
Walter Prescott Webb: Pioneering the Great Plains and Beyond

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Walter Prescott Webb (1888-1963) was a twentieth century historian whose writings, particularly *The Great Plains* (1931), revolutionized views of the American West by demonstrating how man had adapted technology and institutions to a new environment and by describing the West, not simply as an idea or a process, but as a distinct geographic region. In 1952, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association chose *The Great Plains* as “the most important book in the first half of the twentieth century by a living American historian.”¹ A later work, *The Great Frontier* (1951), applied Webb’s conception of the frontier to the entire Western Hemisphere and sought to identify the effects of this “world frontier” upon European and global history. In addition to his important contributions to the history of the American West and to the study of the frontier in world history, Webb did seminal work in a number of other historical fields, including environmental history and the study of comparative frontiers.

The story of Walter Prescott Webb is a “remarkable intellectual odyssey” and during a career which spanned several decades, he would influence the study of western history as much as any other historian, including Frederick Jackson Turner.² In order to understand Webb and to evaluate his books and views, one must examine his personal background, for as Western historian Richard Etulain states, “Webb’s work was highly personal, as much as that of any recent historian.”³ What were the most significant influences on his life and work?

The greatest influence upon Webb’s professional life and writings was undoubtedly his own personal experience on the frontier. Seeking to escape the difficult economy of the Deep South in the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Webb’s parents, Casner P. Webb and Mary Elizabeth Kyle, headed westward in search of opportunity. Like countless others during that era, the “family was caught in the magnetic pull of the westward movement. Like a small cog in a human machine of migrants, they moved in stops and starts toward

a new land.”⁴ A few years after their first move, a “second phase of their westward trek” brought them to “the piney woods of Panola County in East Texas.”⁵ It was here that Webb was born on April 3, 1888. Then, in 1893 (the year in which Turner delivered his address on the American frontier), Webb’s family relocated again. This time they moved from “the forested Piney Woods region of East Texas . . . to Stephens County and the Western Cross Timbers, a belt of blackjack and post oak which reached south from Oklahoma and divided the Grand and Blackland prairies from the plains of West Texas. It was in this region on the edge of the Plains that the family made their permanent home.”⁶ Webb’s biographer, Necah Stewart Furman, states that this relocation was “a significant move for the Webbs, one that carried them from the humid woodlands of old America into a new arid environment. In East Texas from whence they came the terrain and cotton-culture economy made it merely an extension of the Old South, but the dry plains of West Texas created an obvious dichotomy.”⁷ Webb once stated, “There is no confusion in my mind as to what happened in the two contrasting regions,”⁸ and in his 1957 address as President of The American Historical Association Webb half-jokingly claimed that his research for *The Great Plains* had begun at age four when his parents moved him to the arid plains of Stephens County.⁹ Later, in a more serious mood Webb wrote, “I have never been able to get away from the dry country. I returned to it intellectually after having escaped it physically. I have sought to understand what I hated and feared.”¹⁰ Referencing this comment, the regionalist historian Robert L. Dorman, wrote that “the closing of the Texas frontier (was) the true ghost which haunted him.”¹¹

Although proponents of the “New Western History” such as Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White accuse Webb of romanticizing the frontier and the frontier experience, his childhood was marked by its harsh realities.¹² During this period of time, his father “chose to lead the semi-itinerant life of a part-time farmer and schoolteacher, setting up shop wherever and whenever the local citizens and seasonal harvests allowed.”¹³ For young Walter Webb this meant hard work, isolation, and frustratingly, for an intelligent boy, the inability to attend school on a regular basis. Regarding this frustration, Tobin perceptively notes, “For a boy whose exposure to formal education was to be at best irregular, impressions drawn from life became all the more important.”¹⁴ These impressions from his youth, as much as any formal learning and research later in his life, would shape his thinking. “Webb’s intellectual development reflected some of the limitations inherent in the

social conditions prevailing in a remote segment of an outlying state. Some of those limitations had a permanent impact and made it difficult for him to function as an intellectual or a professional historian.”¹⁵ Yet, in spite of these early obstacles, Webb was through personal character, determination, and hard work not only able to overcome these limitations, but to become a historian of international reputation.

