memorable portrait came from the pen of John Steinbeck, who, in the character of the Grandfather in *The Red Pony*, personified the longing and the frustration of those who had seen the frontier come to an end. The old man addresses his grandson Jody:

"It wasn't Indians that were important, nor adventures, nor even getting out there. . . . It was westering and westering. Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering. . . . When we saw the mountains at last, we cried — all of us. But it wasn't getting here that mattered, it was movement and westering.

"We carried life out here and set it down the way those ants carry eggs. And I was the leader. The westering was as big as God, and the slow steps that made the movement piled up until the continent was crossed.

"Then we came down to the sea, and it was done."

"Maybe I could lead the people someday," Jody said.

The old man smiled. "There's no place to go. There's the ocean to stop you. There is a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them."

"In boats, I might, sir."

"No place to go, Jody. Every place is taken. But that's not the worst — no, not the worst. Westering has died out of the people. Westering isn't a hunger any more. It's all done."

The final gift of the frontier, just as it was disappearing, was to send its maladjusts (usually its smartest, most restless young people) back to the city, back to the civilization — now a megalopolitan one — that the frontiersmen had originally fled. It is in this sense that the metaphorical new frontiers of the present day have meaning. It used to be true (it may not be true any longer) that the artist or intellectual, the

mover and shaker, the man with a new idea, who had been *born* in New York (or Philadelphia or Boston or Chicago) was a rarity; he had usually been born and brought up in a small town in the Middle West, or in the South, or maybe in New England, and had somehow managed to get to the city where his ideas and his talents were appreciated and bore fruit. The point is that *his* father — or, more likely, his grandfather or great-grandfather — had left the city one or two generations before to strike off and out and away. For the sake of himself, of course — for "opportunity," for the chance to have his own land, to make his own fortune. But also for the pure sake of "westering" itself. Westering was a spirit that imbued millions of real Americans in the past — and that imbues thousands of literary characters still.

The frontier has had its greatest influence, perhaps, on our popular literature and art; and, through the medium of film, it has strongly influenced the popular art of other countries. The movie *High Noon* ran for a year on the Champs-Élysées in the early 1950s, and Frenchmen whistled its theme as often and with as much pleasure as Americans. The characters of the movie and TV "Western" are appreciated all over the world, and even the Communist nations are said to approve them — of course with certain reservations.

The frontier is also the theme of much of our best literature. We have mentioned Lewis and Steinbeck; scores of other authors come to mind. Cooper of course; Edward Eggleston, whose *Hoosier Schoolmaster* is one of the all-time best sellers; Willa Cather, in books such as *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *The Song of the Lark* (the last is about an opera singer who finds she must go to the big city to become really good, and does so); Hamlin Garland and Bret Harte, masters of the short study and story; Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Robert Frost, all poets who were touched by the

wild; Frank Norris, who hated what had been done to the frontier of his childhood; and Walt Whitman, the very epitome of the frontier spirit in poetry. Even Edgar Allan Poe contributed his bit, in *Astoria*. There was a watery frontier, also, to which the clipper ships and *Moby Dick* bear witness. Hawthorne was fascinated not by the New England of his time but by the earlier New England of the Puritans — when the quiet country around Salem was either a “howling wilderness” or next door to one. The symbol of the frontier was also an export item: nineteenth-century European literature absorbed and exploited it, from Chateaubriand on a “high” level (and rather a dull one) to Arthur Conan Doyle on a “low” level (but an impelling one).

Probably the greatest of America’s “frontier writers” — but he was also much more than that — was Mark Twain. In his best

works, the frontier, whether river, mountain, or plain, was a looming presence, calling forth the good in men and showing up the insincere. Captain Bixby in *Life on the Mississippi* is a superb creation (whether or not he really existed); he triumphs over all obstacles and attains his victories with the utmost insouciance. But the best — the most interesting, the most subtle, the most “American” — of Mark Twain’s characters is the immortal Huck Finn. He reflects all the frontier virtues — youthfulness, honesty and candor, equalitarianism, and common sense — and adds some of his own. His last words may be allowed to sum up the spirit of the literary, if not the real, frontier, as well as to close this discussion:

I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can’t stand it.