

## FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

On March 14 Frederick Jackson Turner died in Pasadena. No student of American history needs to be told who this great man was; but so quiet and unpretentious was his life that many others, not of the history guild, are unaware of the significance of his career. Those of us who had the privilege of his instruction prized among his most endearing qualities this very modesty and simplicity of manner; but it gave him no such widespread clientele as certain more self-assertive individuals among his colleagues have achieved. Added to this quality was a dislike for writing, the more astonishing because of the facility he possessed for effective phrases and telling epithets in his rich prose. His few published books and essays are genuinely creative works, but, alas, they may be counted on one's fingers. Chief among them are his *Rise of the New West*, published in the *American Nation Series* in 1906; and *The Frontier in American History*, a collection of his addresses and papers, beginning with the epoch-marking essay which gives the collection its title and including one of special interest for Minnesotans, "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy," which was delivered on May 11, 1918, at the dedication of the new home of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The title essay, which appeared in 1893, has revolutionized the entire conception of the history of the New World. Its central theme, that the enforced adaptation of Europeans to their new environment west of the Atlantic produced new points of view expressed in ways that are now recognized as characteristically American, was so obvious that historians had overlooked it almost completely. When applied, as Professor Turner applied it, to the frontier, to the West's influence in politics and elsewhere, and to sectionalism, its truth was recognized in a flash.

To most students of American history and to nearly all his readers, Professor Turner stands for an economic interpretation of history, with by far the heaviest emphasis on the frontier's part in that history. It may come as a shock to them, therefore, to learn that at least one of his students—associated with him for four years while taking courses and writing a doctoral dissertation under his direction—was schooled by him not so much in economic as in social history. She is convinced that those who found in him an expounder of the economic interpretation of history grasped only part of what he was trying to tell them. It was human relations in which he was interested, expressed finally for him by the poet. How often has he clinched his argument to his students by a stanza from Whitman! It was never an abstract frontier, never an abstract section that he was describing—it was toiling, thinking, loving, hating human beings of whom he was thinking. He was profoundly interested in democracy, convinced of its value, yet fearful for its future in the United States. Fundamentally, that fact explains his interest in history. He went to it to learn whether he was justified in his passionate hope that democracy might persist on this continent. His quest led him to see that the frontier created the American form of democracy; but the frontier passed away about 1890. Where, then, shall a substitute for this safety valve for discontented, oppressed spirits—the figure is his own—be found? That danger lies in sectionalism seems to have been one of his conclusions. Hence his profound study of sectionalism in its manifold and obscure forms. One of his last publications was a study of a section in which he was tremendously interested, New England. He had an uncanny knack for appreciating the genius of a people. Middle-westerner though he was, he caught what few from his region can perceive hidden behind the cool reticences of New England. One of his students learned more of her own native section from Professor Turner than from any

other person. Probably he could have explained the South equally well.

Contact with him revealed what one might expect from such an ardent believer in humanity, a philosophy that happiness lies in the enjoyment of life, not in endeavor, nor in ambition, nor in the realization of things accomplished. Flowers, birds, music, art, a Maine trout at the end of his line, ducks settling on a reedy lake and his friend Benson's etchings of them, dogs, the sea, and young minds entered largely into the pattern of his life. Characteristically, he modelled his Wisconsin home after a Maine fisherman's cottage. Characteristically, too, he would not tolerate persons and conditions that needlessly spoiled the enjoyment of life. His intense love of human kind was never sentimental, and shoddiness was anathema to him. Consequently, he would not permit students to work for higher degrees with him unless he felt that they would do credit to his instruction and at least not disturb his peace of mind by their ineptitude. On their part students found in this quiet man such a source of inspiration that they literally "bubbled over" with enthusiasm for him, for American history, and for scholarship in general, as some can testify whose desks were just outside his office in Widener Library. These noted the effect on his students with sympathy, though sometimes with annoyance, when their own labors were interrupted by students who, fresh from a conference, must overflow to someone and usually to the first acquaintance met. The world may lament that Turner did not write more; possibly his favored students should rejoice, for more writing might have precluded some of those priceless conferences that are still talked over ecstatically when former students of the greatly beloved "F. J. T." get together.

GRACE LEE NUTE

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