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'FRONTIERISM' AND NATIONAL STEREOTYPES

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This paper does not seek to assess, yet again, F. J. Turner's frontier thesis. It does seek to indicate one aspect of 'frontierism' which has been less noticed than it might have been.[1] I refer to the connection between frontier life and the creation of national self-images or stereotypes which, in turn, may themselves considerably affect the course of history. What is meant by a national self-image or stereotype ?

Every nation has or, if it is a very young nation, seeks to develop an idea of itself, an image with which its citizens can identify of what the 'typical' Greek or Russian or Swede or Ghanian *tends* to be like. Naturally the native-born son likes to dwell on the flattering features of the picture while foreigners see the warts more clearly, but for all that it is usually recognisably the same picture. Thus everyone knows that Spaniards are supposed to be poor, proud and passionate. Frenchmen are widely believed to be civilised, cynical and sensual. And so on. Which is not at all the same thing as saying that all Spaniards, or even the average Spaniard, is in fact poor, proud and passionate. 'Average', in this context at any rate, is by no means synonymous with 'typical'. The *typical* Spaniard of the stereotype is, in an important sense, he who differs most from the *average* Spaniard and who so differs even more dramatically from the *average* European. Thus only can the average Spaniard clearly apprehend his Spanishness — by looking not at himself, the average, but at the extreme case of difference, the 'typical' specimen of his people. So too the average Spaniard, or American, or Australian, if he is not in fact always very like the national stereotype, usually likes to think that he is precisely because by so doing he enhances his self-awareness and security, his sense of belonging in and to his society, his sense of national identity — about which there is a good deal of soul-searching in Canada to-day.[2] Anthropologists stress the importance of studying this process of tribal self-identification as a vital key to the understanding of pre-literate societies. Historians, perhaps in healthy reaction from the chauvinistically nationalist approach of so many of their predecessors, tend to neglect what may be an important tool of their trade.

[1] But see S. D. Clark, "The Frontier and Democratic Theory," in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada,* Vol. XLVIII, Series III, June 1954. Section Two.

[2] See e.g. W. L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity,* Wisconsin and Toronto, 1961; C. T. Bissell (ed.), *Our Living Tradition,* Toronto, 1957; Frank H. Underhill, "The Image of Canada," Founders' Day Address, University New Brunswick, 1962; and many current Canadian press articles.

My thesis is that, in European colonies of overseas settlement, the most obvious and natural way of building a sense of national identity was simply to stress those aspects of life which differed most dramatically from the norms — or from what colonists felt to be the norms — of the mother-country. *How, otherwise, could colonists cease thinking of themselves as 'transplanted Britons'?*[3] Certainly not by stressing their common British outlook and identity. In the United States and Australia this meant stressing frontier attitudes, because they contrasted most clearly with respectable British *mores*, rather than stressing the outlook of the eastern sea-board cities where life was inevitably so much more closely influenced by old-country values and traditions : though we should always remember, as Turner unlike some of his critics did,[4] that New York, Philadelphia and even Boston had been pioneer clearings in the wilderness before they became metropolitan centres of wealth and refinement, and that their own initial frontier experience is part of what makes them, even to-day, something that is different from London and Paris and Rome, something which is quite as specifically American as Reno, Nevada or Dodge City, Kansas.

Turner stressed again and again the American frontier's role in strengthening nationalist tendencies, but he does not seem to have understood that possibly the frontier's strongest influence was exercised, not on institutions and events and economics, but on men's imaginations — probably because his own imagination too was bemused by the romanticised image of the 'noble frontiersman', that most potent symbol, *especially* in the cities, of American nationalism. All the earth's television sets, choked with gun smoke and the corpses of a million Indians, remind us just how potent an image the noble frontiersman still is.

