

Historical Musings

How South Dakota Sparked the New Western History Wars: A Commentary on Patricia Nelson Limerick

The great revival of the history of the American West began, in part, with a young Californian's visit to South Dakota in 1972. Patricia Nelson Limerick, who hoped to break the stereotype assigned to radical student activists during the 1960s, had been visiting and working with the elderly in Santa Cruz nursing homes and inadvertently sparked a national news story that attracted the interest of a history professor out on the prairie. That history professor brought Limerick to South Dakota, setting in motion a pathbreaking career in western history and triggering a grand debate about the history of the American West. While her early work embodies some of the limitations that complicate historians' ability to interpret the past, the course of Limerick's career also provides guidance for promoting healthy interpretive debates among historians.

In the late 1960s, student activists at the University of California–Santa Cruz (UCSC) were already working with the poor, farm workers, and minority groups and against the Vietnam War, so undergraduate Patty Limerick struck out on a new path and found a different cause, visiting with the elderly. “I was supposed to convince them to oppose the war,” she recalls, “but we didn’t get to much of that.”¹ Limerick focused instead on simply socializing and lessening the isolation of the aged “when the political discussions were not fruitful.” In 1970, the Associated Press (AP) covered her work with the elderly in a story

1. Patricia Nelson Limerick, telephone interviews, 27 Aug., 16 Nov. 2009. Unless otherwise noted, the information and quotations from Limerick in this essay are taken from these interviews. I want to thank Professor Limerick for generously sharing her time and for sharing correspondence from her files. The name Patricia Nelson Limerick is used throughout the text of this article for the sake of consistency, although her correspondence bore the name Patricia Nelson or Patty Nelson before her marriage.

emphasizing that some 'sixties students were "doing good" and that not all of the nation's young were anti-establishment protestors. Limerick later recalled that the AP piece portrayed her "as a kind of good teenager, sitting attentively in nursing homes while bad college students neglected personal grooming and raised questions about Richard Nixon's conduct of the Vietnam War."²

The AP wire story ran in newspapers across the country. Journalist and commentator Charles Kuralt followed up on the feature with a visit to Santa Cruz in the fall of 1971 and produced a story about Limerick's work with the elderly for his "On the Road" segment of the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. "On the Road," which began in 1967 and was purportedly based on John Steinbeck's book *Travels with Charley*, specialized in focusing on out-of-the-way places and underreported stories.³ Thanks to the media attention, Limerick received nearly fifty letters from around the country about her efforts in Santa Cruz. One of those letters was from history professor Gerald W. Lange at General Beadle State Teachers College in Madison, South Dakota, newly minted in 1969 as Dakota State College. In his typically enterprising fashion, Lange invited Limerick to Madison during spring break in 1972 to talk about her Santa Cruz initiative. He had, he wrote, "been diligently seeking ways of motivating students to accept the greater challenges of responsibility."⁴ Taking his own advice, Lange would go on to serve for many years as a Democrat in the South Dakota Legislature. Lange, who also brought the social activist Saul Alinsky to campus to speak that spring, noted that Limerick and her "guitar could reach the students better than we of the over 40 crowd."⁵ He tapped

2. See Limerick, "California and the West: Banning Writ Large?" *Riverside (California) Press-Enterprise*, 20 May 1990; Limerick, "Layer upon Layer of Memory in the American West," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 Mar. 2000.

3. See Matthew C. Ehrlich, "Myth in Charles Kuralt's 'On the Road,'" *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 79 (Summer 2002): 327–38.

4. Lange to Nelson, 3 Dec. 1971, personal papers of Patricia Nelson Limerick (hereafter cited as Limerick personal papers). Limerick's papers are in the process of being moved to the archives of the Denver Public Library; the documents housed there at the time of this writing are cited as Limerick Papers, Denver Public Library. See also Lange to author, 6 Feb. 2009; Chuck Clement, "Retired Professor Lange Teaches Course on Government," *Madison Daily Leader*, 19 Apr. 2010.

5. Lange to Nelson, 3 Dec. 1971. See also Lange to Nelson, 25 Apr. 1972, Limerick per-

funds from the Community Action Program to finance the trip.⁶

Even though she had never traveled east of Salt Lake City, Utah, Limerick gladly accepted the invitation and set off to see “the East” in South Dakota. She boarded a plane in San Francisco and after a stop-over in Denver was greeted at the Sioux Falls airport by Lange and his family. She stayed at the old granite Hotel Park⁷ in Madison, met

sonal papers; Lange to author, 27 Mar. 2010; *The Eastern* (Dakota State College), 13 Apr. 1972. Alinsky's famous book *Rules for Radicals* was published in 1971, and he died in 1972 after his visit to Madison, but his influence persists. See “Saul Alinsky, the Man Who Inspired Obama,” National Public Radio, 30 Jan. 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100057050>; Peter Slevin, “For Clinton and Obama, a Common Ideological Touchstone,” *Washington Post*, 25 Mar. 2007; Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1989); Noam Cohen, “Know Thine Enemy,” *New York Times*, 22 Aug. 2009; Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).

6. Lange to Nelson, 3 Feb. 1972, Limerick personal papers.

7. In 1980, fire gutted the historic Hotel Park, killing four guests. Between thirty and forty of those staying at the hotel were attending the Dakota History Conference

Gerald W. Lange, professor of history at Dakota State College, was one of the many personalities who prompted Patricia Nelson Limerick to explore the history of the American West.



many hunters, saw pigs roaming country farmsteads, and encountered many of the trappings of rural South Dakota life. Paul Redfield, one of the godfathers of Madison's reconstructed settlement-era town called "Prairie Village," gave her a tour of its vintage buildings and other artifacts of early pioneer life and "regaled her with his Irish blarney."⁸

Lange, long active in Saint Thomas Catholic Church in Madison, took Limerick to a retreat, a unique occasion for the college student, who had been inside a Catholic church only a few times for funerals. At the retreat, Lange taught her a lesson in bravery and nonconformity. When discussions yielded for a break and participants were told to do whatever they wanted for fifteen minutes, Lange stood on his head, proclaiming, "This is what I wanted to do."⁹ In the course of her Madison visit, Limerick also spoke to audiences at Dakota State College, South Dakota State University, Madison High School, Lake Preston High School, De Smet High School, and several senior-citizen homes.¹⁰ She told her audience at Dakota State that the "battle of loneliness is an inexpensive war. You don't need ships and bombers. We have to start somewhere and there is much we can learn from old people."¹¹ Limerick later recalled that it "was an absolutely wonderful visit, and as I have often said, as my first-ever speaking invitation, it made it very difficult to turn down invitations in the future, on the off-chance that they would prove to be as enjoyable as that trip!"¹²

During that spring of 1972, Limerick was preparing to attend graduate school farther East, at Yale, in the fall. Learning of her great trepidation over the impending sojourn, Paul Redfield offered Limerick some

hosted by Lange's institution, Dakota State College. *Madison Daily Leader*, 13 Apr. 1980. Subsequently, two awards presented at the conference were named in honor of participants who perished in the fire: Cedric Cummins, professor of history at the University of South Dakota, and Richard Cropp, an amateur historian and artist from Mitchell, South Dakota.

