

American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest.

By Gregory H. Nobles. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997. Pp. xvi, 286. Illustrations, bibliographical essay, index. \$24.00.)

Readers seeking a straightforward synthesis of the exploding historical literature on North American frontiers will find exactly what they are looking for in this book. Gregory H. Nobles seems to have familiarized himself with virtually everything that scholars have written on the subject. Only two decades ago many historians considered frontier studies essentially dead. It was a field dominated by the legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner, the scholar who posited in an 1893 speech that the impact of settling and resettling supposedly empty lands had made the United States into an exceptional nation. Turner's adherents published a pile of scholarly monographs that attempted to demonstrate the validity of his interpretation everywhere from colonial New England to Australia. Subsequent critics attacked Turner and his followers, pointing to evidence that undermined their sometimes unsubtle equation of the frontier with democracy, equality, and individualism. By the 1970s the argument had become stale. What more was there to be said on the subject?

Plenty, as Nobles's book makes clear. A generation of scholars has revitalized the field by thinking of frontier studies in terms of multicultural encounters. They have emphasized the roles of women, Indians, Hispanics, Africans, and others in both carrying out and resisting the expansion of the United States. Above all, they have argued that frontier history must be understood as a story of often savage and duplicitous conquest rather than benign settlement.

Nobles discusses these historiographical debates in an effective introduction. He then writes a narrative of frontier encounters that begins with the initial arrival of English-speaking peoples in eastern North America in the early 1600s and ends with the official closing of the frontier in 1890. The chapters are lively and efficient presentations of the evidence and interpretations in the recent literature. Nobles strives for balance both in content and tone; there is no dichotomy between good and bad guys. *American Frontiers* is not a polemic. Instead of attacking other historians, Nobles concentrates on constructing a reliable and readable story. Judged on these terms, his book is a success.

For all the sound and fury of revisionism, however, Nobles's book is surprisingly similar in its overall contours to the frontier syntheses written decades ago by historians such as Frederick Merk and Ray Allen Billington. He is more critical of American policies; he takes Indians seriously, not just as people in the way of American expansion; and he devotes considerable attention to such relatively new subjects as African Americans and environmentalism. Still, *American Frontiers* tells a very familiar tale: how, for good or ill, English-speaking peoples in the course of a couple of centuries occu-

pied and transformed most of the North American continent into one of the most dynamic and powerful nations in the history of the world. In its basic outline this narrative has a power far beyond our ability to bend it to our purposes, no matter how much we argue about what we ought to call it.

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The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917. By Jon Gjerde. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. Pp. xiii, 426. Maps, tables, notes, index. \$39.95.)

The Middle West has the well-deserved reputation of being distinctly “American.” This designation covers a range of distinctions, of which not-being-like-Europe is critical. But how could it be that the region is so different from Europe when so many of its people came from Europe, and not so very long ago? For Jon Gjerde the answer lies in a convergence of attitudes and values. The pioneer settlers were joined after the 1840s by millions of immigrants from Europe. Gjerde is especially concerned with the largest and least studied group, the Germans, and their interaction with the Yankees. The book, although it touches upon many midwestern points, is centered in a one-hundred-mile radius around Dubuque, Iowa, which itself was the epicenter of Germania.

Gjerde ranges widely over social, political, and intellectual themes, with much on farming, religion, marriages, and children, and with some attention to education and occupation. Migration is a major theme, as he demonstrates how communities reassembled themselves in the New World. Would they isolate themselves and echo the old country (as the French did in Canada), or would they interact with and learn from other groups, change and Americanize themselves? Would America be balkanized with groups hating and killing each other? (Gjerde does chronicle the intergroup violence, but there was not very much.) The Germans had a strong tendency to become farmers. Indeed, they tended to stay in agriculture long after other groups moved on to the towns and cities, so the chapters on rural life are especially revealing. The Germans were strikingly religious, although the Lutheran half warred with the Catholic half whenever it was not battling heretical Lutherans or dangerous secularists. The Scandinavians are well represented, and Gjerde contrasts their lifestyle and Lutheranism with that of the Germans. He is effective in showing how the immigrants built their own uniquely American churches and used them as a base to establish family roles and moral