It can be shown that this process of national self-identification through a romanticised image of the frontiersman was just as prominent in Australia as it was in the United States, particularly around the turn of the century at the time when Turner was writing. Consider, for example, the remarks of Francis Adams, published *before* Turner delivered his first seminal paper on "The Significance of the Frontier" in 1893. Adams, who never visited North America, wrote of Australia :

> The gulf between colony and colony is small and traversable compared to that great fixture that lies between the people of the Slope and of the Interior. Where the marine rainfall flags out and is lost, a new climate, and in a certain sense, a new race begin to unfold themselves... It is not one hundred, but three and four and five hundred miles that you must go back from the sea if you would find yourself face to face with the one powerful and unique national type yet produced in the new land...

[3] W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, London, 1930.
[4] F. J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, New York, 1962 ed., p. 4.

> Frankly I find not only all that is genuinely characteristic in Australia and the Australians springing from this heart of the land but also all that is noblest, kindliest and best...
>
> The Anglo-Saxon has perished or is absorbed in the Interior much more rapidly than on the sea-slope and in the towns...
>
> It should be recognized more fully than it is that the successful issue of the American Secession War was due to the Western States...
>
> The West was the heart of the country, the genuine America, and the Interior is the heart of the genuine Australia, and, if needs be, will do as much for the nation and the race.[5]

Australians then, like Americans, identified imaginatively with the frontiersman image, but in one important respect their self-image differed from that of the Americans, largely because the material conditions of frontier life had differed in the two countries. Seymour Martin Lipset in his recent sociological work, *The First New Nation; the United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*,[6] concludes that for mainly historical reasons the national value-systems or self-images of the United States and Australia have much more in common than either does with the kindred self-images of Britain and Canada. This conclusion, though generally valid within Lipset's own terms of reference, practically ignores the particular difference I have in mind between the value-systems of the two countries. It may not be needless to add that I am *not* arguing that democracy, whatever its particular shading, was 'invented' in any frontier society. Obviously democratic ideas, whether tinged strongly with individualism or collectivism or both, came from Western Europe, primarily from Britain, to both North America and Australia. It is the perceptibly differing flavours, which democracy has acquired since its transplantation to the two continents, that may be explained largely in terms of the differing frontier environments.

Turner, of course, never applied his mind in any detail to the effects of frontiers other than the American one. Perusal of his work shows that he thought the effects of the American frontier might be summarized under the following three heads, here set out not necessarily in order of importance :

Promotion of :

(1) Practicality, improvisation, crudity, force, acuteness etc....

(2) Nationalism.

(3) Democracy.

[5] Francis Adams, *The Australians: a Social Sketch*, London, 1893. pp. 144, 154, 166, 171.

[6] New York, 1963. Part III.

My first heading subsumes a whole carpet-bag of qualities which frontier life anywhere may be expected to evoke. On the edge of the wilderness, far from civilising influences and specialist services of all kinds, men are forced to become handy-men, to learn to turn their hands to the many practical skills necessary for even a rudimentary degree of comfort, if not always for mere physical survival. And this emphasis on the down-to-earth and the practical, in turn, brings as its corollary an under-valuation of refinements in taste and of artistic and intellectual pursuits generally. Similarly it is not surprising that frontier life should have strengthened nationalism. Beyond the Appalachians, far from the power of the separate colonial or state governments and from the local loyalties and traditions which sustained them, men were inevitably more conscious of their common Americanism and, in so far as they looked for support to government at all, they necessarily looked to the common national government. Turner also taught that frontier conditions promoted the growth of a democratic outlook: and here is the rub, for he and his followers naturally enough came quite near to using 'democracy' and 'individualism' as synonymous terms.

