

The New Western History

and the National Parks

These are contentious times. Americans are disputing not only their future but their past. They have fought over exhibits on the West and over commemorations of the bombing of Hiroshima. We fight over the past because history matters as a way to shape public understanding of what America is and who Americans are. Public history risks public contentiousness.

The National Park Service cannot avoid this contentiousness because public history—interpretations of the past—are encoded not just in books and films, museums and monuments, but also in the land itself and in institutions like the National Park Service that administer the land. At the turn of the century, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis became embedded in the national parks. Then widely accepted by historians, Turner's frontier began with nature and wilderness. Once, his thesis proclaimed, the continent was a wilderness inhabited by Indians who did little to shape it or change it. History appeared with whites who carried progress and change from east to west, rearranging and shaping the continent as they proceeded. But as they went west, the civilization they carried was itself transformed, shaped, and given new form by contact with the wilderness. In Turner's history, American civilization became not just European civilization

in a new place. It was transformed by contact with American nature. We became "Nature's Nation."¹



In this Turnerian view most national parks represent either remnants of that original nature or else sites that commemorate episodes in the mutual transformation of land and civilization. This is part of their value and justification. Indian peoples in this Turnerian version are naturalized. They do not really have a history before whites. They might once have lived in this land, but they left the land

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1975); see Richard White and Patricia Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture*, edited by James Grossman (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994). The phrase "Nature's Nation" is stolen from Perry Miller, who was in no way or form a Turnerian. *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

in the parks as they had found it: pure and pristine. Some of the parks themselves subvert this popular Turnerian view. Only an Indian history that unfolded long before the arrival of whites, for example, could explain Mesa Verde. But on the whole, national parks stand for wilderness, the original nature of the continent.

By the late 1930s Turner's hold over academic history had weakened and, except among some Western historians, Turnerianism had largely disappeared in most university history departments by the 1950s. Over the last twenty years or so, but particularly in the last years, there has been a resurgence in Western history. In its academic origins the so-called New Western history was not primarily a challenge to Turner. Why challenge an interpretation that few academic historians actually held? It was instead a challenge to American historians who wrote American history as if the entire country could be reduced to the Northeast and, in a few unfortunate episodes, the South. The New Western history asserted that the West mattered in understanding American history.²

But a funny thing happened. The press picked up the New Western history and reporters assumed that

the New Western history was primarily about challenging Turner. They made the assumption not because academic historians believed in Turner, but because they themselves did. They were wrong about the academic controversy. But, in another sense, they became correct about a public controversy that followed. To the surprise of many New Western historians, and to many historians in general, Turner may have lost his hold over the academy, but he had maintained his hold over many Americans. True, they may have never heard of Turner, but they had assimilated his view of American history and made it their own. The national parks, like so many other symbols of American life, reinforced their understandings. To challenge Turner was to challenge, among other things, an interpretation of history prevalent in the popular understanding of the parks.

The New Western history in its account of the history of nature, of native peoples, of settlement, and of society, contradicts the Turnerian story and thus contradicts a popular understanding of the parks. The New Western history plots a different history. Most New Western historians see the West as a historical creation, not a natural fact. It was not a wilderness awaiting settlement. It was already inhabited by Indian peoples, Hispanics, and agents of various European states before Anglo Americans arrived. These peoples, particularly Indian peoples, had long been shaping and transforming the land-

² For examples of the New Western history, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987) Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

scape through fire, agriculture, hunting, and pastoralism. The western plot is less the mutual transformation of wilderness and American civilization than a scene of contact between numerous competing groups of uneven power. The story told by New Western historians involves more groups, more complexities, and more contingencies than the old frontier narrative which put white Americans on one side and Indian peoples and nature on the other.



In the old frontier narrative, the story begins when whites appear on the scene. The setting is a stable and, until then, unchanging wilderness, but it is harder to pinpoint a beginning in the New Western history. History is always already underway. This is particularly true of environmental history, which is a significant component of the New Western history.

