

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

- WSJ.com
- APRIL 28, 2009

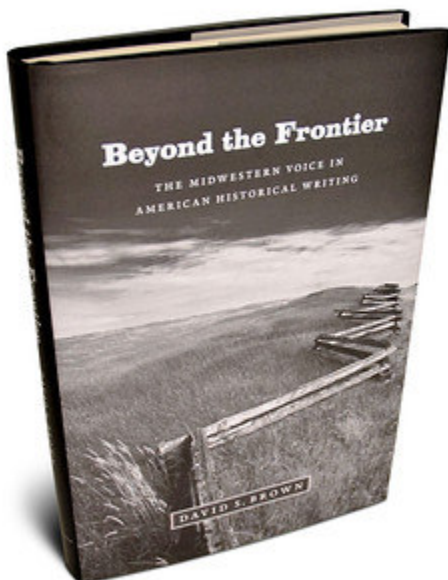
Bookshelf

A Heartland View of History

Out of the Midwest: the 'progressive' interpretation of America's past.

By [ROBERT K. LANDERS](#)

'The Midwest is a state of mind,' David S. Brown says in "Beyond the Frontier." And indeed it must be, since conceptions of what it geographically is seem to vary. Michigan residents, according to a survey, think of it as including Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and their own state, as well as Iowa, Missouri and part of Minnesota. But North Dakotans view the Dakotas and Nebraska as Midwestern, while New Yorkers look upon Kansas as the region's center.



Whatever its geographic boundaries, Mr. Brown contends, the Midwest has exerted a spell on its offspring who write history as well as on those who make it. The leading figures in "Beyond the Frontier" are the historians Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, William Appleman Williams and Christopher Lasch. Over a century, starting in the 1890s with Turner (b. 1861, Portage, Wis.), continuing with Beard (b. 1874, near Knightstown, Ind.) and later, during the Cold War, with Williams (b. 1921, Atlantic, Iowa) and then Lasch (b. 1932, Omaha, Neb.), these scholars produced scholarly works "sympathetic to populist politics, critical of America's swift drift toward empire, and unreconciled to unrestrained capitalism." By doing so, they founded a "progressive" school of history writing that influenced young scholars and helped to shape America's understanding of itself. After World War II, Mr. Brown says, the outlook of Midwestern progressives contrasted sharply with that of liberal historians.

"Big ideas," even when ultimately proved wanting, often move scholarly debate forward, as Mr. Brown notes. Turner's famous "frontier thesis," unveiled in 1893, argued that westward expansion, the dynamic process in which Americans were continually beginning life over again, "furnish[ed] the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West." The thesis underwent extensive scrutiny in subsequent decades, and it turned out, Mr. Brown observes, that Turner "had underestimated the impact of nongeographic forces" -- such as the Enlightenment and the rise of cities, industry and organized labor -- "in the making of democratic states while overestimating the frontier's power to produce representative government."

The big idea in Beard's masterwork, "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States" (1913), was that the Founding Fathers were, in his words, "with a few exceptions, immediately, directly, and personally interested in, and derived economic advantage from, the establishment of the new system." At first violently attacked, his thesis came to be widely accepted in the 1930s. "By introducing the idea that self-interest influenced the framers," Mr. Brown writes, "Beard forced students of the American past to consider the Constitution as an economic rather than a merely legal, let alone divinely inspired, text." Nevertheless, Beard's thesis was thoroughly demolished in the 1950s by the Texas-born historian Forrest McDonald and several other scholars -- an accomplishment that Mr. Brown, strangely, neglects to mention. Mr. McDonald argued, for instance, that on close examination, there was "virtually no correlation" between the Framers' actual economic interests and their votes at the Constitutional Convention.

Beyond the Frontier

By David S. Brown

(University of Chicago Press, 227 pages, \$32.50)

As the Cold War got under way, Midwestern historians in the "Wisconsin School" began to challenge liberal scholars' view that the struggle was one chiefly between communism and democracy. These progressives preferred instead to emphasize the conflict's supposed economic roots and to question what Williams was to call America's pursuit of "empire as a way of life." In "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy," his influential 1959 work prefiguring New Left revisionism, Williams blamed the Cold War on the U.S.

Like Beard's thesis on the Constitution and the Framers, Williams's on the Cold War did not stand up under serious scrutiny. Penn State historian Robert James Maddox, a native of Monroe, N.Y., provided a devastating critique of Williams's shoddy scholarship (and that of six other Cold War revisionists) in "The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War" (1973); Williams, in response, offered only a very brief and very lame defense. His rationalization for constructing speeches and dialogues that didn't happen, says Mr. Brown, will seem creative or weak, "depending on one's position." Mr. Brown also insinuates that Maddox had a personal ax to grind. But that in itself would not make his critique any less devastating. Maddox's work "aroused little interest" in the academy, Mr. Brown reports. He doesn't seem to think this reflected badly on the profession.

Notwithstanding the author's avowed effort at neutrality between the Midwestern and liberal schools, Mr. Brown's disapproval of Cold War liberalism becomes apparent. He writes darkly of America's "complicity in the cold war" and "its rapid economic and military encirclement of the Soviet state." He calls America's containment policy -- aimed at thwarting Soviet expansion -- "problematic." Liberals were wrong to think they had to "choose" between the two systems, he says.

During the 1960s, when he was a radical, Christopher Lasch was a relentless critic of Cold War liberalism. But, though Mr. Brown doesn't mention it, Lasch finally modified his assessment somewhat: In 1991, three years before his death at age 61, he acknowledged that the anticommunist Congress for Cultural Freedom, which he had once scathingly attacked, "served a useful purpose in the 1950s," even though "the necessary struggle against Stalinist liberalism in the West was compromised by the congress's secret dependence on the CIA."

With "The True and Only Heaven" (1991), Mr. Brown writes, Lasch produced "a major work of intellectual history that pushed beyond conventional concepts of left and right." His combination of populism and cultural conservatism was a genuine contribution to American thought. It may prove to be no more tenable than the "big ideas" of his predecessors, but, given our contemporary concerns, Lasch is certainly the most interesting of the thinkers whom Mr. Brown has conscripted into his Midwestern school.

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."