8. Lange to author, 6 Feb. 2009.

9. Limerick, "What Turner Really Wanted: Redefining Borders and Frontiers" (address, Northern Great Plains History Conference, Pierre, S.Dak., 1 Oct. 1993), p. 5, Limerick personal papers.

10. *Madison Daily Leader*, 27 Mar. 1972.

11. *The Eastern*, 23 Mar. 1972.

12. Limerick to author, 9 Jan. 2009.

advice before she left Madison. He told her that in the spring, when the prairie ponds in South Dakota begin to thaw, they emit terrible rumblings, cracking noises, and “big booms,” but then the commotion is quickly over. “That’s what Yale will be like,” he said. “You’ll adjust fast.” Limerick admits to being “in tears for three months” after arriving at Yale, and her professors, her husband recalled, “were sure she was headed for a breakdown.”¹³ She carried on, but “couldn’t figure out or make peace with the whole un-Californian intensity and pressure of the place.”¹⁴ Limerick later recalled that her struggles had less to do with her California attributes than with her own specific bundle of “eccentricities,” but she found the “California explanation” to be “very useful cover.”¹⁵

When Limerick began her graduate work, she had not thought much about the history of the American West. Santa Cruz did not have a western historian, and most of the history faculty was focused on studying the eastern United States and Europe. Many of Limerick’s fellow students at the new, experimental university at Santa Cruz were far removed from their Old West heritage. According to the well-known liberal historian Page Smith, the first provost of Santa Cruz and author of the multivolume series *The People’s History of the United States*, Santa Cruz was “in the vanguard” of the commune and counterculture movements, and its image “as a flaky, drug-using place was not too far off the mark.”¹⁶ While Limerick’s hometown of Banning, California, held an

13. Quoted in Mark Feeney, “Gunslinger of the New West: The Controversial Patricia Nelson Limerick is Changing Our Sense of the Past,” *Boston Globe*, 1 Mar. 2000. See also Fawn Germer, “‘Campus Fool’ Wins Genius Cash; Students Warned About ‘Wacko’ Winner of MacArthur Prize,” *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, Colo.), 13 June 1995. Limerick’s difficulties adjusting to Yale are discussed in the Jeff Limerick-Page Smith correspondence, Page Smith papers, in the possession of Anne Smith Easley and author. Limerick requested that the Jeff Limerick-Page Smith correspondence not be quoted, and I have deferred to her wishes.

14. Limerick to C. Vann Woodward, 11 Dec. 1984, Woodward Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn. (hereafter cited as Woodward Papers).

15. Limerick to author, 30 June 2011.

16. Jeff Wilson, “Hippies Culture Still Big Part of Santa Cruz,” *Associated Press*, 26 Oct. 1989. Limerick attended Santa Cruz in the “school’s early granola-and-idealism days” and admits to “being seriously influenced by ’60s consciousness raising and crusades for

annual festival dubbed “Stage Coach Days,” the event was hardly one to inspire a lifetime spent in the study of the American West.

Limerick’s trip to South Dakota during her senior year at Santa Cruz began to widen her horizons and cause her to think more deeply about the West as a lived experience. Her impression of the Great Plains prior to her visit was that the region was a “boring and remote hinterland,” but Lange’s invitation had introduced her to the “great color and variation and spirit in Dakota.” The experience was, she recalls, one of her “greatest encounters with human nature.” When Lange and his family took her back to the airport in Sioux Falls, she wept. Lange’s then-ten-year-old son Roberto, whom President Barack Obama recently selected to serve as a federal judge for South Dakota, gave her a dime as a memento of her visit.¹⁷

That fall, as Limerick began her studies at Yale, she fully intended to write her dissertation about the history of aging in America, a product of her experience working with the elderly in Santa Cruz. After a short period of drift, however, she signed up for Howard R. Lamar’s famous seminar on the history of the American West, mostly because she needed more seminar credits. Lamar had put Dakota on the historical map with his first book, *Dakota Territory, 1861–1889: A Study of Frontier Politics*, a product of his own Yale dissertation.¹⁸ Lamar, widely known for his generous support of graduate students, set Limerick on her western course. Conscious of the inferior status of western history in the profession, Limerick began to think of Banning and South Dakota and to wonder “What about us in the West?” She also sensed that western history held many fruitful topics that had not been researched and that the field was wide open to inquiry, especially in comparison to the picked-over regions of New England and the South. In an age when students

social justice” (Carey Quan Gelernter, “Showdown in the Western Myth Corral,” *Seattle Times*, 27 July 1995).

17. “Lange Gets Senate Confirmation as Federal Judge,” *Associated Press*, 21 Oct. 2009.

18. Lamar, *Dakota Territory, 1861–1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956); Jon K. Lauck, “The Old Roots of the New West: Howard Lamar and the Intellectual Origins of *Dakota Territory*,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 39 (Autumn 2008): 261–81; Jon K. Lauck, “The Making of *Dakota Territory*: How Serendipity Yielded a Famous Book about South Dakota,” *South Dakota Magazine*, Sept./Oct. 2006.

were rejecting the “rat race” and “getting back to nature,” however, she was careful not to seem too entrepreneurial or careerist.

Limerick began to craft a dissertation prospectus focusing on the relationship of humans to the various topographies of her native California. She envisioned a study that ranged widely across the state’s mountains, fertile farmscapes, deserts, and coastline, an angle of vision on the West that a large group of scholars would later embrace and develop into the field of environmental history.¹⁹ When she presented her prospectus in 1975, however, it was rejected for being sarcastic, whimsical, and generally not meeting the formal requirements of Yale. Limerick took the rejection personally, viewing it as an attack on her identity, literary style, and free spirit. A year of soul-searching and “chemical experimentation” set in, and she concluded that she could not proceed on the rigid terms set forth by her dissertation committee. Lamar and her Santa Cruz mentor Page Smith, Limerick remembers, “had arrived at wit’s end in trying to figure out how to rescue me.”²⁰ Lamar asked her to give one final try. Her future husband, Jeff Limerick, worked with Smith behind the scenes to boost her flagging spirit, to help her overcome her deepening anxieties and irritability, and to save her from expulsion.²¹

With the help of a bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon (Smith’s favorite drink) and a bucket of ice, Limerick composed a more formal prospectus overnight despite the fact that doing so cut against her grain. This time, she decided to focus solely on deserts. Limerick’s proposed study was roughly modeled on Roderick Nash’s interest in the role of nature in American history.²² Her conception of “environmental studies” in-

19. Richard White, “American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field,” *Pacific Historical Review* 54 (Aug. 1985): 297–335.

20. Limerick to author, 30 June 2011.

21. Limerick to Smith, n.d., Page Smith papers.

22. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967). Merle Curti directed Nash’s University of Wisconsin dissertation, “Wilderness and the American Mind” (1965), which became the book of the same title. E. David Cronon, “Merle Curti: An Appraisal and Bibliography of his Writings,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 54 (Winter 1970–71): 132; Interview, Roderick Nash, *Environmental History* 12 (Apr. 2007): 399–400. Nash began the nation’s first course in environmental history at the University of California–Santa Barbara in 1970. Roderick Nash,

cluded “Western American history, nature in American literature, American architecture and landscape, and theories of American character.”²³ She planned to move beyond the study of the lush and green areas of the country, which had received treatments in other books, and focus on the overlooked arid spaces of the West.