Because so much of our understanding of the national parks is caught up in the idea of wilderness and wild nature, this history has implications for the parks. Parks, of course, do preserve wild habitat and even some wilderness in the sense of land unaltered by human activity. But if many areas of the parks were shaped by Indian use, then they were not pristine areas of wilderness. They were and remain contingent, historical landscapes. Furthermore, the changes that have occurred on the national park lands since the incorporation of the parks can only be un-

derstood in relation to the suppression of various Indian practices: burning, hunting, and grazing. Wilderness is not so much preserved as created.

Fire provides a specific and familiar example. It shaped the lands Europeans found as they moved westward. Much of North America is pyrogenic landscape.³ It is born in fire, both natural and human-set. Europeans noted this when they first settled on the eastern seaboard, and continued to notice it as they moved west during the nineteenth century. On September 23, 1804, near the Vermillion and Teton Rivers, for example, the journals of Lewis and Clark noted Indians lighting the prairie to signal their approach. The following spring, on March 6, 1805, the journals recorded:

Smokey all Day from the burning of the plains which was set on fire by the Minetarris for an early crop of grass as an endusement for buffalo.⁴

Modern scholars have made a cottage industry of studying these fires. Steve Pyne, who himself was for a long time a Grand Canyon fire fighter, has written a massive study of

³ For the impact of fire, see Stephen Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁴ Gary E. Moulton (ed.), *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987) vol. 3, Sept. 23, 1804, 3: 104, March 6, 1804, 3: 390.

the role of fire in shaping the continent.⁵ What these studies reveal is both the ubiquity and complexity of Indian-set fires. We cannot speak of them as if they were a homogeneous phenomenon with a single purpose. Their frequency, seasonality, purpose, and location all vary enormously.⁶ There was a range of rationales for burning in given areas. There were signal fires. There were fires to clear forest and fires to alter habitat, as when plains Indians burned to promote earlier growth of grasses. There were fires to open forests and make travel easier, and fire as a hunting technique. There was fire as a weapon in war, and there was accidental fire.

The skill and sophistication with which Indians used fire varied from group to group. Indians in California seem to have had a very sophisticated ability to use fire to create and maintain desired animal communities. In the forests of the Northwest, in the mountains of Montana and California Indian-set fires played major roles. Modern ecologists have re-evaluated the desirability of these fires and have in many cases suggested replicating the fires Indian peoples set, but they are not the first ones to

notice them. In the 1870s John Wesley Powell believed that the forest of the Rocky Mountains were threatened by Indian fires.

Everywhere throughout the Rocky Mountain Region the explorer away from the beaten paths of civilization meets with great areas of dead forests . . . in seasons of great drought the mountaineer sees the heavens filled with clouds of smoke. In the main these fires are set by Indians.

The fires, Powell concluded, "can be curtailed by the removal of Indians"; once protected from fires, the forests would increase in extent and value.⁷

Indians and their fires were, of course, removed from many of these forests, including those that became part of the National Park system. Their fires had shaped these forests, and the removal of fire has had significant impact on the health and viability of the forests themselves. Even when wildfires were later allowed to burn, they became buried in new forests with massive accumulations of fuel.

These kinds of examples with numerous local variations can be extended across the West, but the major point is relatively consistent and clear. The land that incoming Anglo-Americans regarded as wilderness awaiting human transformation was itself already a human landscape,

⁵ Pyne, *Fire in America*.

⁶ Henry Lewis, "Why Indians Burned: Specific Versus General Reasons," *Proceedings, Symposium and Workshop on Wilderness Fire* (Missoula, Montana: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service) November 15-18, 1983. *General Technical Report, INT-182* (Ogden, Utah: Intermountain Forest and Range Experiment Station), no date, 75-80.

⁷ Pyne, *Fire in America*, 80.

shaped by human actions in ways the newcomers often did not recognize. When, like Powell, they recognized the transformation, they disapproved and sought the removal of Indians.

