

## New Horizons for the American West

Margaret Walsh

Wild Bill Hicock and wagon trains - familiar images of pioneer spirit, but a more complex and less triumphalist view of how the American frontier moved West is explained by Margaret Walsh.

For many years and for millions of people on both sides of the Atlantic the American West was and still is the excitement, action and scenery of a John Ford-John Wayne Movie or of a Zane Grey dime novel. For others who have a different cultural approach to the West it is the magnificent landscape paintings of Albert Bierstadt or Thomas Moran or the backdrop to the classic literary works of James Fenimore Cooper or Mark Twain. For historians who studied North America the West was that part of the continent, usually the United States, which was unsettled at the time of the Revolution, or the area beginning at the Appalachian Mountains and stretching to the Pacific Coast. The process of settling this vast territory became the story of the West, often a saga of epic proportions filled with heroes who not only had major adventures but who brought civilisation in the shape of democracy and capitalism.

Such a West was popular for many years in the twentieth century, but then became unfashionable in the 1960s and 1970s when historians, popular culture and the media paid more attention to urban industrial settings and the issue of civil and equal rights. More recently, however, new currents have been flowing and the West has become a whirlpool of historical activity. Stirred in part by the concerns of residents to have a more realistic past and one which covered centuries other than the nineteenth, historians are busy uncovering the 'New West'. This West is a place or a region, rather than a process of development and it is a place which has possibilities as well as problems. Through discussing specific issues Western historians have not only reinterpreted and revitalised the traditional or 'Old' West, hut they suggest ways in which the region may lead the nation into the twenty-first century.

The traditional West which dominated the textbooks and media for much of the twentieth century had been given respectability through the pioneering work of Frederick Jackson Turner. His famous thesis 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', first published in the American Historical Association, Annual Report of the Year 1893, (1894), set the framework for many of the ensuing historical outpourings. Writing that 'the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward explains American development' Turner hypothesised that abundant, available and cheap land ensured the triumph of American capitalism.

By utilising the resources of the West, pioneers contributed to raising American standards of living to the highest in the world. Equally if not more importantly the process of west-ward expansion meant that the nation was won for democracy and that the character of the American population was shaped by the struggle to win the environment. Turner and his followers, now called 'Old Western Historians' wrote optimistic history. Theirs was a story in

which progress was the key feature. The American West had been won for the benefit of a wealthy democratic nation-state.

This traditional West, whether read in academically researched mono- graphs, general textbooks or novels, or whether viewed on the large or small screens, was primarily a Euro-American male experience, often highlighted through the achievements of cowboys, homesteaders, fur traders or the United States' army. In

Ray A. Billington's monumental classic (*Westward Expansion. A History of the American Frontier*, Macmillan, first edition, 1949, fifth edition, 1982) these men overcame obstacles like difficult terrain, drought, Indians, wild animals and distance through their perseverance, hard work, ingenuity and most of all through their use of technology. Such technology might be a Winchester repeating rifle, but it could also be a reaper, a wind- mill or the railroad. Though other people were present in the movement west, they were not the most important actors and could thus be either marginalised or stereotyped. Modifications to this lopsided West came when these other people, women, Native Americans and Americans of colour became both visible and significant. The huge area west of the Appalachian Mountains was inhabited by numerous Indian or Native Americans long before Europeans arrived. The smaller area west of the Mississippi River had been El Norte or north-western Mexico for Mexican Americans for many years before westward-moving settlers crossed that river. In addition to these antecedent settlers, Asiatic immigrants moved east across the Pacific ocean, Canadians ignored political boundaries and moved south while former black slaves from the American South moved west and northwest, all at a similar time to the mainstream migration. The 'New' West was a home for millions of diverse Americans, nearly half of whom were female by sex. Indeed it was a cosmopolitan area in which multiculturalism flourished.