A second important influence in Webb’s life was the relationship he developed with a wealthy New York businessman named William E. Hinds. Isolated by the circumstances of his life, Webb sought escape by reading anything that he was able to find. At one point he purchased a subscription to a magazine that interested him called *The Sunny South*. Not long afterwards, young Walter wrote a letter, which appeared in the May 14, 1904 issue. “It was a simple letter, as straightforward and brief as an honest, teen-age, undereducated farm boy might be expected to write. In it, Webb said he wanted to be a writer and to get an education, and could someone tell him how.”¹⁶ William Hinds saw that letter and decided to make an investment. “Over the next few years Webb received encouragement and practical help in the form of books and magazines from a patron he never saw, and, when he eventually went on to State University, the loaned funds he needed for the first two years came from the same source.”¹⁷ The impact of this investment upon Webb’s development is incalculable. We get a glimpse of the significance of this association upon his life in a *Harper’s* article published by Webb at the time he was establishing the William E. Hinds Scholarship Fund at the University of Texas. Webb wrote, “I owe this man a great debt. It would mean a lot to me if I could report to him how a long-shot investment he made in Texas finally turned out.”¹⁸

A third key influence upon Webb was Lindley Miller Keasbey, head (and sole professor) of the Department of Institutional History, at the University of Texas at Austin. Concerning the impact which Keasbey had upon his intellectual life, Webb wrote that, “It was Keasbey who gave me an understanding for and appreciation for the relationship between an environment and the civilization resting upon it; it was Keasbey who taught me, and many others, to begin with the geology or geography, and build upon this foundation of the superstructure of the flora, fauna, and anthropology, arriving at last at the modern civilization growing out of this foundation.”¹⁹ The influence made upon Webb’s development by Keasbey’s conceptual approach to research cannot be overstated. Tobin writes that, “For Webb, it had a special attraction: for a man arriving late on the scene as far as intellectual inquiry was concerned and disappointed in his early hopes, the Keasbey approach

seemed to provide both a comprehensive vision of how human society had evolved and a superb method of investigation.”²⁰ Keasbey provided Webb not only with a methodology and framework for understanding his past, but an outline for communicating his ideas to his audience.

Before examining Webb’s writing style and his works, two other things need to be considered. First, what was Webb’s relationship to Frederick Jackson Turner? Second, was Webb a Progressive historian? Concerning Turner, there can be no doubt that Webb knew of him and his work. At one point in his studies, Webb’s academic adviser, Fred Duncalf, asked Turner to provide a scholarship for Webb at Harvard. Turner declined citing Webb’s age (he was forty-three) and he instead spent the rest of his career, except for one year at the University of Chicago, in Austin at the University of Texas.²¹ While some have viewed Webb as a disciple of Turner or think that his ideas came from Turner, Webb said that he believed that he came to his ideas independently, citing several reasons in support of this claim. First, Webb himself stated, “I had never had a course in western history. I never saw Turner. At the time I began writing *The Great Plains*, I had never read the Turner essay and I refrained from reading it until I had completed the study.”²² Second, there is little in Turner’s writings to suggest that he anticipated the ideas developed in *The Great Plains*. Turner’s frontier, located east of the Mississippi, differed significantly from the one described by Webb. If a common link did exist, Webb believed it was to be found in the work of the Italian economist Achille Loria (1857-1943) who was not only a mentor to Keasbey, but whom Turner cited in his essay on the significance of the frontier. It is also interesting to note that Keasbey had translated one of Loria’s books, *The Economic Foundations of Society* (1904), into English. Webb’s conclusion on this matter was that he “was on a collateral line from the European scholars through Keasbey rather than from those scholars by way of Turner.”²³