The height of the Chinese wall that used to stand between historical studies in Australia and North America is indicated by the fact that half a century passed, after the delivery of Turner's 1893 frontier paper, before Australian writing showed any awareness of its existence. After the second World War, however, two Australian historians, Fred Alexander of Perth and Norman Harper of Melbourne, set about testing Turner's hypothesis by applying it to their country. Both reached the same conclusion. Broadly they found that the Australian frontier too had promoted (1) Practicality, improvisation, crudity etc. and (2) Nationalism; but that (3) it had not on the whole promoted individualism but rather the reverse. Therefore they thought the thesis was, at best, only partially valid.[7] Yet Turner himself had written, "If . . . we consider the underlying conditions and forces that create the democratic type of government . . . we shall find that under this name there have appeared a multitude of political types radically unlike in fact".[8] The Australian and American types of democracy are not, of course, *radically* unlike, but Turner's hint might profitably have been followed up. In fact it had been by another American scholar, Carter Goodrich, who in 1928 had written :

> Certainly the United States owes its individualism largely to its small man's frontier; I think it is not fanciful to suggest that Australia

[7] See Fred Alexander, *Moving Frontiers*, Melbourne 1947; and N. D. Harper, "Turner the Historian: Hypothesis or Process?", in *Univ. Kansas City Review*, Autumn 1951; and "Frontier and Section", in *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, May 1952.

[8] F. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

owes much of its collectivism to the fact that its frontier was hospitable to the large man instead.[9]

Turner and his followers reiterated the theme that American frontier conditions evoked 'democracy', seen primarily as freedom and equality of opportunity for the individual to get on it the world; and they held that an abundance of free land for the young men who went West was the chief factor in bringing about this emphasis on individualism. In one passage Turner wrote :

> The most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy... As has been indicated the frontier is productive of individualism... So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power.[10]

Critics have shown that frontier lands were not absolutely free and have questioned in other ways the detailed validity of Turner's explanation: but whatever happened in actual fact there can be no doubt that, both before and after Turner wrote, the national image of the typical American was firmly established — that of the homespun but rugged frontiersman striding individually from log cabin to White House, or to an industrial tycoon-ship, or at the very least to a tidy little business of his own on Main Street, Zenith City. Of course this is a ridiculously exaggerated stereotype : but we are not dealing with facts and the average, but with myths and the image. The equivalent Australian self-image, equally ridiculously exaggerated, would be that of a rugged bush-worker slouching collectively with his mates from shearing-shed to pub or trade-union meeting and back again. Why the difference ?

There is one part of Turner's teaching which, as far as I know, has not been seriously questioned by subsequent criticism. It is that the typical (indeed possibly the average) American frontiersman throughout the nineteenth century and before it, in most areas and periods, was the small, self-employed farmer who naturally hoped to become a big one. And American geography, land laws and economic conditions were such as to make this a reasonable hope for many. Whether small-holding farmers, known in older lands as peasants, have usually been promoters of 'democracy' depends largely upon the meaning one attaches to that word, but their unshakeable attachment to individualist values is proverbial — as modern Russian history reminds us. Hence the strong emphasis on individualism in American folk-lore, life, history and even sociological theory.

9 "The Australian and American Labor Movements", in *The Economic Record*, November 1928, pp. 206-207. For earlier, non-Turnerian, statements of the same idea see P. Cunningham, *Two years in New South Wales etc.*, 2 vols., London 1827, Vol. I, pp. 255-261; and H. G. Adam, *An Australian Looks at America etc.*, Sydney 1927, *passim*.

