

Conference Report

Crucibles of Cultures. North American Frontiers 1750–1820

Conference held in New Orleans, 18-19 November 1994.

Sponsored by The Institute of Early American History & Culture,
the Historic New Orleans Collection and the Newberry Library, Chicago.

This gathering of pre-eminent North American frontier scholars was convened in the huge Orleans Ballroom on the third floor of the ornate Bourbon Orleans Hotel, in the heart of the French Quarter, New Orleans. Much about New Orleans is foreboding. Not a lot in New Zealand prepares you for main street, New Orleans. Finding the Bourbon Orleans hotel was quite a challenge; and the French Quarter is something else, especially after dark.

The occasion of the conference was, if only implicitly, a centennial commemoration of Frederick Jackson Turner's controversial Frontier thesis. As most will know, this thesis advanced the western edges of American settlement as critical sites of defining encounter amongst the many and disparate peoples moving across the continent. These western edges were also advanced as key formative zones for the understanding of American history.

While the ghost of Turner roamed freely, the conference largely proceeded, it seemed to me, on the basis that Turner and his thesis were long buried. Most presenters made some reference to Turner. But the recurring and most substantive critique heard was largely repeated through omission. When delivering the final conference commentary, for example, Richard White of the University of Washington described an exceedingly complex frontier historiography which, through all its complexity, no longer turned on Turner or his thesis.

A contested frontier

In keeping with current frontier historiography, then, most papers identified Turner's 'front side of early America's past' as, in fact, a long-contested cultural terrain. The *frontier* may well be located somewhere on the edges of a long peopling process of the west. But it was also a place, symbolic or real, where multiple worlds were in contact, in conflict and in exchange with each other.

The African-American scholar William Hart of Middlebury College, for example, focused on the New York frontier of 1750–1775. He emphasised the mediating roles of black go-betweens within a dynamic process of race, status and identity mutability. John Mack Faragher of Yale University saw the pioneer communities of the lower Missouri valley as too motley to call. Elizabeth Perkins of Centre College suggested that cultural distinctions were also too difficult to discern, much less to represent, amidst the processes of identity forma-

tion and interaction in the Ohio Valley of the revolution era.

Gender dimensions to these multiple worlds of contact and exchange were examined by Bruce White of the University of Minnesota, in the context of Great Lakes trade. White was followed by Lucy Murphy of Northern Illinois University who also focused on the Great Lakes region, from 1740 to 1832, describing a complexity of cross-cultural and gender relations.

Some emphasis was also paid to issues of land acquisition, ownership, and appropriation. Stephen Aron of Princeton University surveyed the processes of land privatisation and perception on the Trans-Appalachian frontier, while Charles Brooks of Texas A & M University discussed issues of changing land use, ecology and representation on the Western New York frontier.

The issue of frontier as an empowering (or disempowering) domain received some attention with Jane Merrit of the University of Washington speaking about the power of language, cultural meanings and the colonial encounter on the Pennsylvania frontier. Andrew Clayton of Miami University examined the rituals (and multiple meanings) of frontier public ceremonies in Trans Appalachia from 1787 to 1815.

Clearly, historians now prefer to explore frontiers as creative arenas, where new forms of social and political organisation might be said to have developed. Thus, the aim of the conference was to probe the boundaries of current research and to advance the 'frontline of frontier scholarship'. And this aim was, in my view, largely achieved, though with one notable omission.

A native American perspective

My interest in the conference was primarily sparked by the involvement of the Chicago Newberry Library, which I was later able to visit. This marvellous research facility, which includes the Darcy McKnickle Centre for the History of the American Indian, is headed by Professor Fred Hoxie who, I knew, would be attending the New Orleans conference. Having read a lot of his material (his field is Native America) I was excited at the prospect of meeting him, and perhaps some of his Newberry team.

I was also interested in meeting Native American scholars who might, I thought, be present at the conference, putting forward a Native American view of the frontier. Unfortunately, Native American speakers were not identified as such and were, as a result, difficult to

spot, as were those (if any) attending as interested observers, as was I.

I had been advised however, at the University of Arizona Native American Studies program, that this particular conference was possibly the wrong one to attend. Native American historians and scholars were more likely to arrive in numbers at conferences organised by groups like ethnohistorians.

Be that as it may, this conference did offer an opportunity to participate in a particular and interesting historical discourse. This was a discourse within which I considered some Native American scholars might want to locate themselves, engage and shape from within, more so because there is an important indigenous dimension to frontier studies. Several Native American scholars were present. I was pleased to meet Duane Champagne, of the University of California Los Angeles, who edits the *American Indian Culture Research Journal*.

Many speakers did incorporate Native American history into their papers, or used Native American situations to develop their broader themes. R David Edmunds of the Indiana University discussed the mediating roles of Native American entrepreneurs, focusing specifically on the Potowatomi Metis of the old north-west and Kansas. Sara Parker of the University of California Santa Cruz introduced the notion of a transforming cultural matrix by examining Cherokee land purchases. Jill Lapore of Yale University addressed the

vexed issue of popular imagination, competing sources and constructions of history. Her paper focused on King Philip's War and the place of that war in the American imagination, founded on documentary tradition, as opposed to differing constructions which might arise from visits to key Native American sites of that conflict.

However, the presence of Native American scholars themselves extrapolating tribal perceptions of land onto this frontier discourse did not happen at this conference. Nor has it really happened in New Zealand. But our frontier historiography is, like the country itself which Pakeha first traversed, small by comparison with America. I greatly appreciated later opportunities when visiting Chicago and San Francisco to talk with Native American scholars on such historical issues. I was pleased to see that Native American scholars are keen to meet and share views with their Maori counterparts.

This *Crucibles of Cultures* conference was interesting and challenging. While it might take time for some of us to adapt to the functional language of American historical scholarship, nothing but good can come of New Zealand historians continuing to travel out to these edges of American historical discourse which do represent key formative zones for the understanding of American, and perhaps New Zealand, history.

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