In December 1979, at the American Historical Association annual meeting, Limerick interviewed for positions with Harvard, the University of California–Berkeley, and other prominent institutions. She told them her dissertation would be done in March, even though she had not yet started writing. When the Harvard hiring committee asked Limerick how her course on the American West would be unique, she said she would emphasize the history of women, minorities, and other neglected groups and aspects of western history. Although one of the skeptical members of Harvard’s hiring committee asked why she was so interested in the “historical backwater” of the West, an area of study viewed as ebbing, they were ultimately impressed with her passion for her subject.²⁴ With an unexpected job offer from Harvard in hand, she went to work on her thesis at a furious pace, drafting a chapter a week and making her deadline. In the fall of 1980, Limerick went off to Harvard to teach western history and polish her dissertation, which the University of New Mexico Press published in 1985 as *Desert Pas-*

“American Environmental History: A New Teaching Frontier,” *Pacific Historical Review* 41 (Aug. 1972): 362. Although he was from New York City, Nash “loved the outdoors” and “worked as a licensed fishing guide in wilderness areas of Wyoming and Ontario. My attraction to wilderness was one reason I undertook the writing of the history of its preservation and of American attitudes toward it” (Nash to David Brower, 5 Mar. 1962, Merle Curti Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison).

23. Nelson to Carey McWilliams, 28 Mar. 1974, Carey McWilliams Papers, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California–Los Angeles.

24. David Donald asked the “backwater” question, according to Limerick. The other two members of the Harvard hiring committee were Ernest May and Bernard Bailyn. Of Limerick’s lecture to the Harvard history department prior to her being hired, Bailyn recalls that “in the introduction to it, she analogized her struggle to get through the lecture with the struggles of the Western pioneers to overcome obstacles of all sorts—droughts, mountains to climb, rivers to ford, etc.—never sure they would get through alive at the other end. And she then discussed some interesting thoughts about Western history which she intended to work through in her dissertation” (Bailyn to author, 14 June 2011).

sages: Encounters with the American Deserts.²⁵ When Limerick arrived, she began the process of “reintroducing Western American history to Harvard after the twenty-three-year gap that followed the retirement of Frederick Merk,” who had replaced Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1920s.²⁶

Limerick’s ability to crank out large amounts of refined and closely argued prose while under pressure saved her young career. She can probably thank her father, Grant Nelson, for her literary skills. A “classically restless” western soul, he had been raised as a Mormon in Utah but had left the church. Limerick found out in later years that her father loved Bernard DeVoto’s writings and his criticism of the Mormon Church and generally shared the historian’s “anti-Utah sentiments.” After a stint at Weber State, Nelson attended the University of Utah, where he majored in English and worked as a butler for the first Jewish mayor of Salt Lake City. He met Patricia McCowen in the University of Utah library and married her. Following graduation, the couple moved to Los Angeles, where he became a scriptwriter for Republic Pictures.²⁷ Nelson’s boss at Republic moved up to the office of vice-president and wanted him, for reasons unknown, to help keep an eye on other people in the company. Because Nelson had acquaintances who were blacklisted and forced out of the movie industry, he was conscious of the dangers of having a career ruined due to associations with radical groups; as a result, he worried about his daughter’s activities at Santa Cruz.

After working in Hollywood for fifteen years, Nelson moved his family in 1947 to Banning, about one hour east of Los Angeles and about twenty minutes from Palm Springs and Palm Desert. In Banning, the family tried to keep a low profile, and Limerick’s parents did not broadcast their college educations. Her father opened the “California Date Shop” on the town’s main street, where he sold various kinds of

25. Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).

26. Limerick to C. Vann Woodward, 23 July 1981, Woodward Papers.

27. Nelson wrote “Western thriller movie scripts” (Tom Patterson, “Historian from Banning Writes Praised History on West,” *Riverside Press-Enterprise*, 17 Sept. 1989). Nelson’s credits include *The Masked Marvel*, *Secret Service in Darkest Africa*, and *Haunted Harbor*. Limerick to author, 28 June 2011.

date-based foods, such as chocolate-covered dates and date shakes. He also oversaw apartment rentals and worked on surveying crews, including some in Palm Springs. Limerick's mother was a legal secretary for Frederick Wing, a prominent attorney in town. She enjoyed the status the position afforded and liked being at the center of the action, although she remained discreet about what she learned while working there.²⁸

Due to her parents' varied occupations, Limerick could not identify where her family fit in when she later took a course entitled the "Psychology of Social Classes" at Santa Cruz. Limerick also worked at the Banning bureau of the *Riverside Press-Enterprise*, writing obituaries and occasional news stories and generally honing what would become formidable writing and speaking skills. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., during her senior year in high school, Limerick wrote what she described as a "story on the reaction of black teenagers in Banning" in which one of the interviewees said, "Banning's no different from Selma, Alabama."²⁹ Other interviewees predicted "riots," "violent retaliation," "drastic" responses, and "a long hot summer."³⁰ After the story was published, Limerick helped to organize a meeting of the Banning Human Relations Commission at the Teen Post to discuss the situation, which she described as her "first exercise in community-organizing, in activism, in fostering dialogue," but the black teenagers chose not to attend.³¹ During the summer of 1968, before she left for college, Limerick founded a "Human Relations Seminar" and, according to one account, "boldly attacked the problem of race relations" in Banning.³²

In 1980, as she prepared to move from graduate studies at Yale to teaching at Harvard, Limerick began drafting lectures for her course on the history of the American West. The following year, at the suggestion of an old friend from Banning, the young Harvard professor was

28. Patterson, "Historian from Banning Writes Praised History on West."

29. Limerick, "California and the West."

30. Patty Nelson, "Younger Negroes Sorrowful, Angry," *Riverside Press-Enterprise*, 6 Apr. 1968.

31. Limerick, "California and the West."

32. Patterson, "Historian from Banning Writes Praised History on West" (quoting reporter George Ringwald).

invited to speak at a conference on the American West hosted by the Sun Valley Center for the Arts and Humanities in Idaho. At the conference, Limerick was surprised to hear participants portray the problems of the West as unprecedented. She, however, knew they had deep historical roots and vowed to write a book connecting the issues of the contemporary West with their historical origins.³³ Limerick began to think about a work modeled on the Yale historian C. Vann Woodward's classic treatment *The Burden of Southern History* (1955).³⁴ She informed Woodward that she had announced to the conference in Idaho that it was time "for someone to write *The Burden of Western History*" and was "increasingly convinced" that she "would like to try to write that book."³⁵ Limerick asked Woodward for his "(private, not necessarily public) permission" to use the spinoff of his title.³⁶ Woodward agreed and said Limerick had the "advantage of starting with a thesis and knowing where you are going."³⁷ One of her goals for the book, Limerick said, "was to claim that Western history was just as sad as Southern history."³⁸

In 1984, after more than a decade on the East Coast, Limerick returned west to accept a professorship at the University of Colorado–Boulder, replacing the long-serving western historian Robert G. Athearn.³⁹ Athearn was an academic descendant of Frederick Jackson Turner and saw himself and his students as the historian's "great grandchildren."⁴⁰ Limerick, who would become a nationally known critic of

33. Limerick to Woodward, 23 July 1981.

34. Ibid. Limerick took Woodward's graduate seminar in the spring of 1973.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Woodward to Nelson, 31 July 1981, Woodward Papers.