Women's historians struck the first major blow at the Euro-American male framework in which women had been either invisible or were stereotyped as long-suffering, dauntless or deviant. For Sandra L. Myres (*Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915*, University of New Mexico Press, 1982) and Glenda Riley, (*The Female Frontier. A Comparative View' of Women on the Prairie and the Plains*, University of Kansas Press, 1988) women were on many frontiers of settlement and were essential to survival and well- being. On the farms where most pioneers were to be found women as mothers raised children; as wives or partners they ran homes; as unpaid labourers they worked on the land and as entrepreneurs they 'paid their way' through 'butter and egg' money. A man could not farm successfully without a female helper. In the western towns women were essential parts of the community, running homes, establishing institutions like schools and churches or earning their living as teachers, hotel proprietors or prostitutes.

Women may have been fewer in number but they were also part of the arduous and adventurous male domains of fur trading, mining and army life. Where women were absent, as on some early logging frontiers or in the exploratory expeditions, Kathleen G. Morrissey ('Engendering the West' in William Cronon, George Miles and Jay Gitlin (eds) *Under An Open Sky. Rethinking the American West*, W.W. Norton, 1992) has suggested engendering such activities by considering how men still remained part of the wider world of two sexes. Relationships between men and women still existed although men were by themselves on the frontier.

The addition of women to the traditional westward process of frontier settlement required consideration of home-making. With the West as home families encountered other peoples and cultures with whom they competed, clashed and compromised. There are no outright winners or losers in this exchange, for much of what has become distinctive about New

Western History is its mixed or multicultural nature. In a setting where everyone can contribute to a cosmopolitan experience, the majority, which are still male and female Euro-Americans, may be dominant, but their claim to authority has been seriously weakened. Their traditional 'winning of the West' is now politically incorrect. The so-called losers not only receive more sympathetic attention, but their encounter with the Euro-Americans is considered from their perspective.

The main losers in the conventional texts and pictures were the Indian Americans. Historians imbued with the ethos of 1960s liberalism like Angie Debo, (*A History of the Indians of the United States*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1970) sharply criticised the inefficiency of the federal government, the corruption of its agents and the greed of incoming settlers. Revisionist historians like F. Paul Prucha, (*The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, University of Nebraska Press, 1984) offered a defence on philanthropic and economic grounds. What else could the federal government, as guardian of the public domain, do other than remove Indian Americans in an era when they could not be accepted as equals and when the government did not have the resources to police the frontier effectively?

European ideas of efficiency earlier suggested that the land was not being utilised effectively by the indigenous dwellers. Given the later disasters which have occurred from over-use of resources some ethno-historians like Wilbur R. Jacobs ('The Indian and the Frontier in American History – A Need For Revision', *Western Historical Quarterly* vol. 4, 1979) and Indian Americans have responded that Indian Americans' land usage was more in harmony with the balance of nature and that their understanding of the environment could offer a better ecological balance. Furthermore their communal way of life, their religion and their culture were well worth appreciating on terms other than as an aberration from whiteness. Yet taking an Indian perspective on the peculiar ways of white people has not revised the disastrous impact of their arrival.

Other notable losers who were also displaced and dispossessed in their encounter with westward moving Euro-Americans were the Mexican and Hispanic Americans. In the early twentieth century Herbert E. Bolton (*The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest*, Yale University Press, 1921) and his students acknowledged the impact of Spanish civilisation as a significant force in the history of the American southwest, but this civilisation did not make a major impact on the dominant Anglo-American frontier. Yet anyone visiting the borderlands of Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico today cannot fail to notice Spanish names, architecture and language. While much of the language is a result of the inflow of millions of twentieth-century Mexican migrants, much of the other Spanish heritage dates back to earlier centuries.

In reappraising the historical dimensions of the frontier Southwest, social and cultural historians have moved beyond the traditional 'Borderlands School' to uncover sources and to use approaches and methodologies which acknowledge the importance of antecedent settlers. With newer categories of analysis like gender, race and culture at the centre, Antonia I. Castaneda ('Gender, Race and Culture: Spanish-Mexican Women in the Historiography of Frontier California', *Frontiers* Vol. 11, 1990) suggests that it is possible to ascertain how the lives of Spanish and Mexican settlers were changed by the later Euro-American arrivals and what the occupiers of the land offered to and thought of the incomers. Though this emerging scholarship is very sensitive to norms other than those of Anglo-American males, the theme of loss and conquest has not been eradicated from the Hispano-Mexican experience in the nineteenth century.

