

Mr. Morgan, who has written widely about the fur trade, is on the staff of the Bancroft Library in the University of California at Berkeley. This paper was published in the Spring, 1966, issue of the American West and is reprinted with permission as it appeared there.

The FUR TRADE and Its HISTORIANS

DALE L. MORGAN

FEW WOULD EVER have heard of Frederick Jackson Turner, probably, had he stayed with his early preoccupation with the fur trade (or "Indian trade") of the Wisconsin area. Turner enunciated in 1893 a hypothesis about the importance of the frontier in American history, and his elaboration of that hypothesis by degrees made him famous, though the hypothesis has had its ups and downs in scholarly opinion. Some years later, a Texan maverick, Walter Prescott Webb, was acclaimed a powerful and original thinker for outlining a novel way of looking at the Great Plains, still later for writing up a vision of American history as a four-hundred-year boom on which time has run out. Turner's disciples are still trying to nail down his frontier hypothesis with specifics; and Webb's more grandiose conception, it seems likely, we shall be unable to test very effectively until we have waited a few hundred years to gain a useful perspective. The harder it is to pin something down, the more compelling the idea; it would seem that thinking must achieve a certain level of abstraction to command general admiration.

Very few, I suspect, would place Hiram Martin Chittenden in the same class with Turner and Webb, either as innovator or as investigator. Yet anyone disposed to inquire into the historiography of the past sixty years will find that Chittenden's *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* has influ-

enced nearly everything written about the history of the West in the first half of the nineteenth century—that it has, indeed, been more largely influential than the only general work Turner himself ever published (his *Rise of the New West, 1819–1829*, which leaned on Chittenden's history and described it as "excellent"). From the year of its publication, 1902, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* has not only been referred to constantly by writers of every description, but has also powerfully shaped their ideas. As recently as 1947 Bernard DeVoto observed that Chittenden's study "remains the most valuable single book about the trade and the only general history of it," though as DeVoto further remarked, "a staggering amount of new material has come to light and a great deal of scholarly work has been done." (Since DeVoto made this comment, Paul C. Phillips' *The Fur Trade* has appeared posthumously. It has a wider field of view than Chittenden's and is more continuously factful, but it is a basically less thoughtful work.) The idea may affront the professional historians, but it can be seriously maintained that neither Turner nor Webb has had an impact on the writing of western history comparable to Chittenden's.

The American Fur Trade of the Far West is not a narrative history but a rather episodic commentary on various aspects of the

trade and on enterprises, personalities, and related historical developments. Although he reviewed at considerable length John Jacob Astor's ill-starred attempt to establish the American fur trade on the Columbia between 1811 and 1814, in the process giving H. H. Bancroft a brisk going-over for outrageous treatment of Washington Irving, Chittenden conceived the western fur trade primarily in terms of an economic activity based on St. Louis, which became important after the return of Lewis and Clark and fell into desuetude when the tide of western emigration set in after 1840. "The true period of the trans-Mississippi fur trade," Chittenden argued, not altogether correctly, embraced the thirty-seven years from 1807 to 1843.

The point I more particularly wish to make is that Chittenden settled the ideas of two generations of historians who, directly or indirectly, have had to come to terms with the fur trade. His was a liberating influence originally, for he provided a rationale by which a diffuse and refractory history was made intelligible. Over the course of time, however, Chittenden has evolved into something of a tyrannical force, for he is still conditioning the thinking of students who should be pushing the frontiers of knowledge a good deal farther out. Pioneering is never easy, but it is time those interested in the fur trade should be stepping out on their own.

BEFORE I elaborate some ideas, let me touch upon certain difficulties, illustrated by Chittenden but not unique to the historian of the fur trade. Reading Chittenden is a necessary part of any student's apprenticeship, but one who reads him is going to find himself brainwashed to some extent. An author like Chittenden by his very usefulness has a crystallizing influence on one's thinking, on the actual formulation of concepts, to the point that one's capability for original thinking may be squeezed down and blunted: it is possible to find oneself walled off from reality.

