

NORTH BY SOUTH, WEST BY EAST

The Education of an American Historian

Howard Lamar

168

I was born in 1923 on a large cotton farm near the small town of Tuskegee, Alabama. My father, who considered himself something of a planter, liked to call the farm a plantation. Both he and my mother were able and ambitious, as were my four grandparents. The latter sent all of their children to college, and my father's only sister made it to Columbia, where she took a master's in history before returning to teach in a women's college in Alabama. My mother and her three sisters all taught in secondary schools until they married, and one of my aunts married a professor of engineering who wound up teaching at the University of Illinois.

In short, my forebears believed deeply in education, although we could hardly be called an academic family. From the word go, I enjoyed school and read incessantly. At an early age, I became aware that the Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington in 1884, was famous both because it was the nation's leading school for blacks and because its faculty included George Washington Carver, whose scientific research popularized the peanut crop and turned it into an international business. At the same time, I was aware of living in a segregated society in which the vast majority of the local population was black, uneducated, and working as field hands or share croppers.

The Great Depression hit the South particularly hard. The future looked bleak until Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933 and gave farmers, businessmen, rural blacks, and public school students new hope. My farther wholeheartedly embraced the New Deal agricultural policies, and both my civics and my history teachers in school openly supported Roosevelt. My father always said that FDR was the only rich man who understood poor people. I have been a devoted New Dealer ever since.

My family subscribed to dozens of magazines, including *Time* and *Life*, as well as three major newspapers. My aunt, who lived near us, took the Sunday *New York Times*. After she had read it, she would pass it on to me, and I loved every page. In

Howard Lamar began his career as an American historian while growing up in the American South, where his forebears had lived since early colonial times. Almost inevitably, he became enamored of his family's past and the South's past at an early age. As an undergraduate at Emory University, he majored in American national history. Upon graduation, he moved north to attend the Yale Graduate School and pursue an advanced degree in American history. While at Yale, he also came to appreciate the remarkable role the New England states had played in shaping the foundation of the American nation and our emerging democracy. By a lucky twist of fate, he wrote a doctoral thesis about the frontier period in the American West. The West became his major scholarly and teaching field for the next forty years. During this period he also served as chair of the History Department, dean of Yale College, and (for one year) president of the university. He became totally committed not only to fostering higher education in all fields—the liberal arts, social sciences, and physical sciences—but also to improving education in public schools. All of these experiences have contributed to his education as an American historian.

1939, my parents sent me to Washington and the New York World's Fair with a tour group of thirty that happily included two other sixteen-year-olds. We had a great time, and I realized then that I could never spend my life in Alabama.

The most vivid impression of my southern upbringing, however, is that Civil War history was part and parcel of everyday experience. My grandmothers told me stories of the roles various ancestors had played in the war "back in slavery times," as they often said. I read southern novels and history constantly. *Gone with the Wind* was a particular favorite of mine, both in print and on the screen. I don't think there was a living, walking person in the South who did not see and like that film.

All of this made me a devoted student of southern history, but my real introduction to American history came when I was admitted to Emory University in Atlanta in 1941. A survey course taught by a young assistant professor named James Harvey Young made the national story fascinating, coherent, and alive. Young had been trained at the University of Illinois by the well-known Lincoln biographer James G. Randall. His approach to American history, like Randall's, was broadly nationalistic. It was Young who introduced me to Charles and Mary Beard's *Economic Interpretation of American History*, as well as to Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that American democracy grew out of the frontier experience rather than European precedents. My enthusiasm for history was so aroused that I took courses in English, European, Greek and Roman, and Chinese history, along with every class in political science, American literature, art, and music that I could squeeze in.

To a small-town boy like me, the experience of living in a real city was sheer joy. In some ways, Atlanta seemed more like Chicago than a southern city. At Emory I read and admired Samuel Flagg Bemis's monumental *Diplomatic History of the United States*, and when I decided to pursue a career in American history, I applied to Yale University, where Bemis taught. An even stronger reason for choosing Yale was the fact that a brilliant Emory graduate, David Potter, had taken his Ph.D. there under the guidance of Ulrich B. Phillips, the most distinguished historian of the Old South. When Phillips died while still in his fifties, Yale hired Potter to teach American constitutional history as well as the United States history survey course. Later in his Yale career, "Colonel Davey," as his students warmly called him, taught his own famous course in the history of the South. He and I became good friends as soon as I arrived at Yale.