38. Limerick to Woodward, David Emmons, Neil Foley, and Peter Wood, 11 Sept. 1992, Woodward Papers.

39. Limerick to author, 25 June 2010. See Elliott West et al., "A Tribute to Robert G. Athearn," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 34 (Winter 1984): 62–64.

40. West et al., "Tribute to Robert G. Athearn," p. 64. Athearn was born in Kremlin, Montana, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota under Ernest Osgood, and taught from 1947 to 1982 at the University of Colorado, where he advised twenty-eight doctoral students. Richard N. Ellis, "Robert G. Athearn," *Great Plains Journal* 19 (1979): 5; West et al., "Tribute to Robert G. Athearn," p. 63. Osgood earned his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin under the direction of Frederick Jackson Turner's successor,

Turner, was not Athearn's choice for a successor.⁴¹ At first, Limerick felt she did not fit in at Boulder and vowed "to write my way out of here."⁴² She thought Coloradoans had "chips-on-the-shoulder" and saw her Harvard and Yale credentials as the apparent "equivalent of original sin."⁴³ She confessed to missing the faster pace of the East and considered the possibility "that Harvard, especially, made me a snob."⁴⁴

Despite her misgivings about her new surroundings and her "writer-in-the-hinterlands-blues," she continued to work on the synthetic treatment of the West that would make her career.⁴⁵ Before Limerick left Harvard, her book idea had triggered a "bidding war" between various publishers. Edwin Barber of W. W. Norton had heard about Limerick from Yale history professors Howard Lamar and John Morton Blum, pursued her at Harvard, and, after several meetings and meals, inked a book contract with her in 1984.⁴⁶ Limerick recalls that Barber "hounded" her to complete the manuscript, providing what she called the "intellectual equivalent of electric shock therapy."⁴⁷ In late 1985, Limerick was still calling her manuscript "The Burdens of Western History" but abandoned this title in the final stages of writing in favor of one that was less imitative.⁴⁸ In 1987, Norton published *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, which had originated

Frederic Logan Paxson, and in 1927 was hired by the University of Minnesota, where he taught until 1957. Osgood, "I Discover Western History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 3 (July 1972): 241–51.

41. Limerick to author, 28 June 2011.

42. Quoted in Jeff Sharlet, "Books Unwritten, Stories Untold," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 Apr. 2001.

43. Limerick to Woodward, 11 Dec. 1984.

44. Ibid.

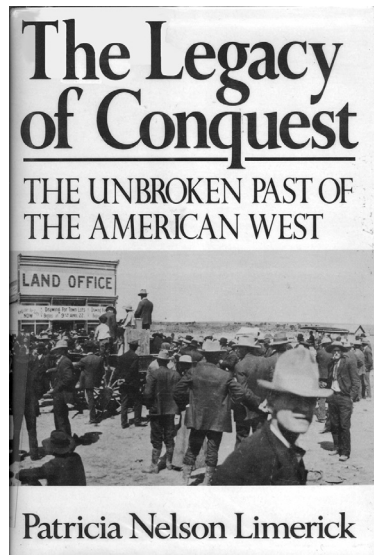
45. Limerick to C. Vann Woodward, 19 Aug. 1985, Woodward Papers.

46. Barber, telephone interview, 9 June 2011. Barber noted at the time that Limerick suggested William Cronon, C. Vann Woodward, Howard Lamar, and some "fellow in the desert" as the outside readers for the manuscript. Barber to Limerick, 14 May 1985, Box 1, Limerick Papers, Denver Public Library.

47. Limerick quoted Barber: "'You know what they'll all be saying in a year or so, Patty,' he said in one of his better-aimed thrusts; 'they'll say, 'she sure talks a lot, but she really doesn't write anything'" (Limerick to C. Vann Woodward, 11 Dec. 1984, box 1, Limerick Papers, Denver Public Library [emphasis in original]).

48. Limerick to C. Vann Woodward, 19 Aug. 1985; interview with Barber, 9 June 2011.

When it appeared in 1987, *The Legacy of Conquest* popularized the tenets of the New Western History and engendered a storm of academic debate.



with her lecture notes from her Harvard class and soon set off a grand argument about how the region had been and should be perceived.⁴⁹

In the wake of the national success of *The Legacy of Conquest*, Limerick traveled the West to discuss her book. In 1993, she returned to the state where her “awakening” had begun. Nancy Tystad Koupal, director of research and publishing for the South Dakota State Historical Society, invited Limerick to Pierre to speak at the twenty-eighth annual Northern Great Plains History Conference, which emphasized themes relating to the one-hundredth anniversary of Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous presentation of his Frontier Thesis.⁵⁰ In her banquet address, Limerick recalled her visit to South Dakota in 1972, explaining that Gerry Lange had “created a monster” in setting her on course for a lifetime of writing and public engagement.⁵¹ For several

49. Norton also agreed to publish books by Limerick entitled “Troubled Land,” about failure in the West, and “The Atomic West,” about nuclear weapons development and related issues in the West. Patterson, “Historian from Banning Writes Praised History on West”; interview with Barber, 9 June 2011.

50. Limerick to author, 25 June 2010.

51. Limerick, “What Turner Really Wanted,” p. 2.

years, she had been the “virtual Kilroy of Western American history, an omnipresent and ubiquitous lecturer and speechmaker, haunting the podiums of Western America.”⁵² She pointed to Lange and Madison, South Dakota, as the departure point for this odyssey.⁵³

In her speech in Pierre, Limerick addressed the controversy she had sparked with *Legacy of Conquest*. Limerick had broken with Turner, who waged a successful battle against the provincialism of eastern historians starting in the 1890s by demonstrating the historical significance of the American Midwest and West. While Turner noted the achievements of the pioneers and highlighted what he saw as the growth of democratic practices and institutions on the frontier, Lim-

52. Ibid., p. 4.

53. Ibid., p. 6.



Limerick returned to South Dakota as a keynote speaker at the 1993 Northern Great Plains History Conference in Pierre. The meeting theme marked the centennial of Turner's Frontier Thesis.

erick reviewed the darker aspects of western history. Her book, as her editors saw it, was designed to “denounce” Turner, “debunk the myths” of the West, and emphasize the region’s “less attractive qualities.”⁵⁴ She believed historians had given Turner’s frontier focus “excessive deference” and insisted instead on viewing the West as “a place undergoing conquest.”⁵⁵ John Lauritz Larson called *Legacy of Conquest* “a saga of continuous exploitation” driven by “engines of unprecedented destruction.”⁵⁶ Limerick focused on excessive land speculation, territorial corruption, the plight of workers, the travails of farmers, fights over water, and what she saw as the overlooked role of women, Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians in the West. She viewed her work as part of a “revolution” against “Happy Face History” and a general “reorienting of Western history, away from happy endings and toward tragedy.”⁵⁷ Limerick became, by her own admission, the nation’s “best-known Turner-basher”⁵⁸ with a reputation as the “Wicked Witch of Western History.”⁵⁹

Some historians and popular critics considered Limerick’s portrait of the West unbalanced. It focused to an unfair extent, they argued, on corruption, despoliation, greed, and brute force. Others objected to the supposed originality of Limerick’s grand thesis and pointed to earlier historians and works that had already addressed her themes. Politics also came into play, some argued. Limerick was wedded to the

54. Ed Barber to Limerick, 14 May 1985, and Steve Forman to Barber and Limerick, 25 Sept. 1985, both in box 1, Limerick Papers, Denver Public Library. Limerick’s original target had been Ray Allen Billington, not Turner, but she “thought it would be more polite if I did not write critically of living historians” (Limerick to author, 10 July 2011).

55. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), pp. 20, 26. In the mid-1980s, she later recalled, Limerick believed that Turner’s “Frontier Thesis had become entirely irrelevant to the history of the Trans-Mississippi West” (“Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World,” *American Historical Review* 100 [June 1995]: 698).

56. Larson, “Grasping for the Significance of the Turner Legacy: An Afterword,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 13 (Summer 1993): 247.

57. Limerick, “Progress or Decline? Judging the History of Western Expansion,” in *A Society to Match the Scenery: Personal Visions of the Future of the American West*, ed. Gary Holthaus et al. (Niwt: University Press of Colorado, 1991), p. 46.

58. Limerick, “What Turner Really Wanted,” p. 7.

59. Limerick, “Layer upon Layer of Memory in the American West.”

causes of the 1960s such as environmentalism, civil rights, opposition to the Vietnam War, and political liberalism in general. One historian, who objected to her leftist outlook, said he was raising money to send her back to the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ Allan Bogue noted that critics saw Limerick and her broader group of allies known as the New Western Historians as the “misanthropic spawn of the troubled 1960s.”⁶¹

According to Limerick, balancing the good and the bad in the West remains a difficult enterprise. Despite her critics’ claims that she has focused too exclusively on the dark side, Limerick notes that western settlers comprised both good and bad actors and that the “moral complexity” of the West deserves to be taken seriously.⁶² In response to her purported neglect of her predecessors, she also points to her consultation in graduate school with older historians and western chroniclers such as Henry Nash Smith and Carey McWilliams, and she states in *Legacy of Conquest* that her book was aimed at synthesizing previous works in western history.⁶³ Privately, Limerick has deemed herself a “cheerful, conscienceless parasite on other people’s hard work (and monographs),” grateful to other academic “drudges” for “finding all that stuff and putting it together.”⁶⁴ By noting her reliance on her

60. Critical appraisals include Vernon Carstensen, “A New Perspective on the West? A Review of *The Legacy of Conquest*,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 38 (Spring 1988): 84–85; Larry McMurtry, “Westward Ho Hum: What the New Western Historians Have Done to the Old West,” *New Republic*, 9 Oct. 1990, pp. 32–38; Gerald D. Nash, “Point of View: One Hundred Years of Western History,” *Journal of the West* 32 (Jan. 1993): 3–4; William W. Savage, “The New Western History: Youngest Whore on the Block,” *AB Bookman’s Weekly*, 4 Oct. 1993, pp. 1242–47; Gerald Thompson, “The New Western History: A Critical Analysis,” *Continuity* 17 (Fall 1993): 6–24; Michael Allen, “The ‘New’ Western History Stillborn,” *The Historian* 57 (Fall 1994): 201–8; Gerald Nash, “The Global Context of the New Western Historians,” in *Old West/New West: Quo Vadis?*, ed. Gene M. Gressley (Worland, Wyo.: High Plains Publishing, 1994), pp. 149–62; Michael Allen, “The Demise of the ‘New’ Western History,” *Columbia: The Magazine of Northwest History* 9 (Spring 1995): 3–5.

61. Allan G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p. 460.

62. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, p. 54.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 30. See also Smith to Nelson, 9 Mar. 1973, Limerick personal papers; Nelson to McWilliams, 28 Mar. 1974; and Limerick, “Dilemmas in Forgiveness: William Appleman Williams and Western American History,” *Diplomatic History* 25 (Spring 2001): 298.

64. Limerick to Page Smith and David [unclear], 19 June 1985, Page Smith papers.

predecessors and pointing to the creation of a synthetic treatment of Western history as her ultimate goal, Limerick seems to concede that *Legacy of Conquest* was not all that “new.” Still, she generally believes that her critics have presented “imaginative reconstructions” of her past and her writings and argues that they are “attacking something that isn’t real.” Moreover, she contends, they “were quite cruel and ungentlemanly about it” and acted as an “old guard protecting a happier version of Western history.”⁶⁵

Limerick did, undoubtedly, offer a more liberal version of the western story, an interpretation that was certainly colored by the 1960s and what she calls her “hippie days.”⁶⁶ While she was in college, after all, protestors bombed the Bank of America in Santa Cruz. Limerick recently called herself a “further-left-than-liberal, anti-war student” and “a regular attender of rallies and marches” during those days.⁶⁷ She signed a petition for the Santa Cruz Radical Union and, during a protest against a California Board of Regents meeting in Santa Cruz, was caught on film by television news cameras striking Governor Ronald Reagan’s limousine.⁶⁸ Reagan attended the meeting to oppose attempts to allow the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver and other uncredentialed individuals to teach at California’s public universities.⁶⁹ At the same meeting, the regents also encountered pressure from student demonstrators and members of the Black Liberation Movement, who

65. Deborah Solomon, “Cowgirl Blues: Questions for Patty Limerick,” *New York Times Magazine*, 11 Nov. 2007.

66. In a recent interview Limerick noted she was a “hippie” and “was in Haight-Ashbury in the summer of ’67” during the “summer of love” (Bill Husted, “Wise Fool Gives CU Dose of Levity,” *Denver Post*, 1 Apr. 2010).

67. Limerick, “Fuzz-y Feelings,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 26 Aug. 2008.

68. The Santa Cruz Radical Union is discussed in Milt Whaley, “UCSC Student Strike Begins Today” and “Summary of Week’s Action at Berkeley, UCSC,” *City on a Hill Press* (University of California–Santa Cruz), 23 May 1969.

69. In a letter, Reagan noted the “sad experience of seeing students on that beautiful campus rioting, threatening physical harm to the regents assembled there, and cursing the regents with profanity and unrepeatable obscenities” (Reagan to Bing Russell, 23 Oct. 1968, in *Reagan: A Life in Letters*, ed. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson [New York: Free Press, 2003], p. 187). See also Irene Reti, ed., *Out in the Redwoods: Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965–2003* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2010).

“waved black and red flags, said to signify anarchy and black power,” to create a “black college” named after Malcolm X at Santa Cruz.⁷⁰ While admittedly a “paleo-liberal”⁷¹ who stands on the left side of the political spectrum, Limerick maintains that her point of view is less attuned to Angela Davis, the former Black Panther and revolutionary-turned-UCSC professor, and closer to that of Eleanor Roosevelt.⁷²

The wars over the “New Western History” that Limerick helped to trigger with *The Legacy of Conquest* were hot because they were politically charged and were an aftershock of the disruptions, protests, and leftist politics of the 1960s. While Limerick was the target of some unfairly personal shots because she symbolized 1960s radicalism to some of her critics, her links to the political left are undeniable. Limerick took many cues from men of the Left such as Henry Nash Smith, a well-known critic of the “mythic West”; Carey McWilliams, the California

70. Mel Baughman, “Reagan Jeered, Unruh Cheered by Students,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 18 Oct. 1968. See also Harry Farrell, “Mob Rides Regents at UCSC Session,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 18 Oct. 1968; Bruce McPherson, “Some Were Pleased, Others Frustrated,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 18 Oct. 1968; “Another Day of Unrest on the UCSC Campus; Regents’ Bus Halted, Reagan Booed,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 19 Oct. 1968; Mel Baughman, “Volatile UC Issues Unsettled,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 20 Oct. 1968. Reagan spoke to the three hundred Santa Cruz student protestors for forty minutes. Mel Baughman, “Reagan Confronts UCSC Students,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 20 Oct. 1968. On the conflict between the universities and Governor Reagan, see Gerard J. De Groot, “Ronald Reagan and Student Unrest in California, 1966–1970,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (Feb. 1996): 107–29.