10 F. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 32.

But the nature of the Australian frontier was such as to evoke quite a different type of frontiersman, different at least in his relation to the land. In nineteenth century Australia, in most areas and periods, the typical (and certainly also the average) frontiersman was not a self-employed agriculturist but an itinerant wage-earner employed casually in the pastoral industry. Despite a vast deal of legislation in the last forty years of the last century aimed at establishing small farmers on the soil, New South Wales, for instance, never produced enough grain to feed its own citizens until 1899. Before 1861 legislation combined with geography and poor communications to ensure that those who went to the Australian West were not petty agriculturists but sheep and cattle-herders. And to make a reasonable living on the dry Australian pastures the pastoralist had to possess enough capital to do things on a large scale. Leases held by one individual or company rarely covered less than several square miles, usually several hundreds and often several thousands. The wealthier run-holders or squatters, as the pastoralists were called ('squatter' was a highly prestigious term in Australia), often spent most of their time in a Sydney or Brisbane town-house with paid managers working their up-country properties. Thus for every rural proprietor, resident or not, on the Australian frontier there were dozens of itinerant working hands — shepherds, stockmen, shearers, fencers, boundary-riders, cooks, bullock-drivers, dam-sinkers, drovers, horse-breakers and so on. Most of them were employed on a casual basis and, as one acute observer wrote, the squatter rarely knew even the real names of his employees or whether they were married or single.[11] Moreover, the Australian frontier was ont a 'moving frontier' in the American sense. Closer settlement, towns and accessible markets did not follow closely in the wake of the pastoralist. Over most of the pastoral country this is still true to-day, glaringly so by Norh American standards. Hence the typical (*and average*) Australian frontiersman throughout the last century was not, and usually did not even seriously aspire to become, a self-employed person who might rise higher in the world by thrift and hard work. He was a wandering wage-earner whose relationship with his employers was much more like that between operatives and management in a large modern factory or corporation than that between master and servant in a small enterprise, whether rural or urban. It is not suggested that he was any more given than was his American counterpart to thinking consciously about such high matters, but for the Australian frontiersman the inner meaning of democracy or 'freedom' was not, primarily, freedom to make his way to the top, but freedom to combine with his mates for better working conditions and the discomforture of 'those wealthy squatters', even on occasion freedom to bring collective influence to bear on government for better social services for all and to bring down the over-mighty from their seats.[12]

[11] Anthony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand,* Melbourne 1876 p. 202.
[12] See Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend,* Melbourne 1958, *passim.*

Hence the overwhelming emphasis in Australian song and story on 'mateship', and the almost equally great emphasis in Australian life on active government, the welfare state and other collectivist aspects of the democratic ideal. The most popular though by no means the best of Australian poets, Henry Lawson, stressed this theme again and again in the 1890's when he wrote of the bushmen:

> They tramp in mateship side by side,
> The Protestant and Roman,
> They call no bi-ped Lord or Sir,
> And touch their hat to no man.

and, seeing visions of the future :

> There'll be higher education for the toiling, starving clown,
> And the rich and educated shall be educated down !

And even the conservative and conventionally well-educated squatter's son, A. B. Patterson, could write at the same period his *Bushman's Song*, one stanza of which reads :

> I asked a cove for shearing once along the Marthaguy.
> 'We shear non-union here,' said he. 'I call it scab,' said I.
> I looked along the shearing-board before I turned to go,
> Saw eight or ten dashed Chinamen all shearing in a row.
> So it was shift, boys, shift, for there wasn't the slightest doubt
> It was time to make a shift with the leprosy about.
> So I saddled up my horses and I whistled to my dog,
> And I left his scabby station at the old jig-jog.[13]

Paterson's lines particularly, with their nakedly racist overtones, suggest the extent to which the collectivist-democratic image had by the 1890's become also the national one, just as had the contrasting American individualist-democratic image : though of course both can be traced back to British seeds.

If it be granted that the American and Australian stereotypes do differ quite appreciably in this way, can it be shown that they have an appreciable effect in helping to determine the actual course of history ? I believe there is a wealth of evidence to show that they do, though there is space here to glance at only one example of the process. It is a truism to say that the extent and power of trade unionism in a given country are apt to depend primarily upon its degree of industrialisation. Yet trade-unionism has always been, and continues to be, relatively much more powerful in Australia than in the United States despite the fact that secondary industry, and particularly heavy secondary industry, is *com-*

[13] 'cove' = Vernacular for 'man' or 'guy', but often in the last century, as here = 'employer'.
'Marthaguy' = a Western river in New South Wales.