Castling about for a dissertation topic in United States political history, I made an appointment to see Prof. Ralph Henry Gabriel. An outgoing and truly genial renaissance man, Gabriel founded Yale's American Studies Program and taught the first course in American intellectual history at Yale, which attracted nine hundred students each year. At our first meeting, he offered a piece of somewhat cryptic advice that I can still quote word for word: "Lamar, reared in the South, educated in the East, go west for your dissertation." When I asked what he meant, he explained that the Yale Library had recently acquired a rich cache of western Americana given by a remarkable

collector named William Robertson Coe. Archibald Hanna had been named curator and was just beginning to catalogue the collection.

I wasted no time in investigating for myself. Within four days, I had discovered a raft of extraordinary material that shed new light on the development of Dakota Territory. Drawing on it, as well as on documents in the National Archives and U.S. State Department collections, I set out to tell the story of how that area became the states of North and South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana. Eventually, I turned the dissertation into my first book, *Dakota Territory, 1861-89: A Study of Frontier Politics*. As a result, I was invited to teach the university's first course on the history of the American West. I started in 1951 and kept it up for more than four decades.

In the course of my dissertation research, I came to realize that western American history was in an appalling state. Almost without exception, the scholarly literature was devoted to celebrating the martial exploits of male pioneers. In this litany of conquest, Indians were cast only as villains. No attention was paid to Hispanic peoples, blacks, French, Mormons, or women. The histories of entire regions had been completely ignored. Nor had anything significant been written about the West in the twentieth century, the coming of World War II, and its aftermath. In my first year of teaching at Yale, I did fervent research on all these topics and incorporated my discoveries in lectures that proved popular with my students.

In *Dakota Territory*, I argued that the federal government had played a key role in developing the West not just by providing virtually free land, but by paying the salaries of territorial governors, secretaries, attorneys, and judges. In addition to establishing territorial legislatures and Indian reservations, Congress had dispatched the U.S. Army to keep the peace throughout the West. In short, the old concept of independent frontiersmen building a new society entirely on their own needed correction.

My contention that settlement of the frontier had been subsidized by the government led reviewers to label me a "federal historian," which is not exactly a complimentary term in the West. In fact, I learned more in the vast collections of territorial papers in Washington than I did in the Dakotas. By 1860, the western territories had become a favorite source of congressional patronage. Benjamin Harrison claimed that his patronage power in Congress gave him control over appointments to no less than four territories even before he became president. I felt vindicated in the 1960s, when William Goetzmann, one of the most brilliant graduate students one could ever hope for, wrote a history of the role of the Army Corps of Engineers in mapping, exploring, and developing the West. *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1967 and is still in print.

Apart from the Dakotas, my firsthand knowledge of the West was extremely limited. One summer, two friends and I spent three months touring the western states and Mexico by car. Along the way, we gambled a little, picked up some silver dollars, and bought jeans, cowboy hats, and boots. Our itinerary took us through Virginia City, Montana, an old mining town that boasted an old-fashioned saloon. One morn-

ing the three of us dressed up in our western costumes and moseyed up to the bar. Trying hard not to look like recent Yale Ph.D.'s, we plunked down our silver dollars and ordered straight bourbons. As we began sipping our drinks, a little boy pushed open the swinging doors of the saloon and shouted, "Look, dad, real cowboys!"

Encouraged by the favorable reviews of *Dakota Territory*, I decided to turn my attention next to the four territories of the Southwest: New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah. Colorado was considered safely "American" and was therefore admitted into the Union on a fast track in 1876. Utah, where Mormon polygamy was a complicating factor, did not achieve statehood until 1896. New Mexico and Arizona, being largely Hispanic and Indian, respectively, had to wait until 1912. Each territory had a separate culture and history, and each responded to its desert environment in a different way. In all of them, though, the federal government and its appointees called the shots. One of my best students, Lewis Gould of the University of Texas, wrote a history of Wyoming Territory. My own book *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History* was published in 1966 and updated for a new edition in 2005.