Other minority groups who were newcomers to the American West in its century of rapid development endured negative encounters on account of their colour. Traditionally they have been ignored or marginalised: now that colour has been given positive connotations by affirmative action programmes their contributions are being woven into, if not given prominence, in 'New' histories like those written by Patricia N. Limerick (*The Legacy of Conquest. The Unbroken Past of the American West*, W.W. Norton R Company, 1987) and Richard White ('It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own'. *A New History of the American West*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

African Americans, moving from the American South, primarily as free persons after the Civil War, may have suffered less discrimination and harassment, but they still faced racial prejudice, as workers, as voters and in social settings. Asiatic immigrants too faced racial persecution as they were exploited as workers and were denied the vote. Furthermore social interaction was very limited as Chinese and Japanese were excluded from many meeting places by laws regulating their distinctive and inferior status. Though minority groups are now examined from the inside out rather than from the conventional Euro-American standards, the nineteenth-century West remains a negative terrain for people of colour. To be sure there is no longer a clear-cut division between triumphant white male pioneers and conquered or tragic Indians, but even with the presence of both sexes and several races and ethnicities the traditional 'majority' group retains its central presence and often dominates in establishing frameworks of analysis.

If the New West has become more complex and diverse in its human dimensions, its shape has also changed chronologically and geographically. The time-frame has been stretched and the area compressed. By looking at several centuries and a smaller region both the cultural historians who are interested in patterns of human behaviour and the environmental historians who are interested in the dynamics of place, whether natural, economic or political, have been able to concentrate on a history of continuity rather than one which has a turning point when the west-ward moving frontier ended about 1890. The New West thus does not begin either with the establishment of the American colonies in the seventeenth century or with the search for American independence in 1763. Nor does it end in the 1890s. The story of the West starts with an understanding of the many different groups of Indian Americans who have inhabited the land for centuries. More importantly for historians like Limerick and White, as distinct from anthropologists, it continues into the twentieth century, where diverse peoples live in an urban industrial and post-industrial society and economy.

Geographically this West is not a moving frontier. It is a region: indeed according to Donald Worster ('New West: True West: Interpreting The Region's History', *Western Historical Quarterly* vol. 18, 1987) it is one of the three great co-terminal regions, East, South and West, in the United States. The western boundary of this region is invariably the Pacific Ocean. Its eastern boundary is either a natural phenomenon, usually the Mississippi or Missouri Rivers or the political bounds encompassing either the seventeen or twenty-one states set off by those rivers. What best unites such a region is still a matter of contention.

It can be united by the problem of aridity. Late nineteenth-century explorers like John Wesley Powell (45 Congress 2nd Sessions, House Executive Documents, 73, 'Report on the Lands of the Arid Region', 1878) and historians like Walter Prescott Webb (*The Great Plains*, Grosset and Dunlap, 1931) had earlier pointed out that it would be very difficult to sustain European-style agriculture which depended on an adequate rainfall. The Great Plains was a grasslands area naturally suited to pastoral farming or to arable farming with irrigation. From the 98th meridian to the Pacific Coast, with the exception of the northwestern states of Washington and Oregon, the West was dry; in its most arid parts it was a desert. Indian

Americans had been aware of establishing a delicate balance between man and nature in their patterns of land use. The Mormons early learned in the 1840s and 1850s that survival in Utah meant having a communal approach to harvesting and using water. Individualistic Euro-American farmers were much slower to come to terms with shortages of water and thereby suffered the consequences not only in the dry cycles of the late nineteenth century but periodically in the twentieth century.

If, following Donald Worster's example (*Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West*, Pantheon, 1985) the West is considered as a hydraulic region then its history can be organised round the theme of water, its location, amount and distribution. Water is not only essential to the production of farm crops: it is necessary to livelihood in urban places. The West has had an urban history since the mid-nineteenth century and urban residents too have encountered the problems of financing and engineering water supplies. Moving from activity at the local level in creating the dams, ditches and canals of irrigation districts to a demand for broader state government action, westerners lurched towards some solutions. Federal government intervention in the twentieth century has struggled to provide more satisfactory regional irrigation schemes, but these have often been caught up in bureaucracy and conflicting interest groups. Water and its shortage are essential to understanding the politics and economy of the region. They could form a central organising theme for studying the West systematically.