Let me cite an example out of my own experience. In the course of writing my biography of Jedediah Smith some years ago, I arrived at the chapter dealing with the historic rendezvous of 1826, when William H. Ashley, whose energies had powered the advance of the American fur trade from the Missouri River to the Rockies during the three preceding years, sold out to a newly organized firm, Smith, Jackson & Sublette, and went back to the States with an agreement to furnish his successors with goods. I knew, as everyone had known since Chittenden's day, that in 1826 Ashley withdrew from the fur trade to devote his time to other affairs, and that he never laid eyes on the Rockies again. Thanks to the Missouri Historical Society's incomparable fur trade collections, I had copies of all the surviving documents that bore upon the negotiations at rendezvous and the subsequent developments. I wrote a draft of this particular chapter. And when I got through, it was all wrong; my text did not say what the documents imported. I wrote the chapter over, and the second version turned out no better than the first. At length it dawned on me what the trouble was: I "knew" what had happened, and I was writing my text to conform with what I knew — in defiance of the record at hand. I tossed out everything I thought I knew and wrote a third version. And since this rested upon the documents themselves, which told a plain, entirely logical story when allowed to do so, that third version did the job and was eventually published. My frame of reference had not been large enough to accommodate the data I had brought together, and I was slow to adjust.

What makes the incident worth relating is that I have a great deal of company in this mental incapacity. I do not know how many times in contemporary historiography I have run across formal conclusions contradicted straight down the line by the "facts" marshaled in their support. Bernard DeVoto had the same disrupting experience, for in *The Year of Decision: 1846* he said of

Justin Smith's *The War with Mexico*: "The research behind Professor Smith's book is certainly one of the most exhaustive ever made by an American historian, and if it came to an issue of fact I should perforce have to disregard my own findings and accept his. But it is frequently — very frequently — altogether impossible to understand how Smith's conclusions could exist in the presence of facts which he himself presents. If there is a more consistently wrong-headed book in our history, or one which so freely cites facts in support of judgments which those facts controvert, I have not encountered it."

I SEEM to be arriving at the awkward position of denying the utility of written history, asking that the student forget what others tell him, return constantly to the sources, and form his own ideas from those sources. But I have already indicated how difficult it is to approach history *de novo*, without regard to what has been found out, or thought, or believed before. The possibility of being led down the garden path is one of the hazards of getting an education; but if nobody pays any attention to what has been written already, we may be confronted with the spectacle of a hundred different students writing Chittenden all over again rather than pressing out toward the new frontiers I have envisioned.

The pioneering spirit is, of course, as rare in fur trade history as anywhere else, and let us not make the mistake of blaming Chittenden for our own lacks. Why this history has not been written on as high a level as might be wished is worth meditation.

To begin with, many historians are in too much of a hurry for a payoff; they will not take the time to qualify themselves to the point that they know what they are talking about; they do not stop to *think*. Inside the academic community, this scrambling haste (often expressing itself in a mere piling up of "facts") is known as the "publish-or-perish" syndrome, though critical standards would have to advance only very

slightly for the syndrome to be rephrased as "publish-and-perish," the scholar's ritual cooking of his own goose. If publication becomes a public exposé of incompetence, we need only establish some proper accounting system to effect a great improvement, for example, reducing a professor's salary \$1,000 per year for every piece of balderdash he publishes. When there are real risks to academic publication, we may expect the *quality* to improve.

In and out of the academic community, haste in publishing may be dictated by financial considerations; it can cost too much in dollars and cents to acquire the necessary education, an education no one is ever going to come by simply or easily; and the cost is going to keep on rising as more and more material emerges into view. Fur trade history has always been extremely complex, and I see no prospect that it will ever be otherwise.

Money is a factor, but so is simple human laziness. Men there are aplenty who parrot information because it is easier than embarking upon independent inquiry; these are the men who most appreciate stereotypes and abandon them with anguished outcries. A characteristic, if not distinguishing, feature of this class of historians is their unwillingness to stand up and declare themselves before the bar of judgment. They will remark that one authority says this, while another says that; and for them, there is the end of the line: we shall have no digging into the basis of this divergence of judgment, no assessment of the facts.

Also — let us face it — the fur trade field has its full share of characters who not only are unable to write but who give evidence of being unable even to read. Once upon a time, back in my college days, in a dog-eared unabridged dictionary of uncertain antecedents, I stumbled upon a lovely word, "disnoetic," defined as "incapable of knowing what one sees." I employed the term to devil a fellow columnist on the student newspaper, whose specialty was pontificating on the passing scene. I have not had occasion to

use the word since, but after thirty years, the season has come round: surely some will agree with me that the fur trade as a field of scholarly inquiry has its quota of "dis-noetic" practitioners.

