

Plow in One Hand, Six-Shooter in the Other

By David S. Reynolds:
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Correction Appended

THE FRONTIER IN AMERICAN CULTURE By Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick. Edited by James R. Grossman. Illustrated. 116 pp. Berkeley: University of California Press. Cloth, \$ 30. Paper, \$ 15.

PATRICIA NELSON LIMERICK recently had a semantic problem while teaching a survey course in American history at the University of Colorado. She couldn't bear to use the "f-word" in class. The "f-word," as she explains in her essay in this volume, is "frontier." For most Americans, it is a benign term that conjures up cowboys and wagon trains. For some current historians, however, it suggests a brutal history of the victimization of Native Americans and other groups by white settlers.

To some extent, this view is shared by Ms. Limerick, who insists that the idea of the frontier is "jammed with nationalistic self-congratulation and toxic ethnocentrism." But neither she nor Richard White, her co-contributor to this handsomely illustrated book, "The Frontier in American Culture," a volume produced to accompany a recent exhibition at the Newberry Library in Chicago, is primarily concerned with fighting today's culture wars. Instead, they explore many historical meanings of the frontier, noting both the positive and negative aspects of westward expansion.

As Mr. White explains, our vision of the frontier was largely shaped by two very different 19th-century Americans: the University of Wisconsin professor Frederick Jackson Turner and the flamboyant showman Buffalo Bill Cody. In his 1893 address "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" -- perhaps one of the most influential lectures ever -- Turner pictured the frontier as free, open territory that was settled with little violence. A contrary image was popularized by Buffalo Bill in his famous Wild West extravaganza, which attracted huge crowds with its stirring renderings of bloody fights between gun-toting scouts and rampaging Indians.

Both versions, Mr. White points out, involved a certain amount of distortion. If Turner marginalized American Indians, Buffalo Bill demonized them. For Turner, the continent was conquered with the ax and the plow; for Buffalo Bill, with the rifle and six-shooter. As Mr. White concisely explains, "Turner took as his theme the conquest of nature; he considered savagery incidental. Buffalo Bill made the conquest of savages central; the conquest of nature was incidental."

The two men, in short, presented compelling stories, not straight facts. Mr. White's most original point is that the stories had a long background in American culture. He is especially useful in tracing the roots of Turner's idea of a bracing frontier experience that built the American character. Mr. White, a professor of history at the University of Washington and the author of " 'It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own': A History of the American West," uses fascinating 19th-century illustrations, reproduced from the exhibition at the Newberry Library, to show that the basic elements of Turner's narrative were long entrenched in the popular imagination.

Most of these illustrations -- paintings, maps, lithographs -- depict the migration of the pioneers, highlighting their sturdiness and de-emphasizing their encounters with Indians. A typical lithograph, "Across the Continent," by Francis Palmer, printed by Currier & Ives in 1868, pictures a train barreling westward toward the open prairie while leaving a pair of Indians literally in its smoke. Another illustration, titled "The March of Destiny" and used as the frontispiece of Col. Frank Triplett's book "Conquering the Wilderness," published in 1883, depicts a long wagon train stretching toward a golden West that gleams like paradise in the distance.

When Mr. White turns from the Turner myth to Buffalo Bill Cody, he loses his interest in historical roots. One wishes he had discussed previous representations of Indian warfare, in pictures and popular literature, that prepared the way for Buffalo Bill. But he does a fine job with the showman himself. Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, performed countless times throughout the late 19th century, was an action spectacle featuring bloodthirsty Indians whose main role was to attack whites. "Indians were imitating imitations of themselves," Mr. White notes. In one stage melodrama, titled "The Red Right Hand; or the First Scalp for Custer," Cody repeatedly re-enacted his duel with Yellow Hand, a Sioux warrior he had killed in an actual battle. In this and many similar scenes, Cody presented the whites' slaughter of the Indians as a justified reaction to barbarous aggression.

IF we combine the Turner story and the Buffalo Bill story, Mr. White argues, we have a multidimensional version of the frontier that nonetheless has its gaps, the most important being the viewpoint of Indians themselves. Mr. White suggests how this gap can be filled, discussing drawings in a ledger book by eight Cheyenne artists recollecting their experience of warfare in the 1870's. The Indians, it turns out, did some myth making of their own. Even when drawing battles in which they were badly defeated by the Army, the Cheyennes depicted themselves as superhuman warriors unscathed by the bullets that rained around them.

In light of all these stories about the frontier, how do we get at the "real" frontier? That problem has become even more difficult in modern times, Ms. Limerick suggests in her essay. In the 20th century, she shows, the frontier has become a commodity and a political tool. The frontier has been a regular staple of the entertainment industry -- in westerns and in Disney's Frontierland, for example -- and has appeared in countless other contexts as well. Ms. Limerick sampled 4,000 recent headlines for references to "pioneer" or "frontier." She found stories about a Cookie Pioneer, a Microwave Popcorn Pioneer, Underwear Pioneers and, most memorably, a Pioneer of the South Philadelphia Hoagie. Promoters of space exploration have loved using the frontier analogy, as have politicians, ranging from John Fitzgerald Kennedy, with his vision of a New Frontier, to Ronald Reagan, with uplifting pronouncements like "We're crossing new frontiers every day."

Although Ms. Limerick, the author of "The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West," is not totally comfortable with this near-universal acceptance of the frontier, she is aware of its extraordinary power as a cultural myth. She complains that discussions of the frontier almost inevitably take the vantage point of white settlers to the exclusion of all others, like the Asians who settled America from the west or the Mexicans who came from the south. Her aim, however, is not to probe the frontier experience of various ethnic groups but to reveal the many uses of the frontier mentality in American life. At the end, she accepts the idea of the frontier: "Whether or not it suits my preference, the concept works as a cultural glue -- a mental and emotional fastener that, in some very curious and unexpected ways, works to hold us together."

It seems as though, with all her qualms, Ms. Limerick will someday allow herself to use the "f-word" in class again. In the meantime, most Americans will doubtless continue to flock to Frontierland, contemplate the frontiers of space and feast on the products of hoagie pioneers.

Correction: February 19, 1995, Sunday A review on Jan. 22, about "The Frontier in American Culture," by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, edited by James R. Grossman, misidentified the artist responsible for the 1868 Currier & Ives lithograph "Across the Continent." She was Fanny Palmer (Frances Flora Bond Palmer, 1812-76), not Francis Palmer.

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