When considering Webb’s relationship with the Progressive historians, his independent nature and unorthodox educational route make it difficult to establish a clear link. Webb was, like many Westerners of his era, aligned with Populist and Progressive social and economic positions and he was in favor of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. The great Western historian Ray Allen Billington said of him, that he “saw the study and writing of history, not solely as an academic exercise, but also as a panacea for the ills of society. History to him was not only an essential ingredient in the training of good citizens and the

education of cultured men; it was also – and more importantly – an instrument for social change that could, when properly used, better mankind’s lot.”²⁴ The clearest example of his use of history in this fashion was his book, *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy* (1937), in which Webb wrote a “masterful brief against the government for the few and a convincing argument for the economic rejuvenation of the South as a step toward national recovery. Here spoke Webb the Crusader, his weapon historical truths, logically arranged to present a case for the people against selfish corporate might.”²⁵ Webb believed very strongly, as evidenced by his desire to write for the general public, that history could and did provide answers and could help to improve society. “In a sense then, Webb was a Progressive historian; yet his optimism in general about what history could do, was to diminish considerably with time.”²⁶

Once the major influences upon Webb’s life and his philosophical leanings have been identified, it is then possible to examine his writing style and purpose. His purpose was clearly stated in his address as President of the American Historical Association when he declared, “I wanted to write so people could understand me; I wanted to persuade them.”²⁷ His writing style was influenced by the great variety of reading materials which William Hinds had sent to him, including *Twentieth Century Review*, *American Boy*, *National Magazine*, *McClure’s*, *Current Literature*, *Review of Reviews*, and *Success*.²⁸ Additionally, Hinds “counseled Webb to read the best works of fiction – Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Cooper, and Irving – and to practice descriptive writing.”²⁹ This exposure to both popular writing and good literature, as well as the admonition to write helped Webb develop a style as a historian which was both appealing and persuasive. The Webb biographer, Walter Rundell, Jr., also believed that Webb’s writing style and his sense of purpose were developed during his years of teaching. He writes that, “Those qualities of his success as a historian – imagination, creativeness, independence of mind, and belief in the soundness of his ideas – all evidenced themselves during his days as a schoolteacher.”³⁰

Webb’s writing style was didactic and conversational, just as in the schoolhouse. His metaphors and illustrations were simple. Once while discussing the dynamic nature of modern society in *The Great Frontier*, Webb stated that “it is necessary to bear in mind that we are examining a social phenomenon which resulted largely from the introduction of a new ingredient into the historical stew.

It is important to remember that a stew is a blended composite of many things, and that each affects all the others . . . A stew, though containing many elements, is usually dominated by one.”³¹ His writings are filled with such simple metaphors. His style also reflected a sense of humor not often found in academic writings. In a discussion of the enormous impact that the idea of the frontier had upon the American imagination and its omnipresence in American life, he said of the interestingly named “Frontier Bra” that “In advertising, the frontier has no confines.”³² His illustrations and asides reveal that he knew his audience. His choice of publishing venues revealed this understanding as well since he wrote hundreds of articles for popular magazines such as *Scribner’s*, *The Saturday Review*, and *Harper’s*.

During a professional career which spanned more than thirty years, Webb wrote four major works - *The Great Plains*, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (1935), *Divided We Stand*, and *The Great Frontier*. While at first glance there may not seem to be a connection between these titles, further study reveals both a connection and a progression. Webb stated,

As I look back on this program of work, I see in the four books a record of a mental adventure into an expanding world. *The Texas Rangers* was local, simple in structure, and involved little thought. *The Great Plains* was regional, based on a single idea. *Divided We Stand* was national. *The Great Frontier* was international, and like *The Great Plains*, was the expansion of an idea. The common element in all of them is the frontier, dominant in three and present in the fourth. Taken together they tell the story of the expansion of the mind from a hard-packed West Texas dooryard to the outer limits of the Western world.³³

