

"Are you Mr. Krutch?"

"I am."

Her face fell.

"But you do not look as . . . as . . . depressed as I expected."<sup>3</sup> I have many versions of this story, in which people come up after I've spoken to tell me that I am nowhere near as depressed, glum, bitter, or angry as they had expected, or hoped. An advance reputation as the Wicked Witch of Western History can leave audiences easily disarmed, when the author surprises everyone by showing up with a personality that bears a much closer resemblance to Judy Garland's Dorothy than to Margaret Hamilton's witch.

The desire to transcend some of these misapprehensions led me to develop a four-word summary, exemplary in brevity and directness, of the changes in this field of history. Responding to the questions of a skilled interviewer from *People* magazine (a periodical with an underrecognized potential for bringing professorial understandings to a wider audience), I was able to pack the New Western History into four words beginning with "c": continuity, convergence, conquest, and complexity.<sup>4</sup>

### CONTINUITY

Twenty years ago, right at the heart of the dominant version of Western history, stood a big discontinuity between the nineteenth-century West and the twentieth-century West. As Frederick Jackson Turner had declared, the frontier closed in 1890. Frontier stories came to a halt; in the end of the Indian wars and the creation of national forests and parks, frontier issues reached resolution; the West lost its distinctiveness. These assumptions remained orthodox in college history textbooks into the 1990s.\* Nearly all of the textbooks stopped indexing any usages of the word "West" after 1890 because, to their authors, the frontier was the West, the West was the frontier, and both had departed as significant subjects of study before the twentieth century started. Most unhappily, this closing of the frontier and the West, in a stroke, declared the work of Western historians irrelevant to any

\* See "The Case of the Premature Departure," the third essay in this volume.

understanding of the West today. To study the frontier was to study an era that had definitively and solidly ended, with no narrative or causal ties connecting the past to the present.

Nearer the soil, Western life told quite a different story. There was more homesteading after 1890 than before. A number of extractive industries—timber, oil, coal, and uranium—went through their principal booms and busts after 1890. If one went solely by the numbers, the nineteenth-century westward movement was the tiny, quiet prelude to the much more sizable movement of people into the West in the twentieth century. Even more important, any number of conflicts and dilemmas, stirred up in the nineteenth century, remained to haunt Westerners in the twentieth century. Conflicts over water use, public lands, boom/bust economies, local authority versus federal authority, relations between Mexico and the United States (as well as between Mexican Americans and Anglos), Indian land and water claims, as well as freedom of religious practice—most of the issues that had agitated the nineteenth-century West continued to stir things up a century later. The assertion of continuity in Western history, along with the discounting of the belief in "the end of the frontier," could reunite the pieces of a fragmented story and help Westerners steer their way through dilemmas which seemed to come from nowhere but which actually came with long pedigrees.

### CONVERGENCE

In earlier versions of Western history, the doings of white people, especially white men, controlled center stage. With attention fixed on the westward movement of white Americans, the older Western history could only recognize Indian people as obstacles or barriers to the big process of frontier expansion, while Chinese and Mexican workers could find relevance only as they contributed to the building of railroads and the developing of agriculture. White Americans were the leading men (and, much more rarely, women) of Western history.

In practice, the American West looked dramatically different. The West was, in truth, a place of extraordinary convergence, one of the great meeting zones of the planet. In the Trans-Mississippi West, peo-

ple from all over the planet met, jockeyed for position with each other, and tried to figure each other out. The westward movement of white Americans was unquestionably important, but so was the westward movement of African Americans, the northward movement from Mexico, the eastward movement from Asia, and the prior presence of Indian people.

### CONQUEST

The word "frontier" was the essential term for Western historians in earlier generations. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner wisely passed up the opportunity to pin down the term, but its meaning was, in fact, quite clear. If historians were willing to merge their point of view with that of English-speaking white people, heading into the interior from the Atlantic Coast. From that angle of vision, the frontier was the edge of civilization, the area where white domination had not yet been consummated. Saturated with nationalistic pride, the emotional and ideological associations of the frontier had the curious effect of exempting United States history from world history. In popular understanding, places like South Africa, the Belgian Congo, Algeria, New Zealand, and Australia had unmistakably undergone invasions and conquests, and the United States, meanwhile, had a frontier, an ever-expanding zone of freedom, opportunity, and democracy.

As Western historians grew more uncomfortable with the problems built into the term "frontier," a number of enterprising souls set forth to salvage it, trying to redeem it for continued use by reducing its ethnocentricity and increasing its inclusivity. My own preference was to give up on these time-consuming exercises in redefinition and, instead, to place Western American history back into global history with an explicit and honest use of the word "conquest." In the last five hundred years, the biggest story on the planet has been the movement of Europeans from Europe into every other continent. Like many other parts of the planet, the American West had been transformed by this story, as the seizure of resources and the imposition of colonial dominance, along with often more benign processes of collaboration, intermarriage, and syncretism, have reshaped the lives

of native people. Calling this process "conquest" cleared away the fog.\*

### COMPLEXITY

The desire for a telling of Western history in which good guys are easily distinguished from bad guys is deep and persistent. Mythmakers have shaped thinking all over the planet; residents of other nations, as well as many Americans, want the Old West to be the place in the past where we go to escape complexity. Black hats should mark the heads of villains, and white hats the heads of heroes, and yet the moral reality of Westerners makes gray hats the appropriate headgear. Human behavior in the American West, both past and present, has shown the same level of moral complexity as human behavior in any other part of the planet. To make a comparable statement about the South would surely elicit a heartfelt "Ho hum."

Describing the West as morally complex, I have had many opportunities to observe, will elicit a chorus of dismay and protest against such a negative point of view. Thus, a major project of the New Western History had to be the assertion that benefits often came packaged with injuries, good intentions could lead to regrettable outcomes, and the negative aspects of life wove themselves into a permanent knot with the positive aspects. The deeply frustrating lesson of history in the American West and elsewhere is this: human beings can be a mess—contentious, conflict loving, petty, vindictive, and cruel!—and human beings can manifest grace, dignity, compassion, and understanding in ways that leave us breathless.

~~Underlining all four "s" was the assertion that the history of the American West was important, and it is a source of the greatest satis-~~

\*Curiously, the rejection of the word "frontier" set off a wonderfully unnecessary scholarly debate over the comparative validity of analytic preferences for place or process. The New Western History, the advocates of process contended, unjustly prohibited the study of the frontier process and required that all our attention must now go to the study of region, or place. In fact, the goal of substituting the word "conquest" for the word "frontier" was to have a better grounded discussion of the process that shaped the West. The squabble over place versus process was, as my colleague Richard White has observed, one of the few scholarly debates to die purely of its own fatigue, a very encouraging precedent.