A Century of Dishonor (1881)

In the years following the Civil War, problems with American Indians in the West became increasingly difficult to resolve. The federal government’s policy of creating reservations by treaty with specific Indian tribes did not work. President U.S. Grant endorsed the “peace policy,” which called for “concentrating” most Plains Indians into two large reservations: one in the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) and the other in the Dakota Territory. Government management of these reservations was poor, and American Indian resentment increased. Other forces compounded the situation; new discoveries of gold and silver, westward railroad expansion, the destruction of the buffalo, and white demands for more land only heightened tensions. Struggling against these threats to their civilization, some American Indians resisted. In a series of Indian wars, the U.S. Army subdued hostile tribes and pushed American Indians to the reservations. Alarmed at the plight of the American Indian, Massachusetts-born Helen Hunt Jackson studied the history of Indian–white relations. Jackson’s book, A Century of Dishonor (1881), chronicled the federal government’s mistreatment of American Indians.

Questions to Consider:

1. According to Jackson, what motivated whites to mistreat American Indians?

2. What shaped white views about the American Indians?

3. How did actions and policies of the federal government affect the fate of Indians in the West? (see Chapter 16 of your textbook also)

4. How might William N. Byers, the author of “A Western Newspaper Editorial on the Custer Massacre”, have responded to Jackson’s view of Indians? Of the federal government?

... It makes little difference, however, where one opens the record of the history of the Indians; every page and every year has its dark stain. The story of one tribe is the story of all, varied only by differences of time and place; but neither time nor place makes any difference in the main facts. Colorado is as greedy and unjust in 1880 as was Georgia in 1830, and Ohio in 1795; and the United States Government breaks promises now as deftly as then, and with an added ingenuity from long practice.

One of its strongest supports in so doing is the widespread sentiment among the people who dislike the Indian, of impatience with his presence as a “barrier to civilization,” and distrust of it as a possible danger. The old tales of the frontier life, with its horrors of Indian warfare, have gradually, by two or three generations’ telling, produced in the average mind something like an hereditary instinct of unquestioning and unreasoning aversion which it is almost impossible to dislodge or soften.
There are hundreds of pages of unimpeachable testimony on the side of the Indian; but it goes for nothing, is set down as sentimentalism or partisanship, tossed aside and forgotten. President after president has appointed commission after commission to inquire into and report upon Indian affairs, and to make suggestions as to the best methods of managing them. The reports are filled with eloquent statements of wrongs done to the Indians, of perfidies on the part of the Government; they counsel, as earnestly as words can, a trial of the simple and unperplexing expedients of telling truth, keeping promises, making fair bargains, dealing justly in all ways and all things. These reports are bound up with the Government’s Annual Reports, and that is the end of them. It would probably be no exaggeration to say that not one American citizen out of ten thousand ever sees them or knows that they exist, and yet any one of them, circulated throughout the country, read by the right-thinking, right-feeling men and women of this land, would be of itself a “campaign document” that would initiate a revolution which would not subside until the Indians’ wrongs were, so far as is now left possible, righted.

In 1869 President Grant appointed a commission of nine men, representing the influence and philanthropy of six leading States, to visit the different Indian reservations, and to “examine all matters pertaining to Indian affairs.” In the report of this commission are such paragraphs as the following: “To assert that ‘the Indian will not work’ is as true as it would be to say that the white man will not work. “Why should the Indian be expected to plant corn, fence lands, build houses, or do anything but get food from day to day, when experience has taught him that the product of his labor will be seized by the white man tomorrow? The most industrious white man would become a drone under similar circumstances. Nevertheless, many of the Indians” (the commissioners might more forcibly have said 130,000 of the Indians) “are already at work, and furnish ample refutation of the assertion that ‘the Indian will not work.’