The New Western history recasts both the setting and the early sections of Western history, but it also rearranges other parts of the narrative. Too often the history of the West is presented as one of unrelieved conflict and inevitable white triumph. Various parks and national monuments preserve sites of conflict. Others, such as Fort Vancouver, preserve sites of a different world, a mixed world, that we more often forget. In various places and for varying amounts of time there existed a mixed world which in some ways is undergoing a resurgence today as tribes reassert their legal rights in ways that may challenge a historical interpretation of the history of expansion encoded in the parks.

Turner gave white migration the inevitability of a natural force, flood, or a volcanic eruption. And we speak of it as flowing as if it were a river, or an eruption. And we, prisoners of our metaphors, expect that nothing could have stood in front of it. It was destined to overwhelm all who opposed it. Things could not have been different. When we pick our symbols of this encounter, we encapsulate our assumptions. We think of mounted warriors of the Great Plains confronting covered wagons. We think of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. We think of Wounded Knee. We think of constant and inevitable conflict.

Over large sections of the West, however, Indians and non-Indians worked out, at least for a while, an accommodation. Some encounters in the West indicate other possibilities. Dr. Charles Pickering is not a prominent name in the annals of American exploration. He was, in nineteenth-century terms, a naturalist; yet he gained appointment as an ethnologist to the Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42 (more commonly known as the Wilkes Expedition). He was to study humans, not plants or animals. His appointment yielded the book, *The Races of Men*. Only 100 copies of the original were published.⁸

In hindsight, joining the Wilkes expedition was one of those choices that Pickering might have better passed by. Lieutenant Charles Wilkes was not *the* only problem, but he was most definitely a problem. Wilkes, described rather forgivingly by one historian as a "paranoid martinet," had formidable skills as a navigator and chart maker, but he also imagined himself a competent scientist, and he hated the "scientifics" who recognized neither his talents or qualifications. That the commander of a scientific expedition hated sci-

⁸ I will cite J. Neilson Barry (ed.), "Pickering's Journey to Fort Colville in 1841," *Washington Historical Quarterly* (1929) 20:54-63, an excerpt from a second edition of *Races of Man*, rather than the hard-to-obtain volume itself. Charles Pickering, *The Races of Man and Their Geographical Distribution* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1848).

entifics might have served as storm warning, but it was hard to distinguish among Wilkes' hatreds and dislikes. There were so many of them. He brutalized his crew, browbeat his officers, slaughtered South Sea Islanders, and alienated most everyone he met. One of his midshipmen called him more of a monster than a man.⁹ All of this lay in the expedition's long bloody wake when the ships reached the Northwest Coast in 1841.

Charles Wilkes was the kind of man who seems a walking trump card when it comes to arguments about the inevitability of racial conflict in the West. He was impatient with what he regarded as inferior races and inferior classes. Wilkes operated in a customary world of Indian deficiency. He assumed there existed a chasm between peoples.¹⁰ This unbridgeable chasm is a lingering cliché that many of us still hold. Although we are likely to make the Indians virtuous where Wilkes saw them as vicious and deficient, we nonetheless presume a "clash of cultures." Wilkes, however, forms only the conventional background to an astonishing foreground that Pickering revealed in his book. Wilkes' certainty and utter

faith in his own prejudices makes Pickering stand out all the more clearly. Unlike Wilkes, Pickering could be pleasantly surprised by the unexpected.

When Wilkes, anchored in Puget Sound, ordered Lieutenant Robert E. Johnson to lead a foray across the Cascade Mountains and "explore the interior," he expected not only a reconnaissance of "wilderness" but an encounter with "savagery." That is why he ordered Pickering, the ethnologist, to accompany Johnson. The whole party consisted of seven men.¹¹ They accomplished nothing of real consequence. But on one side-trip of this obscure expedition, they experienced a small, but revealing jewel of a moment, one that deeply impressed Pickering. That moment came at the end of Johnson's journey as the returning party descended the western slope of the Cascades.

In 1841 physical culture was beginning to make organized exercise a part of American education. "Gymnastic exercises" was an elastic term in the early 1840s. It applied to the "more active species of exercise." Most likely, these gymnastic exercises were calisthenics that operated on a military model and demanded "military postures." But then, again, they also might have been simply sports or games of one kind or another.¹² There is no way to be sure,

⁹ William Goetzmann, *New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Great Age of Discovery* (New York: Viking, 1986), 276, 286.