71. Limerick, in Donald Worster et al., “*The Legacy of Conquest*, by Patricia Nelson Limerick: A Panel of Appraisal,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (Aug. 1989): 321.

72. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, p. 12; Gerry Kearns, “The Virtuous Circle of Facts and Values in the New Western History,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88 (1998): 399. Angela Davis joined the UCSC faculty in 1991 where she teaches in the History of Consciousness program. Marina Budhos, “Angela Davis Appointed to Major Chair,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 31 Mar. 1995.

FACING PAGE

Top: Governor Ronald Reagan’s visit to the University of California–Santa Cruz was controversial among liberal-minded students like Patricia Nelson.

Bottom: Student protestors blocked buses during Reagan’s visit to show solidarity with a variety of causes.



social critic who served as editor of *The Nation* from 1955 to 1975; and Page Smith, her Santa Cruz advisor.⁷³ Limerick's academic allies such as Donald Worster also advance inflammatory denunciations of the West as "violent," "imperialistic," "shameful," and beset with "radical defects."⁷⁴ When Gerry Lange brought Limerick to Madison in 1972, he was enthusiastically promoting the presidential candidacy of South Dakota Senator George McGovern, who would win the Democratic nomination that year with the support of the liberal-Left.⁷⁵

Unlike the more angry members of the 1960s generation, however, Limerick has promoted discussion through forums and academic debate. She genuinely wishes "that liberals and radicals would spend more time speaking persuasively to middle-class and working-class Americans, and spend less time pissing them off."⁷⁶ In the years after the publication of *Legacy of Conquest* when the hottest moments of the New Western History wars had passed, Limerick made a concerted effort to reach out and reconcile with some of her critics, and these peace overtures form an important part of her career. She is also known for professional networking, building relationships, and seizing opportunities to speak to and write for general audiences.

Some of the animus toward Limerick stems from her critics' jealousy of her national platform, the media attention she has sought and won, and her tendency toward introspection. She has been derided as a "media queen,"⁷⁷ and one frequent detractor, University of Washington-Tacoma historian Mike Allen, tweaks her for too often "writing

73. On Henry Nash Smith, see Neil Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 208–11, 217. On Carey McWilliams, see Greg Critser, "The Making of a Cultural Rebel: Carey McWilliams, 1924–1930," *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (May 1986): 226–55; Catherine A. Corman, "Teaching—and Learning from—Carey McWilliams," *California History* 80 (Winter 2001/2002): 204–43; and Limerick-McWilliams correspondence, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, UCLA.

74. Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pp. 13, 15–16.

75. Lange to Nelson, 25 Apr. 1972.

76. Limerick, "Dilemmas in Forgiveness," pp. 298–99.

77. Gelernter, "Showdown in the Western Myth Corral."

about her favorite subject—Patricia Nelson Limerick.”⁷⁸ The *Boston Globe* has noted that Limerick “maintains a very high profile,” while the *Los Angeles Times* has termed her “media-conscious.”⁷⁹ While some may find these qualities grating, Limerick’s personal allusions often fuel her most penetrating and unique commentaries, and the energy she devotes to promoting a broader public interest in the history of the West and its interpretation deserves commendation. Turner, after all, was also known for his full public-speaking schedule, for promoting his writings, and for sincerely believing in the obligation of professors to engage the public. Page Smith, Limerick’s Santa Cruz mentor, applauded her desire to speak to a broad audience and considered her primary mission to be that of a genuine “writer” and, thus, an “undercover agent” in a world of stolid academicians who were “scared to death” of writers.⁸⁰

While some of the jabs at Limerick have been unfair and caustic, she can display a tin ear toward criticism. Those who see genuine accomplishments in western history, who have a heartfelt love of western symbols and idealism, and who sincerely view the West differently can be summarily dismissed by Limerick. She sees a “projected fear and anxiety” in her opponents, viewing them as “people ruled by strong, unexamined emotions about the West.”⁸¹ In an unfortunate allusion to racist motives, Limerick at one point stated that the heat of the interpretive battle had “almost nothing to do with the West, but with white anxiety over the growing proportion of people of color in America.”⁸² In the course of debate, Limerick says, some “people became so overwrought that it became kind of laughable.”⁸³ Such dismissals are not funny to reasoned dissenters to the New Western History, however, and allegations of racism do not foster rational discourse.

78. Allen, letter to the editor, “How New is the ‘New Western History’?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Apr. 2000.

79. Mark Feeney, “Gunslinger of the New West”; Terry Pristin, “‘Taming’ of the Wild West Is Rewritten by Scholars,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Nov. 1990.

80. Smith to Nelson, 28 Aug. 1987, Page Smith papers.

81. Limerick, “Layer upon Layer of Memory in the American West.”

82. Gelernter, “Showdown in the Western Myth Corral.”

83. Carma Wadley, “Speaker to Focus on Ways Utah Shaped the West,” *Deseret (Utah) News*, 15 Aug. 2002.

Limerick's insistence on "conquest" and "imperialism" as the central organizational themes of *Legacy of Conquest* also remains problematic. While Limerick criticized Turner's frontier as an "unsubtle" concept, the same can be said of imperialism.⁸⁴ Settlement patterns and the mixing of peoples can involve wildly differing processes and outcomes, and lumping them together into one category is anything but subtle.⁸⁵ As Michael Malone has noted, "conquest" remains a "very broad and value-laden term." "Imperialism" similarly requires attention to nuance, context, and particulars.⁸⁶ Limerick was too willing to embrace the 1960s sentiment, fueled by critics who had absorbed the writings of William Appleman Williams, that American foreign policy was "imperialist" and motivated, in part, by the popular writings of Frederick Jackson Turner.⁸⁷ The Turner-Caused-Vietnam school of thought and

84. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, p. 25.

85. Walter Nugent, "Frontiers and Empires in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (Nov. 1989): 400–1.

86. Malone, in Worster et al., "*The Legacy of Conquest*," p. 311. For more on Limerick and imperialism, see her presidential address to the Western History Association, "Going West and Ending Up Global," *Western Historical Quarterly* 32 (Spring 2001): 5–23. For doubts about the notion of "imperialism," see James A. Field, Jr., "American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book," *American Historical Review* 83 (June 1978): 644–68; and Michael Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History," *American Historical Review* 106 (Dec. 2001): 1712.