paratively backward in Australia.[14] Similarly, for the last twenty years or so the unemployed proportion of the total work-force has been at least twice as high in the United States as it has been in Australia. Twice since 1947 in the latter country the percentage of unemployed rose for a few months to about two. Public fury, political feverishness and a reversion to 'full employment' quickly followed each brief lapse from what Australians tend to regard as a state of grace. In the United States during the same period the percentage of unemployed has fluctuated between about three and seven,[15] and American opinion seems to regard this state of affairs as practically inevitable, if not wholly desirable. Economists have described, and thus in a sense accounted for, the contrasting situations in purely economic terms: but even economists are apt to aver, if pressed, that the basic reason for the contrasting economic situations of the two countries is not primarily economic but political, in the sense that 'public opinion' — the image of what is acceptable and right — decisively influences the kind of economic measures taken, or not taken, in each country. As an Australian visitor I have been deeply impressed by the efficiency, despatch and politeness with which American business transactions are conducted, and equally depressed by the seeming *sang-froid* with which American opinion accepts a high level of unemployment (by Australian standards) as the perhaps necessary price of such efficiency.

What relevance has all this to Canada ? Not very much perhaps, except to underline the obvious fact that the study of history is far too complex a matter for one type of explanation to have universal validity, even in broadly similar historical contexts. I have tried to show that in Australia and the United States the sense of national identity has been built quite largely upon romanticised frontier attitudes — because these differed most dramatically from traditional attitudes inherited from the mother-country. Broadly speaking the conditions of Canadian development seem quite similar. Yet the Canadian self-image, in so far as it can be pinned down, would appear to owe little to frontier attitudes, romanticised or otherwise : and this, it may be suggested, because the great fact of Canadian history is the overshadowing power and prestige of the great republic to the south of the long border. Identification with a frontier-type self-image might have served to differentiate Canadians from Britons, but for Canadians themselves as well as for foreigners, the increasingly urgent need has seemed to be to differentiate themselves from Americans. Thus it may be suggested that Canadian historians, much more than their American and Australian colleagues, have tended to stress the continuing, traditionally inherited elements in their story, as

[14] *Statistical Abstract of the United States* and *Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia.*
[15] *ibid.*, and *Year Book of Labour Statistics,* (I.L.O., Geneva.)

have Canadian writers.[16] The romanticising of frontier attitudes, in the ballads of Robert W. Service for example, is an odd 'sport' in Canadian literature instead of being at the very heart of the tradition as it is in Australian writing.[17] And even Service's characters, Dangerous Dan McGrew and the rest of them, are identified by most non-Canadians with the American frontier tradition rather than with a distinctively Canadian one.

I have said nothing here of bi-culturalism or of the marked regionalism of Canadian life. Both of course complicate enormously the already complicated picture. Henry James wrote once of the "complex fate" of the artist in a trans-oceanic society like his own. A few Australian artists like 'Henry Handel Richardson', and Martin Boyd and Patrick White have both suffered from and profited by the Jamesian type of allegiance divided between the old and the new, the traditionally inherited and the indigenous : but for most ordinary Americans and Australians their 'fate' has seemed tolerably simple — to identify with the indigenous image which serves to differentiate them from citizens of Britain or Europe. Canadians grope for an image which differentiates them from both Britons and Americans, and which at the same time somehow contains both French and English-speaking Canadians. It seems that their 'fate', in James' image, is a very complex one indeed. To a visitor it is not surprising that Canadians should be very much concerned with the question of their national identity. Rather it is astonishing that they have in fact maintained for so long an identity of their own, however complex the problem of apprehending exactly what it is.

[16] See e.g. Morris Zazlow, "The Frontier Hypothesis in Recent Historiography," in *Canadian Historical Review*, June 1948; and J. M. S. Careless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism and Canadian History," in *Canadian Historical Review*, March 1954.

[17] See J. P. Matthews, *Tradition in Exile: a Comparative Study of Social Influences on the Development of Australian and Canadian Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, Melbourne and Toronto, 1962.