Two of these books, *The Great Plains* and *The Great Frontier*, were signally important. The first, *The Great Plains*, is the book upon which Webb made and retains his reputation. The thesis of *The Great Plains* is the necessity of *adaptation* of institutions, and as historian William Cronon states, “unlike the simpler frontier narratives, Webb’s history traces a dialectic between a resistant landscape and the technological innovations that will finally succeed in transforming it.”³⁴ While Webb acknowledged a kinship with Turner, *The Great Plains*, according to Cronon “tells a story that significantly revises the Turnerian frontier. For Webb, the Plains were radically different from the more benign

environments that Anglo-American settlers had encountered in the East. Having no trees and little water the region posed an almost insurmountable obstacle to the westward march of civilization.”³⁵ Webb, in the fashion learned from Keasbey, painstakingly laid out not only the innovations needed to settle a region radically different from the Eastern United States, but also the social and legal adaptations which were forced upon them by this new environment. *The Great Plains* concludes with a discussion of the distinctive literature of the Plains, for Webb believed that, “If in working out the solution to the problems confronting him in the region the Western man developed something special in his outlook on life, that too may become the subject of the novelist and the artist.”³⁶

While reaction to Webb’s book was immediate and overwhelmingly positive, some were troubled by his methodology and others by the errors which appeared in the text. These scholars “were critical of Webb’s methodology because it did not produce history in any traditional sense. It may have been geography, or anthropology, or sociology, or maybe some other things. But it was not history, they argued.”³⁷ While Webb’s method was not without precedent, it was fairly unorthodox at the time. He was simply following the model bequeathed to him by Keasbey, and one similar to that employed by the *Annales* scholars. Others claimed that Webb’s error was that “He had the idea, the insight, first; he then assembled the proof.”³⁸ On this point, there would be no argument or denial from Webb. He knew what he believed, what he felt, and what he had experienced. In Webb’s mind, all that he needed to do was to make his case, and make it he did. Cronon’s conclusion is that Webb wrote a book which was “marvelously intricate in its arguments,”³⁹ and one which had a profound influence.

Twenty years after *The Great Plains*, Webb published *The Great Frontier*. This time the artist’s canvas had expanded from the Great Plains of the Western United States to the entire globe. The purpose of the book is revealed on its first page where Webb writes, “The Frontier as a determining factor in modern Western civilization has never been fully examined by historians and other scholars.”⁴⁰ Using a methodology similar to *The Great Plains*, Webb sought to answer the question, “What effect did all the new lands discovered by Columbus and his associates around 1500 have on Western civilization during the following 450 years?”⁴¹ From his examination, Webb developed “The Boom Hypothesis of Western Civilization.” This theory suggested that the existence of a World

Frontier during more than four centuries, and the wealth generated by the newly discovered lands of the World Frontier, had played a significant role in the development of numerous features of Western civilization including personal liberty, capitalism, and democracy. Webb also speculated concerning what the closing of this frontier might mean for the Western world. While *The Great Frontier* never won for Webb the acclaim he had received for *The Great Plains*, it is nevertheless filled with compelling ideas and has drawn praise from many noted historians including William F. McNeill and Geoffrey Barraclough.

In addition to transforming conceptions about the American West and to offering a framework with which to reevaluate the modern era, Webb is recognized as a pioneer in a number of other historical fields. His most significant contributions lie in environmental history, the study of comparative frontiers, and to a lesser degree in regional history, public history, and in the history of water reclamation.