87. Limerick embraced Williams "as my predecessor" and said a "recognition of the centrality of Empire, with a capital e, now drives and energizes my field" (quoted in David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* [University of Chicago Press, 2009], p. 140). Williams, a historian popular with the critics of the Vietnam War, thought Turner's frontier thesis "implied a program" for action that led to a "foreign policy of expansion" ("The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," *Pacific Historical Review* 24 [Nov. 1955]: 383). On Williams and opponents of the Vietnam War, see Jon Lauck, "The 'Interior Tradition' in American History: A Review Essay," *Annals of Iowa* 69 (Winter 2010): 85–86, and Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, p. 140. Limerick acknowledges the importance of Williams in "Dilemmas in Forgiveness," p. 295. Williams was also a favorite of Limerick's hero Carey McWilliams. Mike Davis, "Optimism of the Will," *The Nation*, 1 Sept. 2005. Richard Hofstadter noted, however, that "Turner had not expounded the frontier thesis for imperialist uses" (*The Progressive Historians: Turner, Parrington, Beard* [New York: Vintage, 1968], p. 85). See also Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890–1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), p. 57; and Michael C. Steiner, "Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History," *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (Nov. 1995): 482.

the milieu of protest from which it grew, it should be remembered, produced second thoughts. In a cautionary tale about historians' over-reliance on the interpretative priorities and trends emanating from that era, even Williams, who did much to propagate the notion of American "imperialism" and to promote his views with a younger generation, fled the 1960s scene when he came to believe that student activists had become absurdly anti-American and self-indulgent.⁸⁸

Limerick, however, is not inclined to modify her conception of empire and conquest. She remains frustrated by her "failed campaign to place western history in the framework of international imperialism." She further bemoans the "failure of perspective" that persists in the United States and that, she believes, led to the Iraq War in 2003. Instead of adopting her imperialist interpretation of the American West, Limerick finds the nation continuing to adhere to a "version of history that affirms national vanity."⁸⁹ The more sullied and bleak interpretation of western history that Limerick presents would, presumably, deprive the nation of the spirit and self-confidence necessary to be active in foreign affairs. As a *New York Times* critic noted, Limerick and the New Western Historians pursue an "altered view of the moral status of America itself."⁹⁰ This desire to shape present-day political outcomes, as some critics of the New Western History contend, too often intrudes on efforts to depict the western past accurately and biases interpretation in favor of negative findings. Viewing the American past in "positive terms," the western historian William Goetzmann has stated, is not deemed "politically correct" by many historians in this age.⁹¹ If a

88. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, p. 145; William Palmer, *From Gentlemen's Club to Professional Body: The Evolution of the History Department in the United States, 1940–1980* (Charleston, S.C.: BookSurge Publishing, 2008), pp. 180–81; George Mosse, *Confronting History: A Memoir* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 157; Paul M. Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 146–47, 150, 160–61. For a scholarly rethinking of the Vietnam War itself, see Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

89. Limerick, "Empire and Amnesia," *The Historian* 66 (Fall 2004): 533, 536.

90. Richard Bernstein, "Unsettling the Old West," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 Mar. 1990.

91. Goetzmann, *When the Eagle Screamed: The Romantic Horizon in American Expansionism, 1800–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), p. x.

rejection of and bias against “Whiggish history,” or the tendency to find signs of human progress in the past, had developed by the 1970s, as Limerick has noted, it may be that an “anti-Whiggish” bias, or a strong tendency to view the past only as cruel and regressive has now developed.⁹² This tendency is the one at work in *Legacy of Conquest*, which Limerick conceived of as “stressing . . . failure, suffering, conflict, injury, and bitter legacies” in the West.⁹³

The battles over the New Western History thus illustrate one of the timeless dilemmas confronting the historical profession. Historical interpretations can reflect what J. H. Hexter called the larger “metahistorical commitment” of the historian advancing the interpretation.⁹⁴ Some of the New Western Historians, for example, sought to promote the reform of American society and traced many of the injustices in contemporary American life to the history of the American West.⁹⁵ If western history could be portrayed as a relentless parade of horrors, they could raise the level of social consciousness about injustice in the past and justify rebellion and reform in the present. A western past that was positive, on the other hand, would not be politically “usable.”⁹⁶

The focus of Limerick and other New Western Historians on undermining Turner also risks the loss of what was most significant in his thought. Much of Turner’s work revolved around the ingredients necessary to make American democracy function, ingredients he found in abundance in the frontier areas of the Midwest. Turner was a man of his time and was not occupied with the issues that late twentieth-century historians find most compelling. He focused instead on the qualities of American democracy, especially as they differed from Europe, the home of old empires and autocracies. “What I was dealing

92. Limerick, “Turnerians All,” p. 713.

93. Limerick to C. Vann Woodward, David Emmons, Neil Foley, and Peter Wood, 11 Sept. 1992.

94. Hexter, *On Historians: Reappraisals of Some of the Makers of Modern History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 4.

95. Nash, *Creating the West*, p. 130.

96. Warren I. Susman, “History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past,” in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 30.

with," Turner wrote, "was . . . the American character of democracy as compared with that of Europe or of European philosophers."⁹⁷ In an extended analysis of Turner published in 1969, Howard Lamar fittingly noted this emphasis and concluded that "Turner deserves the title 'democracy's historian.'"⁹⁸ An unwillingness to take into account the traditions of American democracy and constitutionalism is one of the weaknesses of Limerick and the New Western History.⁹⁹ Failing to take the thrust of Turner's work seriously constricts the historian's field of vision. Not understanding Turner's focus on democracy, moreover, and engaging in what Jean-Francois Revel calls "extravagant criticism," drains civic energy by persuading the "citizens of democratic societies . . . that their civilization is merely an accumulation of failures and a monstrous imposture."¹⁰⁰

Focusing on the development of American democratic institutions as Turner did would engage the literature of American exceptionalism, or the belief in the unique unfolding, development, and, to many, achievements of the American republic.¹⁰¹ Michael Kammen notes that Turner was a "patriotic exceptionalist" and one who had traveled widely, who had consumed European history, and whose belief in exceptionalism "did not result from intellectual narrowness or ig-

97. Quoted in Wilbur R. Jacobs, John W. Caughey, and Joe B. Frantz, *Turner, Bolton, and Webb: Three Historians of the American Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 11.

98. Lamar, "Frederick Jackson Turner," in *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p.

109. On Turner and the history of American republicanism, see Donald K. Pickens, "The Turner Thesis and Republicanism: A Historiographical Commentary," *Pacific Historical Review* 61 (Aug. 1992): 319–40.

99. Peter Schrag, "The Burden of Western History," *The American Prospect*, 27 Mar.–10 Apr. 2000.

100. Revel, *How Democracies Perish* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1984), p. 10.

101. Francois Furstenberg notes that "Turner's move has long been cast as the founding turn toward American exceptionalism in U.S. historiography" ("The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History," *American Historical Review* 113 [June 2008]: 676). For exceptionalist thinking, Ian Tyrrell notes that the "most prominent examples are found in the work of Turner and his followers" ("American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96 [Oct. 1991]: 1031n2).

norance.”¹⁰² American exceptionalism is a bitter pill for proponents of the New Western History to swallow, however, and conflicts with an agenda that, in part, is centered on exposing and emphasizing the darker moments of the American past. Limerick sees exceptionalism as a “trap.”¹⁰³

In the 1970s, during the formative years of Limerick’s thinking, the belief in American exceptionalism was under assault.¹⁰⁴ Despite solid evidence of the American republic’s unique development, the notion of exceptionalism alarmed some scholars because of its “overtones of superiority,”¹⁰⁵ as well as its perceived “chauvinism and parochialism.”¹⁰⁶ Opponents of American exceptionalism believed it would be used to justify an activist American foreign policy, which they saw at work in Vietnam, and to promote a “predisposition to denigrate the worth and viability of foreign, particularly non-Western, cultures.”¹⁰⁷ The rejection of the literature of American exceptionalism that began in the 1970s led to a sustained effort to promote an equivalence among cultures and nations generally known as “multiculturalism.”¹⁰⁸ When Limerick’s *Legacy of Conquest* was published in 1987, it entered

102. Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” *American Quarterly* 45 (Mar. 1993): 9.