In the early 1950s, I met Ray Allen Billington, the leading historian of the American West, at a publisher's party in New York. "Say, Lamar," he asked, "you don't really hate Turner, do you?" As a leading exponent of the "frontier thesis," Billington had noted my criticism of Turner's approach. When I assured him that I had nothing against Turner, Billington and I became friends. At his invitation, I presented a paper at a meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Society in Chicago, in which I briefly summarized New Mexico's difficulties in becoming a state. The legendary historian Walter Prescott Webb, of the University of Texas, was in the audience. When Billington asked him for a comment, Mr. Webb rose to say he was glad to hear a paper about New Mexico that did not mention Billy the Kid. Billington later appointed me to serve with him on the committee that changed the name of the Mississippi Valley Historical Society to the Organization of American Historians.

After several years at Northwestern University, Billington moved to the Huntington Library in 1963 as senior research associate. He encouraged scholars of every persuasion to work at the Huntington and attend the annual meetings of the Western History Association, which he helped found in 1961. During my own sojourns to California, I met scores of western historians—Oscar O. Winther, Robert Athearn, Leonard Arrington, and others. In 1972, Billington asked me to serve as coeditor of his *Histories of the American Frontier* series. To me, he symbolized the virtues of tolerance, civilized disagreement, and a national as opposed to regional approach to history. By the end of his life, he had written twenty-six excellent books and was honored by historians everywhere. The vibrant community of western scholars that he created is alive and well today.

Billington's broad perspective fostered interest in such emerging fields as environmental, Mexican American, African American, Native American, social, and cultural history. This, in turn, led to the founding of major research centers on the

American West at Southern Methodist University, the University of New Mexico, Yale, the University of Colorado, and other schools, as well as at libraries such as the Huntington, the Newberry in Chicago, the Bancroft at the University of California, and the Beinecke at Yale. Art museums and galleries are flourishing all over the West. I myself taught for three summers at the Buffalo Bill Art and Cowboy Museum in Cody, Wyoming, which sounds parochial but wasn't.

To return to my early career, when I arrived in the fall of 1944, Yale was on a wartime schedule of three semesters a year. Nine of the ten residential colleges – all except Jonathan Edwards – were occupied by military personnel. I took a required survey course in the literature of American history taught by Leonard Labaree, Ralph Gabriel, George Pierson, and Samuel Flagg Bemis. It was the most comprehensive introduction to the subject I can imagine. I also took a historical methods course chaired by Harry Rudin and featuring experts in many fields – Ellsworth Huntington on climate, Ralph Turner on world history, and others. My third course, in English social history, was taught by Wallace Notestein, a charming man who lived just off Whitney Avenue and was married to the former president of Radcliffe.

Although I was still unsure that I wanted to pursue a career in United States history, on Notestein's recommendation I got a job teaching seventeen-year-old volunteer soldiers at Massachusetts State, now the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, in 1945-46. This proved to be as exciting – and exhausting – as my first year of graduate school. I taught four platoons of soldiers in uniform five days a week. The first semester covered United States history, the second the origins of World Wars I and II. My students were a rough bunch from South Boston, but I survived and loved it. At the end of the second semester, Massachusetts State asked me to stay on to teach modern European history and/or Greek and Roman history. I agreed to teach the European course and spent every night ravaging standard texts for material.

By this time, the Amherst campus was awash in returning veterans, many of whom were older than I was. Avid to learn about the European countries where they had served, they proved to be some of the most engaged students I have ever taught. When I came back to Yale, most of my fellow graduate students were veterans too. Mature and tough-minded, they gave me a first-hand history of their experiences in England and on the Continent.

My own attempts to enlist in the armed forces during the war had come to nothing. The Navy rejected me because I was underweight, the Army on account of a heart condition. Resigned to seeing action only on campus, I buckled down to my courses with Hajo Holborn, Whitney Griswold, Bemis, and Notestein. Bemis required every student to do archival research in the National Archives and State Department records. In researching a paper on Thomas Jefferson and France, I found myself reading Jefferson's, Madison's, and Monroe's original manuscripts – a thrill I shall never forget. In a folder labeled "Letters from Federalists," I discovered a letter that read,

“Thomas Jefferson, you are a God damned red headed son-of-a-bitch.” Naturally, I copied it out verbatim.