¹⁰ Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, 5 volumes and atlas (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845), 4: 298-304, 311, 417.

¹¹ Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 4: 305

¹² Harvey Green, *Fit For America: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society* (New York: Pantheon Books,

but let's imagine that the gymnastic exercises were calisthenics.

At their last encampment, twenty miles from Puget Sound, the Johnson party met some Nisqually Indians who were camped nearby for purposes of their own. And at this encampment it occurred to someone "to [initiate] the Indians in gymnastic exercises." There on a prairie in the shadow of Mount Rainier were American sailors, marines, and scientists in military posture with Nisqually men and women lined up alongside them. And they all began to do synchronized gymnastic exercises. The Indians, Pickering said, "entered into the sport very willingly and with some spirit."¹³

We can take that moment of Indians and whites, "synchronized and spirited," and use it as a prism for the remainder of the expedition. From Pickering's account we can imagine a set of circumstances and possibilities in which Indians and whites exercising and praying on the prairies seemed ordinary instead of an odd and surprising moment of harmony where we generally expect to find conflict. Pickering and Johnson's travels recorded a mixed world in which the later categories and boundaries of white and Indian, conqueror and conquered had not yet hardened. Pickering saw a world, a set of possibilities, that Wilkes seemed congenitally unable to see.

1986) 85-87, 96, 97; "Gymnastic Exercises," *Journal of Health* (January 1830), 132.

¹³ Barry, "Pickerings Journey," 63.

Johnson's party explored lands already long, if sparsely, settled by Indians and more recently settled by smaller number of other peoples: some Spaniards, British and Scots, Canadians, Hawaiians, Indians from the East, and a few Americans. This settlement had already produced a group of children of mixed descent. But these divisions into whites, Indians, and mixed-race were all Pickering's distinctions. He was told that "no idea of difference of race such as is recognized by Europeans, ever enters into the heads of the natives."¹⁴

The "natives" were hardly a simple lot. Johnson, Pickering, and their companions met Indian women gathering clams and Indian men fishing for salmon. In other lodges they saw buffalo robes, evidence of hunts made eastward across the Rockies. At Spalding's mission, Pickering saw Indian farms and farmers whom Spalding characterized as "generally being an exceedingly industrious people." A few days later he saw four generations of another Indian family gathered under a canopy "hardly sufficient to shelter a sheep." He saw lodges made of mats, and tipis like those of the plains, and Indians living in log cabins. All of these diverse people were Indians, and around them were Hudson's Bay Company forts as well as American Board missions.¹⁵ In short, there was, on the eve of American settlement, a complicated world already well in

¹⁴ Barry, "Pickerings Journey," 61.

¹⁵ Barry, "Pickerings Journey," 54-63

place. Everywhere there was exchange and interchange. This was a mixed world. These were people fully aware of differences, but disinclined to structure these differences around race.

I introduce Pickering, his gymnastic Indians, and his seemingly inconsequential journey to underline a simple point about the Western past—the American past. It was not only contingent, but it also contained possibilities that we forget because they cannot always be recognized in the present. The Western past is fuller than our popular histories make of it. Pickering's response does not, of course, erase Wilkes' more typical and scornful reaction. Moments of gleeful surprise do not erase Little Big Horn, or Wounded Knee, or innumerable other conflicts and atrocities that scar the Western legacy. But that is not the point. The point is that this West was a world that harbored both

gymnastics and annihilation.

There are remnants of this world, too, within the national parks. The legacies of this mixed world are part of the history that the National Park Service should preserve and interpret, because they are for the most part the histories of the parks themselves. There is a mixed world that in a sense has continued within the parks. Today, Indians use park lands for hunting, for gathering, and for religious ceremonies, years after these lands have been withdrawn into the national park system. What the New Western history suggests then is an opportunity for parks to see themselves as historical—and not simply natural—sites. More importantly, it offers the National Park Service the opportunity to recognize that history involves the conflict and accommodation of many groups, and not the inevitable dominance of a single group.



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