103. Limerick, “Turnerians All,” p. 701.

104. Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism,” pp. 11–12, 16, 20. Limerick has noted her debt to Laurence Veysey, whose work Kammen points to as “pivotal” to the growing opposition to exceptionalist views in the 1970s. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, p. 12; Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism,” p. 12. Veysey, a professor at UC–Santa Cruz, called for a “demystification of America” and for scholars to “view their subject with fewer blinders than before” (“The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered,” *American Quarterly* 31 [Autumn 1979]: 458). Veysey also noted, however, that for Western settler expansion beyond the Appalachians, which he saw as supported by a “national ethos of republicanism,” “it may become necessary to concede more to traditional arguments about American distinctiveness” and to concede that “in this sense Turner was right” (*ibid.*, pp. 469–70).

105. Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” p. 1034.

106. Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism,” p. 16.

107. Adas, “From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon,” pp. 1696, 1720.

108. John Higham, “Multiculturalism and Universalism: A History and Critique,” *American Quarterly* 45 (June 1993): 208–11; Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 12–13.

the broader cultural and political maelstrom over exceptionalism and multiculturalism.¹⁰⁹

The bias against exceptionalism and the bows toward multiculturalism, some historians thought, made the New Western History trendy and politically correct but not insightful. In 1992, when Limerick organized a panel discussion designed to compare western and southern history at the annual conference of the Western History Association at Yale, she asked C. Vann Woodward, whose *Burden of Southern History* she sought to emulate in *Legacy of Conquest*, to participate. Woodward was a frequent proponent of liberal causes and garnered praise from Limerick in her letters to him, but he dismissed the New Western Historians' focus on race as "conforming to fashion," deeming the movement an example of "what I deplore in our profession." He later told Limerick that he refused to "retract a word, or deplore or regret, and only wish I had said it plainer and better."¹¹⁰ Woodward's denunciation should not be used as a reason to ignore the New Western History, but it can serve as a useful warning about how movements and causes, including the New Western History, can obscure our vision of the past and remind us of the value of a variety of viewpoints, including older ones such as Turner's, on American history.

However heated the debates over the New Western History and the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s became—and they were surely exaggerated by media commentators eager to cover conflict—they have largely abated now, while the history of the American West has thrived. Through the work of Limerick and others, the field of western history boomed. In 1983, the Western History Association attracted roughly 250 annual convention-goers. By the late 1980s, however, more than

109. For an overview, see *New York Times* correspondent Richard Bernstein's book *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

110. Limerick to Woodward, 22 Oct. 1992, and Woodward to Limerick, 29 Oct. 1992, both in Woodward Papers. Historian David Emmons, who chaired the panel discussion at Yale, recalled that Woodward "thought the whole sorry New Western History spectacle was driven by intellectual fashion trends not rigorous scholarship and he clearly indicated that he didn't want to be held accountable for any of that" (Emmons to author, 11 July 2011).

twelve hundred people attended. Limerick's post-*Legacy of Conquest* calls for narrative complexity offer the opportunity for further refinement and debate about how to describe the settlement of the West. More recently, Limerick has articulated a greater respect for Turner and concluded that he was a much more complicated man than she once thought.¹¹¹ She now says that she did not intend *Legacy of Conquest* "to stand for the ages."¹¹² If some of Limerick's critics thought her interpretation of western history was too heavily slanted toward the negative, she has come gradually to place a stronger emphasis on the balance of the good and the bad. "The deeply frustrating lesson of history in the American West and elsewhere," Limerick says, "is this: Human beings can be a mess—contentious, conflict-loving, petty, vindictive, and cruel—and human beings can manifest grace, dignity, compassion, and understanding in ways that leave us breathless."¹¹³

The adaptations in Limerick's thinking are too rare in the academy, however. She remains concerned about the unwillingness of too many historians to debate their findings and consider varying perspectives. Some academics, she holds, are too quick to take offense and too quick to feign injury. The Western History Association has also lost part of its public audience and outside appeal in recent years, Limerick says, and has become excessively academic. The effort by some historians to abolish the campy "mountain-man toast" at the association's annual dinner was unnecessary and heavy-handed, in her view, and a caricature of the profession's bows to political correctness. Limerick also worries about the themes and emphases of the New Western Historians "becoming orthodoxy" to the detriment of competing interpretations.¹¹⁴ Her ally and fellow New Western Historian Richard White jokes, "We're now what the people we attacked were in the 1980s."¹¹⁵ To their credit, both Limerick and White call for more debate and open inquiry within the profession.¹¹⁶ With many of their one-time interlocutors retired

111. Limerick, "Turnerians All," pp. 697–716.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 708.

113. Limerick, "Layer upon Layer of Memory in the American West."

114. *Ibid.*

115. Quoted in Mark Feeney, "Gunslinger of the New West."

116. Richard White, "What Are We Afraid Of?" *OAH Newsletter*, Aug. 2006; Limerick,

or deceased, however, and their successors more attuned to the New Western History, the prospect of a return to those lively and cutting exchanges of earlier years is lessened.¹¹⁷ Because of such developments in academic history, C. Vann Woodward thought the profession ran the risk of conformity diminishing open debate. In criticizing the New Western Historians and the trends in the field of history, Woodward said he felt as though the “academy is turning into a machine for self-imposed silence (at least of dissent), the most effective censorship of all.”¹¹⁸

Whatever risks lie in one mode of interpretation dominating western history and political correctness constraining debate and open inquiry, Limerick cannot be fairly charged with endorsing conformity or fearing debate. In contrast to the bunker mentality of many academics, she has been an extremely active public citizen. She loves public forums and policy debates and engaging with a broader audience. Her literary flair and witty presentations also attract a wide following. Her freewheeling style and willingness to take risks, in evidence at Santa Cruz and Yale, in her writings, and in her early adventure in South Dakota, stimulate and drive open debate. Her efforts have led to platforms such as the editorial pages of the *New York Times* and *USA Today* and, now, the directorship of the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado–Boulder. Limerick’s “project to inject historical perspective into contemporary issues” is also succeeding grandly.¹¹⁹ She even credits Frederick Jackson Turner, who “embodied the idea of historians as public servants, as scholars whose inquiries into the past could contribute directly and concretely to human well-being in the present.”¹²⁰ Much of Limerick’s vision and success can be traced to an indelible visit to Madison, South Dakota, in 1972.

Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), pp. 337–38.

117. The most frustrating aspect of writing this article was the near-universal unwillingness of critics of the New Western History to voice their concerns on the record out of fear of professional reprisal or being dubbed “old school.”

118. Woodward to Limerick, 29 Oct. 1992.

119. Limerick, “Layer upon Layer of Memory in the American West.”

120. Limerick, “Turnerians All,” p. 715.

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