After settling on my dissertation topic, I taught U.S. history part-time at Wesleyan University. At the end of a year, they offered me a full-time job. Instead, I accepted Yale’s invitation to teach sections of David Potter’s survey course in U.S. history. Eventually, he gave it up to teach southern history and I took his place as chief lecturer. By that time, the History Department had recruited two more distinguished American historians, John Blum from MIT and Edward Morgan from Brown. Because my field of western history included Native American history, I gravitated toward Morgan, who had written a book about Native Americans in the colonial period, a subject that historians had virtually ignored.

When Potter moved to Stanford, the university undertook a search for his replacement that lasted three years. Finally, C. Vann Woodward was persuaded to come to Yale from Johns Hopkins. Woodward was a completely different breed of historian from Potter. He refused to teach undergraduates, fought with his ultra-left-wing graduate students, and attacked fellow faculty members who used their classes to preach their own political views. An avid believer in civil rights, he set forth a revisionist view of southern history in his books and, much later, often expressed disappointment that a new generation of black leaders had not emerged.

Woodward and I became close friends, despite his criticism of my own forebears for their compromising behavior in order to end the Republican military occupation of the South in 1876-77. We even collaborated on a seminar on the reconstruction period: Woodward taught about Congress’s reconstruction of the South and I taught about the reconstruction of Indian policy in the West. In his later years, Woodward and I met for lunch every two or three weeks, a relationship that nourished my continuing interest in southern and civil rights history. His closest friends, however, were Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Brooks was a conservative Episcopalian and a defender of the older agrarian South, but Penn Warren was a fighting liberal, and he and Woodward were soul mates to the end.

In the course of researching *The Far Southwest*, I was astounded by the cursory treatment American scholars had given to the history of Spanish Americans after the Mexican War of 1846-48. I began to reconstruct the resistance of Hispanic culture in the face of constant Americanization. In the process, I got to know my colleague in Latin American studies, Richard Morse. Together, we taught a course comparing the interactions of the Spanish pioneers with Indians and with east coast settlements in North America. My burgeoning interest in comparative history became a major commitment when Leonard Thompson, professor of African history, asked me to cowrite a book called *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared*, which Yale University Press published in 1981. We persuaded four historians from each continent to contribute analytical essays on the new interpretations of pioneer-

ing, touching on everything from social and economic processes to frontier politics and even the spread of Christianity.

Also in 1981, I contributed a chapter to an edited volume tracing the very different responses to the Great Depression in the Great Plains states and the Canadian prairie provinces. Four years later, I wrote an essay titled "From Bondage to Contract: Ethnic Labor in the American West, 1600-1900," in which I suggested that unfree labor systems in the North American West deserved comparison with southern slavery. The new emphasis on Indians, Mexican Americans, and environmental and women's history inspired me to discuss these topics in an essay called "Persistent Frontier: The West in the Twentieth Century," published in 1972. Twenty years later, in an essay for *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, edited by William Cronon, Jay Gitlin, and George Miles, I indulged myself in speculation about the future of the western past in the twenty-first century.

Over the years, I've become interested in western American art and have published essays and articles portraying the artist as historian. Three of my most distinguished doctoral students have specialized in histories of art—Amy Meyers of Yale's British Art Center; Martha Sandweiss, director of the Amherst College's Mead Art Museum and an expert on frontier photography; and Victoria Wyatt, who has written books on Alaskan photography.

Inevitably, the rise of the Indian rights movement prompted me to investigate the history of Native Americans. One of my most distinguished students is Phillip Deloria, son of the late Vine Deloria, the most significant and outspoken Indian leader in the latter twentieth century. In his dissertation (and later book) "Playing Indian," Phil Deloria traces white fascination with Indian spirit and culture from the time of the Boston Tea Party to the present.

The many strands of my scholarly interests came together in a major project that I undertook in the 1970s. Rather than following the usual career path and writing a textbook, I chose to edit the first comprehensive encyclopedia of the American West. Published by Crowell in 1977, it proved so successful that two decades later Yale University Press invited me to put together a revised and expanded edition, a project that involved some five hundred contributors and, incidentally, confirmed my resolve never to do an encyclopedia again.