ACTUALLY, simple incapacity may be easier to abide than the popularizers who clutter up the literature. These popularizers, as often as not, are frustrated novelists. At worst they are akin to the writers and producers of television scripts who are insufficiently gifted to create fictional worlds and use reality as a crutch, not scrupling to distort reality, with artistic license their justification. (The amorality that seizes upon Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, or whomever and does violence to truth may yet come to be recognized for what it is.) At best, fur trade popularizers may rise to the level of a Stanley Vestal, who was willing to work at writing but not at research. A scholar acquainted with him has recently summed up Vestal, not unkindly, by saying, "He was convinced that the day-to-day stuff of which history is composed would bore his readers, whereas unique, startling characters and incidents would sell well." Except as entertainments, and a source of income, the majority of Vestal's fur trade books should never have been written; they added nothing to knowledge, and by merely existing, by preempting the field, may have inhibited scholars and publishers alike from going ahead with books that needed doing.

I am complaining about popularizers, not synthesists. Of the latter we are never going to have enough, and we lost a great one when Bernard DeVoto succumbed to a massive heart attack in 1957. The mark of the synthesist is that he is indeed interested in facts, deals honestly and intelligently with them, clothes them with excitement, and has a gift for isolating the details that bring history to life. We would all be the gainers if more of our historians, so often preoccupied merely with the grinding out of "facts," could find within themselves the resources

to illuminate these facts for our understanding.

As an illustration of what is possible, consider a passage in DeVoto's *The Course of Empire*, a description of the Chippewas at the time the younger Alexander Henry was trading with them in the Red River country about 1800. These Chippewas, DeVoto tells us, "were at their farthest west here, and uneasy outside the forest, which ended a little farther east. As a result, they were in practically continuous terror of the Sioux." So far, the factual observation; the average historian would now have broken off in the conviction that he had done his job. DeVoto, however, went on to elaborate the scene and the situation, with exquisite attention to detail: "Every moment might be a threat of massacre, even a drift of cloud-shadow across the edge of the plain. Let anyone come in sight above the horizon or along the edge of an oak grove, let a horse stumble in the brush or leave a hoofprint in the mud of the riverbank, let a squaw have a painful dream or a bird dart low over a cook fire — it was enough to start the women screaming and digging foxholes and the braves running in circles and firing muskets at the sky." In a very few words DeVoto evoked a place, a time, and a whole culture. If any of our scholars have a comparable capability — imagination, the power to bring it to bear upon communication, a way with words, and mastery of background — let them not hide it away.

WHATEVER we call him — a synthesist or simply a historian working deftly, understandingly, and imaginatively at his trade — there is plenty of scope for a good man prepared to give himself to the charms of fur trade history. How useful, for example, would be a history of the Rocky Mountain trade that would view this segment of the trade in long perspective, as an integral part of the whole North American fur production. We have seen much loose writing about the "incredible richness" of the Rocky Mountain beaver preserves at the time ex-

ploitation began. But did the Rocky Mountain yield ever really compare with that of the Canadian fur lands, or even with that of the Great Lakes region fifty or a hundred years earlier? Maybe the American West was rich only in poor man's terms. It would be interesting to find out!

And how useful would it be to have some sound economic studies of the trade! I can scarcely imagine a more pressing want. James L. Clayton, of the University of Utah, has lately occupied himself in digging out some of the economic facts of fur trade history and has demonstrated that the fur trade did not lie down and die in 1843 as the Chittenden stereotype has led us all to suppose. The Rocky Mountain fur trade, as a way of life that drew sustenance from the annual rendezvous, had indeed ceased to exist, and well before 1843. But the fur trade itself went on. John Sunder, in his *The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1865*, has well recorded how a part of that trade sustained itself into the sixties; the inland (or outland) trade, with more emphasis upon the buffalo robe and less upon the beaver pelt, flourished in its own fashion throughout the same period. Another change in emphasis came with the virtual extermination of the buffalo by hide hunters who were actively encouraged by the Indian-hating army. The robe trade died out, but the fur trade continued, doubtless more valuable today than ever.

The economic history on which I lay such stress should, of course, be broad enough to embrace the problems of the entrepreneurs and fur merchants achingly neglected while historians have preoccupied themselves with the fur trade mainly as a force in geographic exploration. For a long while now our ideas have been dominated by the viewpoint of the trappers, individual mountain men colorful enough to have become the subjects of biographies, one after another. Such men bawled their fury when they felt themselves ground down by the entrepreneurs; their voices have mainly been heard in the literature, and the uproar that is their legacy has

deafened historians to virtually all other voices. A beaver skin taken in by a trader was not, as many have supposed, the equivalent of so much gold, to be deposited in the U.S. Mint or a mattress in the back room: it had to be sold. Dealers in fur could, and often did, lose their shirts. It is time all this was explored with some understanding that the fur trade did not exist in a world beyond time and circumstance. The prices placed upon goods traded for beaver in the mountains or along the rivers, the size, nature, and justification for markups, even a clear exposition of the type of goods traded, where bought, on what terms, to whom sold (Indians or white trappers), their quality, and the use made of them—all these facts would be instructive and need not be boring. Fights with grizzlies, tall tales, battles with the whisky jug, high jinks at rendezvous, and other familiar ingredients of the storyteller's art are not the only means of enlivening histories of the fur trade. By all means, let us have some well-written economic history with its own commanding excitement!