But can it be studied effectively? For some New Western historians, like Richard White, water is only one resource. In a broader environmental approach to the region it is also necessary to include animal, vegetable and mineral resources. The economic abundance of such resources drew many migrants westwards and their rapid exploitation created both urban growth and the possibility of a managed approach to the environment. The destruction of wildlife, starting with the beaver in the Rocky Mountain streams and moving through the sea otters, the fur seal and most famous of all, the buffalo of the Plains in the 1870s and 1880s, has created endangered species which are now the concern of conservationists nationwide.

The depletion of precious minerals in California and the Rocky Mountains in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, the coal mining in the Plains and Mountain West and the oil drilling in California and Texas in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have left a legacy of waste and destruction as well as stimulating the boom and burst pattern of urban development. Ghost towns, corporate mining towns, commercial centres servicing mining ventures and railroad towns all feature in the New West. The felling of the magnificent strands of timber produced vast cut-over districts in the Pacific Northwest. Here at least, however, it was possible to replant and conservationists, aided by government support, have made some progress in reforestation. As for the superb scenery and its relationship with tourism, this too has become a concern for conservationists. Naturalists and governments recognised the importance of 'set-asides' in the shape of national and state parks if the natural wonders were to be retained for the benefit of the people.

The West as a region is not the agrarian democracy envisaged by the older generation of historians who paid most attention to the settling of the frontier by farmers and the establishment of territorial and then state governments which would be the equals of the original thirteen states. The West had both an agrarian dimension and an urban dimension tied into the exploitation of non-land resources, and its political development came later chronologically. Its relationship with the federal government was thereby more problematic. Indeed some revisionists like Jack Eblen, (*First and Second United States Empires: Governors and Territorial Government, 1784-1912*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968) and some of the New Western historians (in Gerald Nash and Richard W. Etulain (eds.) *The*

Twentieth Century West: Historical Interpretations, University of New Mexico Press, 1989) have favoured an institutional framework of analysis for the region's history focused on the troublesome association between the West and Washington DC. Often using colonial or neo-colonial terminology they envisage the region as dependent upon, rather than interdependent with, national or even global affairs.

Traditionally the federal government was protector of pioneers through the defensive agency of the army, through the land office which distributed land cheaply, and through the territorial system of government which promised democracy and equality. Though settlement was not always fair it worked reasonably well for the majority of Euro-American migrants in the trans-Appalachian and mid-continental areas. Viewed from the Pacific Coast or from the Mountain West in the mid-late nineteenth century, the federal government was slow to provide for independence in the form of statehood and retained too much control over the land and other natural resources. Parts of the 'New West' thus lived under a system in which local political and economic decisions often needed the approval of outside officials. This 'colonial' heritage stimulated a dual reaction. Westerners resented a federal tyranny which frustrated their individualism. At the same time they became dependent and demanded increased federal spending to resolve regional problems and upgrade the quality of their lives. In the twentieth century the 'neo-colonial' tradition has continued with the federal government retaining ownership of large amounts of land and being regulator and subsidiser of major projects ranging from reclamation and conservation, through transportation to defence. Some New Western historians contend that it is impossible to look at the West without considering the significance of the bureaucracy of government.

What now is the history of the American West? Have the traditional stories of cowboys and Indians, the romantic yarns of lone Mountain Men or gold seekers or even of sturdy pioneer farmers disappeared? For some historians the adventurous and triumphal West rarely existed. For many others who moved steadily westwards with Turner's frontiering process, their analysis showed a realistic appreciation of its difficulties and successes. What the newer research and emerging frameworks like those discussed in the collection of essays, Trails. Toward A New Western History (Patricia N. Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II and Charles E. Rankin [eds.], University of Kansas Press, 1991) have done, is to shift the emphasis to the West as a region. Here all New Western historians want a longer time-frame and one which perhaps has a present perspective but one which certainly calls for continuity. Many are concerned to focus on the human and cultural dimensions of settlement and the exchange between peoples of different race, ethnicity and sex. Many are more concerned with the problems and possibilities of the region's environment, whether defined in terms of natural and human resources or in a political sense. The New West is smaller geographically, but is more diverse and more complex than its traditional forerunner.

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