

Quarterly Journal of Ideology

A Critique of Conventional Wisdom

An electronic journal at:

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Frontiers and Boundaries in U.S. History.

Edited by Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton.

Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2004. Pp. 251.

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Since Frederick Jackson Turner elaborated his well-known “frontier thesis” over a century ago (Turner 1894), the idea of the frontier has acquired a number of ideological implications in the historiography about the United States. Besides being the geographical or metaphorical demarcation between settlement and wilderness, this concept has also come to epitomize the cradle of American civilization and the forge of the U.S. nation. After an early infatuation with Turner’s theory, an almost boundless literature has highlighted the various drawbacks and shortcomings of his interpretation. In particular, scholarship has criticized his ethnocentric nationalism, his exceptionalistic perspective, his disregard for the centrality of slavery to the U.S. experience, and his celebratory view of the territorial expansion of the United States (Faragher 1998 [1994]; Etulain 1999).

Against this backdrop, the essays in the volume under review here – a collection of selected papers originally presented at the Roosevelt Study Center’s Sixth Conference of European Historians of the United States, held in Middelburg, the Netherlands, on 23-25 April 2003 – not only reassess the meaning of the frontier in North America, as editors Sylvia L. Hilton and Cornelis A. van Minnen do in their interpretative introduction of Turner’s scholarly legacy and his critics. These

chapters also enrich what might have otherwise been a sheer reconsideration of Turner-related issues by extending their analysis to an examination of the many other notions of borders in U.S. history. The outcome is an impressive and fascinating set of studies that spans from the early Republic to the late twentieth century. Especially valuable in the book, however, is not the mere width of the timeframe. Rather, it is the multidimensional application of a category initially indicating demarcation in the historical expansion of the United States toward the Pacific coast to as many fields for research as politics, literature, demography, media studies, arts, and culture in general. Significantly, for example, Tity de Vires' chapter on Alaskaland, a history theme park in Fairbanks, deals both on Alaska as the last U.S. frontier and on the politics of the preservation and ideological representation of Alaskans' past and identity.

Most essays agree that U.S. boundaries, whether physical or mental, are flexible and have tended to undergo a process of redefinition and renegotiation in due time. This conclusion might sound quite obvious from a geographical and political point of view with reference to a country that has made territorial expansion one of its main characteristics over the centuries. Yet, even along this much trodden path, some contributors manage to shed light on little-known aspects or to offer original reconsiderations. For example, both Carmen de la Guardia Herrero and Marco Sioli highlight the ties between foreign and domestic policies in the early Republic. The former suggests that the Federalists thought of territorial expansion as a pivotal means to strengthen political stability in the recently established Union. In this view, enlarging the number of citizens and primarily participating voters by acquisitions of new lands was an expedient that would make it harder and harder for any political faction to impose its will and interests over the rest of the country. The latter goes beyond the stereotypically romantic aura of the legendary Lewis-Clark expedition. Sioli places the explorations that the Jefferson administration promoted within the context of the Euro-American struggle over the New World in early nineteenth century and persuasively argues that their aim was

also to make a claim of U.S. sovereignty over the regions across the Mississippi in the eyes of other competitors such as Great Britain, Spain, and native American tribes. Along these lines, Joseph Smith shows that President Rutherford B. Hayes' resort to a special message to Congress in March 1880 to include the isthmus of Panama in the U.S. sphere of influence was a clear attempt at extending the jurisdiction of the United States beyond its political and geographical borders. However, as Frank Schumaker contends, the outreach toward the Caribbean marked a break with American exceptionalism not only because the United States followed in the footsteps of European countries in embarking on imperialism, but also because Washington bureaucrats began to draw on how European powers were coping with their own colonial problems in order to handle similar matters.

Another trait that many essays share is the emphasis on contacts and interaction rather than conflicts in both geographical and intellectual borderlands. For instance, Robert M. Lewis outlines the elaboration of a Cajun sense of affiliation among the white inhabitants of southwestern Louisiana and its survival into the twenty-first century as a positive identity that has eventually superseded the originally derogatory implications of the French cultural heritage in this area. Likewise, Giles Scott-Smith maintains that Senator Lyndon B. Johnson's successful efforts to overcome Southern Democrats' opposition to Hawaiian statehood because of the archipelago's multiracial population resulted in part from the future president's desire to turn the islands into a laboratory of peaceful cultural encounters to be used as an instrument of propaganda warfare in the Pacific basin during the Cold War.

The emphasis on conciliation rather than antagonism is evident especially in the chapters that focus on historiographical reassessments. Louis Billington and David Brown, for instance, suggest that the experience of antebellum small farmers cannot be confined to the contrast between slaveowners and the advocates of free husbandry because people living in some northern and

southern rural countries shared a common ideology based on production for the market and the defense of family and community ties. Similarly, James Ryan urges historians of the Communist Party of the United States to overcome their ideological divide and to produce a more balanced scholarship. Such “middle of the road” studies should combine an examination of the treacherous attitude of many American Communists toward the U.S. government in international affairs with the acknowledgement of their genuine commitment to promote civil rights and to fight against social and racial injustice at home. Among the contributors to the collection, only Paul Otto openly takes issue with a search for middle ground that has progressively shaped post-Turnerian interpretations of the frontier since the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The ethnic revival of those decades undoubtedly paved the way for the elaboration of alternatives to a Wasp narrative in frontier studies. The scholarly discovery of the Spanish borderlands in what theretofore used to be referred to as British North America offers a significant case in point (Weber 1992; Jackson 1998). In this respect, however, the volume reveals some imbalance. Against the backdrop of a multicultural definition of the literary history of the United States (Sollors 1998; Shell and Sollors 2000), Michael Boyden investigates the relationship between American literature and territoriality. But does not reach a definitive conclusion on whether the linguistic or the territorial criterion is more viable than the other in the construction of a canon. Similarly, besides the editors’ survey of the frontier scholarship in the introduction and a similar overview in Otto’s essay, few chapters adopt a territorial rather than a nation-oriented approach or discuss encounters across U.S. actual borders. In this context, Sioli delineates the Spanish echo of the Jeffersonian explorations and how these expeditions affected U.S. relations with native Americans. Likewise, Graham Davis outlines the Irish pursuit of the American dream in Mexican Texas before the Great Famine migration and disproves the stereotypical image of Irish immigrants as destitute people heading for urban settings because of financial restraints.

Since Mexican land grants lured the Irish into moving to Texas as Davis aptly notes, the role of the immigration policies in rearranging North American geography and borders might have deserved greater attention. Moreover a broader hemispheric perspective would have further enriched the volume. In the end, however, *Frontiers and Boundaries in U.S. History* is a substantial scholarly achievement and a pleasant read as well. That only two out of the nineteen contributors to this impressive collection of essays are from North America also offers evidence of the vitality of European studies on the United States.

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