

IN 1893 at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a young historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, delivered an address before the American Historical Society. It was entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History".

His thesis was that the frontier was the cutting edge of American civilization and determined its democracy, its individualism, its culture.

This process took place as settlers pushed westward into the expanse of the frontier where land could be obtained cheaply or even free.

At this same Columbian Exposition Henry George attended one of the earliest Single Tax conferences. It does not appear that George or Turner were aware of one another's presence there. George most likely did not know the 32-year-old history professor, but Turner knew about George and was influenced by his views on the importance of free land.

Turner's short essay (later expanded into a book) had a greater impact than any other single work on the interpreta-

How to make an endless frontier

BOB CLANCY ON A BOLD CHALLENGE

tion of American history. Up to then, historians did not quite know what to make of the multifaceted mosaic of "American history." Here was a clear and plausible unified theory.

Turner came at a time just as the frontier was closing. He was not the first or only one to notice this. Others were concerned about it - and not just Americans - Lord Bryce, for instance. But Turner put it all together. He had his critics but his thesis held its own.

Now the whole Turnerian hypothesis is being challenged. A historian, Patricia Nelson Limerick - herself a westerner - has written a book, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*.*

Instead of heroic trail-blazing she sees an often sordid story of greed and conquest. She sees

complexity rather than simplicity, a fragmented set of stories instead of an onward march, dependence on federal government rather than independence.

Ms Limerick complains that Turner has written from the "white male" point of view and did not give the plight of women and minorities due attention - Indians, blacks, Chinese, Mexicans.

Many other historians, in rebellion against Turner, and in an exercise of "deconstruction" that is now in vogue, are also exhuming bad deeds of frontier times. But these are hardly new revelations. We knew about outlaws, feuds, gold rushes, Indian decimation and the plight of other minorities.

And, asks Ms Limerick, "what about land monopoly and land speculation?" What indeed! This certainly happened (and continues to happen) and it hastened the closing of the frontier. Jefferson thought there was enough land in America to provide settlement for hundreds of years. Instead the frontier was closed less than three-fourths of a century after his death.

But despite all that, an opportunity was offered by the expanse of the American frontier that was unique in history. It offered multitudes of immigrants and people from the east coast a

* *The Legacy of Conquest: the Unbroken Past of the American West*, by Patricia Nelson Limerick. W.W. Norton & Co., New York and London, 1987.

MUGABE 'TIME BOMB'

PRESIDENT Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, fresh from electoral victory, is facing the demand for drastic action to satisfy the land hunger of millions of farmers.

Britain played a key role in leading Rhodesia to black majority rule: but the price of political freedom was an agreement that left most of the best land in the hands of a white minority.

"Either the government reacts to it or we are sitting on a time bomb for revolution, because the cornerstone of the revolution was the question of land," warns Saieth Dube, political commissar for the ruling party in Bulawayo, in a *Wall Street Journal* article (March 27).

'CLIMATE' FUND TO RESCUE RAIN FORESTS



• Gro Harlem Brundtland

ALL the industrial nations will have to pay billions of dollars in "rent" to protect the world's rain forests, their genetic resources and ability to stabilise the world's climate, says President Virgilio Barco of Columbia. This was an "ecological debt to pay to mankind."

The Prince of Wales has already called for "mechanisms of compensation" for countries that controlled the destruction of their forests. Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former Norwegian Prime Minister, believes that the developed nations should pay 0.1% of their GNP to a "climate fund" to finance curbs on "greenhouse gases".

None of these advocates has yet proposed internal social and economic reforms that would probably do more for conservation of

the environment, and the quality of life of third world citizens, than the simple transfer of "rents" to developing countries.

SPECULATION:- Hundreds of squatters have settled in the desert hills, hoping the land will increase in value if a border crossing is built in Anapra, Mexico.

The population of this little town exploded from 300 families to over 1,000 families in the few months following the announcement that it may have a border crossing into New Mexico. But the mayor of nearby Ciudad Juarez warns: "The rights of those people who lived in Anapra from the beginning, 16 years ago, will be protected. They'll get title to their land. But those squatters moving in now will be removed - forcibly if need be."

safety-valve when they were hard pressed by economic conditions.

Ms. Limerick says it is America's "creation myth" that the availability of land attracted people and that a pioneer spirit moulded life on the frontier. But 19th century observers and participants saw it happen. Why deny, more than a century later, that it happened? By focusing on the particular mishaps and misdeeds, Ms. Limerick and the other deconstructionists do not see the forest for the trees.

The people who migrated west were ordinary people, warts and all, seeking a new life. Taking a

FLIP FLOPS

NAVAJO Indian Chief Peter MacDonald Sr denies that he attempted to cheat his tribe through the deal on a 491,000-acre ranch, which was bought for \$26.2m and then immediately resold in what investigators call a "land flip" to the tribe for \$33.4m. The tribe seeks \$24m in damages from their chief and his co-defendants.

perspective that is less myopic, the civilization built up was, in spite of everything, a phenomenal accomplishment.

As for what to do with a society after the frontier is gone, Turner thought the government would have to become more active and involved in making up to people the benefits previously offered by the frontier.

Indeed, this has come about, what with the extensive welfare programs undertaken by the government.

Henry George had a better idea. Recreate frontier conditions by publicly collecting the rent of land through land value taxation. This would cause much good land to be disgorged by monopolists and speculators. Persons seeking land for homes, farms, businesses, would find it much easier to obtain.

A reform like this would not depend on the accidents of history and geography, but on a knowledgeable and rational creation of a perpetual frontier.

Deadly deal springs into life

WESTMINSTER Council — Premier Margaret Thatcher's favourite London borough, which has cut its spending to one of the lowest levels in Britain — sold three cemeteries in 1987 for 15p. That triggered a political row, and now the current owners say they would agree to sell the land back for 15p plus their expenses — about £5m!