

'FRONTIER' REALITIES

Frederick Jackson Turner continues to receive the credit for developing "the frontier thesis" - namely, that the availability of land was what Bob Clancy summarised as "the cutting edge of American civilization and determined its democracy, its individualism, its culture."¹

In fact, the elements of that thesis were laid out by Henry George 10 years before the young historian presented his address to the American Historical Society in 1893.

In 1883, George wrote *Social Problems*². In this, he spotlighted issues which were not only of relevance in his day, but which would repay study today for the insights they offer into modern social problems.

As a journalist who had roamed the western frontier in search of stories, George acquired a deep appreciation of the interaction between man, his culture and the natural environment. He was to distill some of those insights in *Social Problems*, including this proposition:

"All that we are proud of in national life and national character comes primarily from our background of unused land."

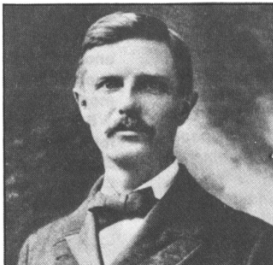
It was, he said, "the virtue of new soil, the freedom of opportunity given by the possibility of expansion, that has here transmuted into wholesome human growth material that, had it remained in Europe, might have been degraded and dangerous..."

Turner is credited with chronicl-

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ing the closing of the frontier. Yet George, in 1893, was already sending out the signals that the frontier was about to be closed: "There is no farther West. Our advance has reached the Pacific, and beyond the Pacific is the East, with its teeming millions."

But it was the genius of George that he was not deceived by



• Frederick Jackson Turner

appearances. He pointed out that this "closure" was nothing more than legal formality: it did not mean that there was no more land for others to occupy.

All that it meant was that the last tracts were about to be fenced off, with the speculators even then moving north-westward into Canada and southward to Mexico, to seek out the soil on which others would later need to live. He drew the parallels with Europe:

"The social pressure which forces on our shores this swelling tide

of immigration arises not from the fact that land of Europe is all in use, but that it is all appropriated. That will soon be our case as well. Our land will not all be used; but it will all be 'fenced in'".

George understood the social significance of that closure: "And, correlatively, one of the most momentous events that could happen to the modern world would be the ending of this possibility of westward expansion".

He concluded his analysis with this statement: "What I want to point out is that we are very soon to lose one of the most important conditions under which our civilization has been developing - that possibility of expansion over virgin soil that has given scope and freedom to American life ...".

This, then, was the framework waiting for embellishment. And along came Mr Turner, 22 when George's thesis was published.

Ten years later, the two men were present at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Turner delivered his address entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". George was attending one of the first conferences on the Single Tax.

Turner received the credit for this thesis: but Henry George had planted the intellectual seeds.

¹"How to Make an Endless Frontier", *Land and Liberty*, July-Aug, 1990, p.62.

²*Social Problems* (1883): New York; Robert Schakenbach Foundation, 1981, Ch.3.

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paying for independence from Britain to the vanquished. In the process, the concept of voluntary association was thereafter destroyed; force, rather than the inherent justice of positive law, would become the means of holding the United States together.

What is so troubling to me is that not only have we ignored the true lessons of history, most of what is taught in our public schools that passes for history is either half-truth or myth. For example, very few of the framers of the U.S. constitution believed in democracy or widespread participatory government; they were elitist and conservative, anxious to preserve and expand the privilege they had for so long enjoyed. When the North American frontier was set-

led a century later, the true extent of these privileges brought misery and poverty to millions of immigrants - often worse than what they had left in Europe or Asia or Africa.

The social democracies have engaged in 45 years of centralized intervention. This has had a socialistic flavour in many of the European states; in the United States and Canada the experiment is thought of as Liberalism. Decades of massive government spending and heavy taxation of those who produce the wealth in these societies have only pulled us closer than ever before to becoming societies of haves and have nots - despite an increase in productive capabilities that could provide a level of material well-being undreamed of two generations ago.

We have no one but ourselves to blame.