Environmental history began in the 1960s with the writings of Roderick Nash and Sam Hayes, coming of age in the environmentally conscious era of the 1970s. Yet, environmental history has “well-known antecedents starting in 1893 with Frederick Jackson Turner’s ‘Significance of the Frontier in American History,’ through to Walter Prescott Webb’s *The Great Plains* to James Malin’s *The Grasslands of North America*.”⁴² In spite of the fact that these early efforts in environmental history are of lasting value, the authors were “accused of crude determinism,” and “came into disrepute, and studies of people/land relationships declined with the general decline of Western history.”⁴³ They have nevertheless served as a “source of inspiration, mainly for U.S. environmental historians” because they “were fully alive to the environmental transformations of North America’s grasslands that came with Euro-American settlement, and saw in the process of frontier transformation defining forces in American history.”⁴⁴

A second line of research, briefly hinted at in *The Great Plains*, but more fully developed in his later work, *The Great Frontier*, was that of comparative frontiers. In his preface to *The Great Frontier*, Webb wrote “it will not be difficult for anyone to see that the book is of American origin, and that most of the illustrations on the frontier side are drawn from the American experience. A similar story, with different emphasis and a different set of illustrations equally valid, could have come, and can come, from any country, frontier, or metropolitan, with frontier experience.”⁴⁵ Webb noted Canada, Australia, South Africa, New

Zealand, and Latin America as areas of potential research. Today, a simple web search of “comparative frontiers” will reveal innumerable links to books, articles, and other publications on such diverse frontiers as the Amazon, the Outback, and Tsarist Siberia. Many of the basic ideas utilized in this discipline are foreshadowed in Webb’s writings.

An examination of Webb’s career reveals that he had an extraordinary impact upon historians and the writing of history during his lifetime. Why is it, then, that he is less highly regarded today? There seem to be several major reasons. First, Webb in *The Great Frontier* characterized Europe (his Metropolis) as a stagnant world that was suddenly transformed, enriched, and empowered by the discovery and exploitation of the Great Frontier. Whether the argument has merit or not, few Europeans have ever been willing to accept this characterization. Secondly, Webb’s life and career ended in the early 1960s just as larger historiographical trends were gaining ground in Western history. “Beginning in the 1970s and during the next two decades a New Western historiography (as distinct from the more recent New Western history) gradually emerged, in which historians of the West paid increasing attention to racial and ethnic groups, women, families, gender, and environmental topics.”⁴⁶ This group, including Richard White, William Cronon, Richard Slotkin, and Patricia Nelson Limerick, has to varying degrees rejected both Turner and Webb. Interestingly though, an examination of their works reveals that “the frontier and regional concepts of Turner, Bolton, Webb, and Malin were by no means dead, they have just been put to use for different purposes since the 1970’s.”⁴⁷ Finally, Webb himself is partly responsible. In the preface to *The Great Frontier*, William Rowley writes, “Like the console radios of a bygone era, the book strikes a nostalgic note alongside the sleek, compact, and specialized models of its successors.”⁴⁸ Webb’s books with their hand drawn graphs and charts give the books a dated appearance, causing some today to look upon them as lacking a certain sophistication and professionalism.

Webb’s life ended tragically in 1963, the result of an automobile accident. At the time of his death at the age of seventy-four, he was as busy as ever teaching, writing, and learning. If Webb were alive today, how would he respond to the combination of criticism, neglect, and admiration that his body of work has produced? His attitude would be best reflected by what he wrote in the preface to *The Great Frontier*:

The excursion has been down the main street, but there have been many observations about views up the side alleys, some of which have been explored tentatively for a short distance. This procedure may lead some to conclude that the work lacks a satisfying completeness, that it falls short of the possibilities. That is exactly the effect desired. The author would have been much gratified to complete the story rather than begin it, but since he could not complete it, the next best thing was to suggest to others the possibilities without exhausting them. He who explores the Great Frontier intellectually is subject to the same errors as those who explored it physically. Those who wish to avoid such risks should never invade the frontier, but should remain close at home with easy access to such pillars of certitude as the policeman and the encyclopedia. Many explorers made mistakes in the American wilderness, but nevertheless came back with or sent back valuable information.⁴⁹

