

David W Fletcher, Fall 1999

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

BOOK REVIEW: *WILDERNESS AT DAWN*

Ted Morgan's *Wilderness at Dawn: The Settling of the North American Continent* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) offers "a collective biography of ordinary Americans" (p. 12) to portray a threefold frontier—English, French, and Spanish—that collided on the "New World" continent. This frontier was multinational and much more so than just European. "There was always the Indian, making the frontier a battle line and also a porous line of red-white exchange" (p. 13). Furthermore, the black slaves added yet another dimension to this already multi-faceted picture as they harkened from the African continent often via the Caribbean islands.

As the frontier kept moving . . . it left behind the hinterland [with its] land and government, institutions and stability, in contrast to the anarchy and insecurity of the frontier. What made America was not just the hinterland, and not just the frontier, but the tension and interaction between the two.

The settling of the North American continent . . . was an epic of the multitudes, of mundane events and minor characters, of incremental advance and retreat, of clearings in the forest and compasses and chains, a quilted patchwork pieced together from strips of settled land, an aggregate that kept expanding over the centuries until it assumed its present shape (pp. 13-15).

Morgan, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist from New York City, who has written biographies of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Sir Winston Churchill, and Somerset Maugham, organizes his "story of an empty continent filling with people" (p. 11) by the usual chronological structure (from ca. 1490 to the early 1800s): Part One—First Arrivals, Part Two—English Footholds, Part Three—The English Advance and the French Retreat, and Part Four—America for the Americans. But his frontier approach is quite fragmented and therefore very realistic. He includes the Spanish presence, the French, Jamestown, Pilgrim, Dutch, Puritan, Manorial, Chesapeake, Black,

David W Fletcher, Fall 1999

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

Salzburger, and Quaker frontiers. His careful distinction between pilgrim and puritan is to be applauded, and his seeing the Virginia tobacco planters (Manorial), the Charlestown rice culture (Black), and Austrian Lutherans in Georgia (Salzburger) as their own “frontier” gives an important geographical specificity to the peculiar characteristics of the various areas of settlement. Of note is Morgan’s interweaving native interaction with the Europeans. This he does frequently, so a separate chapter about any Indian counter frontier is unnecessary. However, the idea of a moving “frontier” against an established Indian presence does belie the Eurocentric perspective of the author.

Wilderness At Dawn is chocked full of compelling stories of “known” and “unknown” players in the American drama. These stories cover a broad range of human experience. Nothing is left untouched, and verisimilitude oozes from the narrative. The story flows beautifully while the veracity of the events is not at all compromised as it tends to be with poetic license. Ample anecdotes from diaries, monographs, and public records move the reader through eyewitness accounts. While the lack of footnotes might frustrate the technical historian, such certainly enhances the readability of the book as story. Primary and secondary sources for each chapter are listed appropriately at the end of the book.

Worthy of special mention are Morgan’s excellent brief syntheses—sometimes historical, sometimes geographical, sometimes a mixture of both. A few examples are: Spain’s capture of the last Moorish stronghold, the Granada, and the deadline for the expulsion of unconverted Jews coinciding with Columbus’ initial voyage westward in 1492 (p. 48), the rich contextual

David W Fletcher, Fall 1999

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

background for Ponce de Leon's exploration of Florida (p. 57), the effects of the Spanish transplanting their whole culture (p. 79; cf. p. 209), important differences in early English and French settlements—"compact area of dense settlement" versus "handles on a two-thousand-mile-long jump rope [the water routes]" (p. 100; cf. p. 195), the contrast of the "geographical lacework" of the Chesapeake Bay with the St. Lawrence system (p. 112), the momentous importance of tobacco as "the substitute for undiscovered gold" (p. 121), the New Amsterdam resistance to Jewish refugees from Pernambuco, Brazil—an example of interconnectedness of North and South America (p. 159), Indian perceptions of land "ownership" and its relation to Puritan Anglicizing of the Indians (pp. 171-172), the forward / backward concerns of the hinterland, i.e., its duality (p. 185), hints of a phenomenological approach in comparing Catholic and Indian religions (p. 194), Catholic clerical obstinacy to dissidents as detrimental to French immigration to Canada and Louisiana, and hence French success in the New World (p. 206), the importance of Pope's rebellion as illustrative of geographical persistence, i.e., the Indians could not completely purge Spanish influence, as they were "Hispanicized beyond return" and had become "irretrievably hybrid" (p. 216), the Spanish lure of slaves to the free haven of St. Augustine as a prelude for the Stono Rebellion and the English siege of St. Augustine (p. 255), the excellent summary of English, Spanish, and French settlements by the year 1750, although Morgan fails to include Spanish California (p. 298), and the fine global construct for the Seven Years' War, indicating effects in Minorca, Calcutta, the Philippines, and elsewhere (p. 309).

In addition, this reader learned, among other things, that the Indians captured by Columbus carried syphilis to Spain, which was previously unknown in Europe (p. 51), that the Spanish crown reacted negatively, at the behest of the Catholic clergy, to colonial brutality against Indians (p. 56), that Florida means Easter day, *Pascua florida* (p. 58), that Cabeza de Vaca spent eight years among the Indians (pp. 63-66), that the New Mexico Pueblo revolt of 1860 was “the one and only example of an Indian rebellion that succeeded in expelling the colonizing power” (p. 209), that the sickle-cell gene in slaves from West Africa gave them an “inherited immunity to malaria and yellow fever” (p. 226), that a woman, Eliza Lucas, introduced the cultivation of indigo into South Carolina (p. 258), and that germ warfare was used by the English against the Indians in the eighteenth century (p. 344).

While some generalizations in the narrative do exist, Morgan is not prone to such as his rich details about people, places, and events paint a full, realistic portrait. On the deficit side, however, is his unfortunate rehashing of the Bering Strait origin myth (chapter one) without any reference to alternative explanations from Indian traditions that have been passed down for countless generations. Otherwise, the book is a mine for excellent information. These are stories to be passed on. They are worth telling and worthy of hearing. Maps in the work are good, but sparse, as there are only eight. More would be better. The only illustrations are black and white, and they depict relevant art, relics, photos, letters, documents, and quotes at the beginning of each chapter. Notes are provided at the end as well as a fine index.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1999

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

In summary, while the critical revisionist scholar might bewail Morgan for his portrayal of a different America and charge him as guilty of a gullible swallowing of Turner's "frontierism," the reality of America as "no one's clone" and as "self-invented, *sui generis*, underivative and wholly original" (p. 492), in this mind of this reviewer, remains valid and intact.

In the words of the author,

America was a smoking test tube, a braying infant, a blank page; it was change made palpable, change glorified, change as a stated goal, fluid, undetermined, unfixed, defying the logic of the centuries, observing its distant horizon lines, a ship that had strayed from the fleet and was off on its own uncharted course (p. 493).