The fur trade teems with possibilities for investigation. No good history of the trading posts up the Missouri River, not even a dependable checklist to replace Chittenden's shaky essay in that direction, has been attempted yet; probably 50 per cent of what has been published about these forts is flatly wrong, and the errors propagate themselves with the vigor that weeds alone seem to possess. A scholar could have himself a fine time getting at the facts, and a good many of us would rather have the flowers than the weeds. Individual fur trading concerns in the vast basin of the Missouri similarly await thorough investigation. It is incredible that we do not yet have a useful history of the company which bore various names at different times but was always dominated by the Chouteaus of St. Louis. Only this primary lack makes it surprising that the Columbia Fur Company, founded in 1822 and transformed five years later into the American Fur Company's Upper Missouri

Outfit, has been subjected to no critical study, the accepted beliefs about this concern being fable to the extent of perhaps 40 per cent.

Clearly, the Indian tribes need to be re-studied in relation to the fur trade. Some interesting ideas have been advanced lately about noneconomic motivations of Indians in their relation to traders, for example, the status that was so highly prized by the "carrier tribes" who transported furs from the south of Canada to Hudson Bay, willing to starve and die for the ill-paid privilege. It would be fascinating to see such ideas pursued further. And I, for one, would be pleased to see serious studies undertaken of the relationships between particular traders and particular tribes — who the men were, how they established themselves among the tribes, the effect they had upon subsequent tribal history — the whole works. For that matter, we have scarcely a single history of a western Indian tribe that makes adequate use of fur trade sources. The ethnologists have tended to pursue their own mystique, and their inclination has been all against reliance upon documentation preserved in a different culture. This avoidance of the appearance of evil would be ludicrous, except that historians formally concerned with the fur trade have been just as inept. I should like to say, however, that Alvin M. Josephy's lately published *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest*, a work with a historical rather than an ethnological bias, shows brilliantly what can be done, both with Indians and with fur trade sources. Josephy having established a precedent, maybe we will see studies of other tribes reflecting a comparable mastery of fur trade documentation.

WHAT I HAVE SAID here is dominated to a considerable extent by my own specialization in the history of the trans-Mississippi West. I am not really competent to discuss the state of the art elsewhere, the Minnesota region, for example, or much of Canada. My personal horizons, nevertheless, continue to

widen; the more I find out, the more I need to know; and peripheral interests have a way of becoming central. In a sense it is a comfort to be involved with such a large area of knowledge, one which with due regard for human mortality has no limits, never an end to the possibilities for learning something new. There are discomforts, too. It is easiest to write authoritatively on a subject when you do not know too much about it. The more you learn, the more you are tied down by facts, and the more difficult you find it to express a complex of fact with any degree of grace. But this essentially is a literary problem and though it does away with "authority" forever, I think we need to take a fresh look at practically everything.

We have gone a circuitous course to arrive back at the Messrs. Turner, Webb, and Chittenden. I ventured the opinion at the outset that Chittenden may have made a fundamentally more useful contribution to western history than either Turner or Webb. Chittenden has been useful to this degree because his hypotheses proceeded out of a body of data subject to being checked. We have reached a point where we ought to strike out beyond Chittenden, doing so, however, by a series of controlled hypotheses, constantly subject to the discipline of factual correction. If chroniclers of fur trade history are equal to this challenge, Chittenden is going to be one of the casualties; from here on, his reputation can only decline.

He would not have been dissatisfied by that, I think. As a military man, Chittenden understood something about the bubble reputation pursued in the cannon's mouth. He did not set out to be one of the immortals, to feel himself brushed by angels' wings. He did a work for his day, a work no one had had the wit or the will to do before him; and because he did well what he set out to do, within the limitations of what it was then possible to do, Chittenden will have his own imperishable place in the historiography of America and its West. Any who follow him may rest content if their life work is assessed as comparably valuable.



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