Webb understood history and he understood the role of the historian as one who is contributing to the piecing together of a puzzle. He was aware of his faults and understood his shortcomings. He did not deny them or seek to hide them, rather he embraced them, seeing opportunity for historiographical progress, not only through those who would accept and further his ideas, but among those who would make important historical contributions through their conscious effort to *refute* them. Concerning *The Great Plains* and *The Great Frontier* he wrote, they “are idea books, and each has received its share of criticism. This is to be expected and as it should be. If an idea or interpretation cannot survive a critic, any critic, it is no good anyway. If the idea is sound, then the criticism advertises and spreads it.”⁵⁰ Webb’s ideas are alive today, sometimes in works based upon them and other times in criticisms of them. This fact speaks for itself. Webb was fearless in his exploration of the frontier and tireless in his efforts to explain the frontier. Whatever one’s ultimate opinion of him, it is irrefutable that he has left us with some valuable information.

As a boy, Webb had been given a heritage, the frontier. For Webb, this heritage was both a burden and a responsibility. The burden was that of a lonely and isolated youth, while the responsibility was to capture and preserve, through his historical genius, a people, a time, and a way of life. This frontier, personal and individual, as well as national and collective became the consuming interest of his life and his interpretation of it, while deeply personal, has provided explanations for millions of others.

Notes

1. John Walton Caughey, "Historian's Choice: Results of a Poll on Recently Published American History and Biography," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39 (1952): 289–302, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1892185>.

2. Elliot West, "Walter Prescott Webb and the Search for the West," in *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, ed., Richard W. Etulain (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 167.

3. *Ibid.*, 168.

4. Necah Stewart Furman, *Walter Prescott Webb: His Life and Impact* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 11.

1976), 6-7.

7. Furman, *Walter Prescott Webb*, 12.

8. Walter Prescott Webb, "The Search for William E. Hinds," *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1961, 62.

9. Walter Prescott Webb, "History as High Adventure," *The American Historical Review* 69, no. 2 (January 1959): 279, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1845443>.

10. Walter Prescott Webb, "Water Conservation as a Private Enterprise," address to the Water Conservation Conference, May 22, 1959, typescript in Walter Prescott Webb Papers, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas Archives.

11. Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 157.

12. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1987); Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own:" *A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

13. Furman, *Walter Prescott Webb*, 10.

14. Tobin, *The Making of a History*, 9.

15. *Ibid.*, xv.

16. Wilbur R. Jacobs, John Walton Caughey and Joe Bertram Frantz. *Turner, Bolton, and Webb: Three Historians of the American Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 97.

17. Tobin, *The Making of a History*, 18.

18. Webb, "The Search for William E. Hinds," 66.

19. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 279.

20. Tobin, *The Making of a History*, 49.

21. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 271.
22. *Ibid.*, 279.
23. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 280.
24. Ray Allen Billington, "Introduction," in *Essays on Walter Prescott Webb* ed., Kenneth R. Philip and Elliot West (Arlington: The University of Texas, 1976), xvii.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Michael Kraus and Davis D. Joyce, eds. *The Writing of American History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 282.
27. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 268.
28. Walter Rundell Jr., "Webb the Schoolteacher," in *Essays on Walter Prescott Webb*, 97.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 117.
31. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003), 144.
32. *Ibid.*, 288.
33. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 278.
34. William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History*, 38, Issue 4 (March 1992): 1355.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Webb, *The Great Plains*, 454.
37. George Wolfskill, "Walter Prescott Webb and *The Great Plains*: Then and Now," *Reviews in American History* 114, No. 2 (June 2004): 301.
38. *Ibid.*, 302.
39. Cronon, "A Place for Stories," 1355.
40. Webb, *The Great Frontier*, 1.
41. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 277.
42. Michael Williams, "The Relations of Environmental History and Historical Geography," *Journal of Historical Geography* 20, no. 1 (1994): 4.
43. *Ibid.*
44. "J.R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 42 (December 2003): 14-15.

45. Webb, *The Great Frontier*, xv.

46. Richard W. Etulain, *Re-Imaging the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 170.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Webb, *The Great Frontier*, ix.

49. *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

50. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 280.

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