In my many years as a teacher, I've been blessed with an extraordinary number of talented students, both graduate and undergraduate, who taught me a great deal about western history. Deloria and Brian Wescott, a Native American from Alaska, introduced me to a new world of Indian life and thought patterns. Maria Montoya, Steven Pitti, and Raul Ramos took me far beyond the conventional perception of Mexican American history. John Faragher (now on the Yale faculty), Sarah Deutsch, Susan Johnson, Teresa Jordan, Esther Lanigan, and Ruth Moynihan have established the central importance of gender and women's studies. William Cronon, Karl Jacoby, Steven Stoll, and Louis Warren have done pioneering work in the vast area of envi-

ronmental studies. Meanwhile, historians like Sandweiss and Wyatt have provided a new understanding of the central role of photography in portraying the western saga.

Another former student, Patricia Limmerick, boldly challenged all the old interpretations in a book so revisionist that she has been justly identified as the leading spokesperson for the new western history. A superb and witty lecturer, she taught a very popular course at Harvard for three years before moving to the University of Colorado. At Yale, Limmerick was extremely shy and used to weep if somebody criticized her in class. On the advice of a psychiatrist, she went to clown school to gain aplomb and became terribly successful at it. One day at Harvard, Limmerick approached President Derek Bok and said, "As you know, I'm a professional clown. Most medieval universities had professional fools on their faculty. I would like to be Harvard University's fool." "Patty," Bok replied, "I have already appointed so many fools to the faculty, I'm not adding another one." Today, Limmerick is as controversial as ever, and a new generation of historians is actively revising her own revisionist history.

My four-year tenure as chairman of Yale's History Department not only forced me to consider all fields of history but enabled me to plug some of the gaps in our coverage of Latin American, African, East European, and Middle Eastern history. Later, as dean of Yale College, I realized that the university had no viable programs in environmental, women's, and film studies, and that we had virtually abandoned foreign language requirements. With the help of Cronon, Morse, Sid Altman, and others, I was able to rectify many of these omissions.

In the 1970s, under the leadership of Jonathan Fanton (now head of the MacArthur Foundation), James Vivian, Bart Giamatti, and others, many of us came to realize that the university had no role in local primary and secondary education. With the help of many devoted faculty members and the National Endowment for the Humanities, we founded the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute and other year-long programs serving public school teachers. The sense of reaching out to the broader community has proved as rewarding to me as scholarship and teaching and deepened my appreciation of the central role the university plays in both community and national life.

My innate curiosity about how universities work made me susceptible to appointments as an administrator. Over the years, I have known and worked with a succession of Yale presidents, starting with Whit Griswold, with whom I forged a genuine friendship. My admiration for Kingman Brewster was not diminished by our frequent disagreements. Bart Giamatti was a close personal friend, but he had such strong likes and dislikes that in the end I felt his administration had not been a success, except with devoted alumni. I also came to know and like Benno Schmidt, who had been an undergraduate in my U.S. history survey course (although neither of us ever admitted it to the other). He was so New York-oriented that he came to be seen as an absentee president. The students passed around sweatshirts that said "Where's Benno?" on the back.

When Schmidt suddenly resigned in 1992, I realized that I was among his possible successors. Frank Turner urged me to take the job, saying, “You know where all the bodies are buried, including your own.” Bill Cronon got it right when he told me, “Howard, you and I have something in common. We don’t know how to say no.”

176

My own year as president was blessed by a super-loyal staff in Woodbridge Hall, wonderfully supportive fellow officials – Provost Judy Rodin, Bill Nordhaus, Terry Holcombe, and others – and by an understanding Yale Corporation. My luckiest early appointment was Rick Levin as dean of the Graduate School. Levin already had a wonderful reputation for solving problems across the university in firm but diplomatic ways, and to my great joy the Corporation chose him to be my successor. My final major appointment was Richard Brodhead as dean of Yale College.

But what was most gratifying was that Rick and I met every few days for a month to discuss problems and the future, and one of the first things he proposed was to appoint Linda Lorimer as vice president and secretary of the university. Since 1993 Richard Levin has proven to be one of the most innovative and progressive Yale presidents in the last fifty years. He has led this bright, able community of scholars, administrators, and students to new levels of academic and intellectual achievements. It has been an honor and a pleasure to have worked with him.