There is no escape from the inexorable logic of facts. “The history of the Government connections with the Indians is a shameful record of broken treaties and unfulfilled promises. The history of the border white man’s connection with the Indians is a sickening record of murder, outrage, robbery, and wrongs committed by the former, as the rule, and occasional savage outbreaks and unspeakably barbarous deeds of retaliation by the latter, as the exception. “Taught by the Government that they had rights entitled to respect, when those rights have been assailed by the rapacity of the white man, the arm which should have been raised to protect them has ever been ready to sustain the aggressor.”

The testimony of some of the highest military officers of the United States is on record to the effect that, in our Indian wars, almost without exception, the first aggressions have been made by the white man; and the assertion is supported by every civilian of reputation who has studied the subject. In addition to the class of robbers and outlaws who find impunity in their nefarious pursuits on the frontiers, there is a large class of professedly reputable men who use every means in their power to bring on Indian wars for the sake of the profit to be realized from the presence of troops and the expenditure of Government funds in their midst. They proclaim death to the Indians at all times in words and publications, making no distinction between the innocent and the guilty. They irate the lowest class of men to the perpetration of the darkest deeds against their victims, and as judges and jurymen shield them from the justice due to their crimes. Every crime committed by a white man against an Indian
is concealed or palliated. Every offence committed by an Indian against a white man is borne on the wings of the post or the telegraph to the remotest corner of the land, clothed with all the horrors which the reality or imagination can throw around it. Against such influences as these the people of the United States need to be warned.”..

“The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893)

Since the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown in 1607, white settlers had moved steadily westward for nearly three hundred years, encroaching on American Indians’ land and pushing the tribes farther west. Many Americans believed that an ever-advancing frontier line enabled a “superior” white culture to exploit the resources of the West. In 1890, the director of the U.S. Census Bureau announced that the country’s “unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.” This announcement that the frontier period of American history was at its end prompted Frederick Jackson Turner, a young historian, to present a paper entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago in July 1893. Excerpted here is the essay that becomes known as the Turner frontier thesis.

Questions to Consider

1. How does Frederick Jackson Turner describe the frontier? What is the significance of the frontier? What might be the implications of the closing of the frontier?

2. How would Helen Hunt (A Century of Dishonor) respond to Turner?

3. What does this document reveal about late nineteenth-century white Americans’ views of their culture? Turner’s thesis provokes a great deal of controversy. What are some criticisms?

The American frontier is sharply distinguished from the European frontier—a fortified boundary line running through dense populations. The most significant thing about the American frontier is that it lies at the hither edge of free land. In the census reports it is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile....

In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life and reacted of Europe. Our early history is the study of European germs developing in an American environment. Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the Germanic origins, too little to the American factors. The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective
Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe.

It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe....

The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American.... Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history. . . .

But the most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe. As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control.... The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy....

From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance. The works of travelers along each frontier from colonial days onward describe certain common traits, and these traits have, while softening down, still persisted as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social organization succeeded. The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and with all that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.... And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.

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**Turner Thesis Chart**

Directions: Read “Debating the Past” in chapter 16 (p. 458) and compare the following arguments made by the “New West” historians (including those made by Helen Hunt Jackson).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turner Thesis</th>
<th>New Western Historians</th>
<th>Helen Hunt Jackson’s “Century of Dishonor”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The West as “free land” for Anglo-American settlement and Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>A place of heroism, triumph, progress, dominated by the feats of brave white men.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A place where rugged individualism flourished and replenished American democracy.</td>
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The West as a process of settlement that came to an end with the “closing of the frontier.”
Life on the Prairie Farms (1893)

The Homestead Act of 1862 and its promise of 160 acres of free land if it were improved for five consecutive years enticed people to settle the Great Plains. This vast grassland, once considered “desert” and uninhabitable, was passed over by earlier westward migrants. But new agricultural techniques (dry farming, the chilled iron plow, drought and disease-resistant wheat) helped transform the region into America’s breadbasket. Despite these changes, many settlers found that economic survival was difficult: the arid environment of their homestead did not contain enough land to grow wheat or corn profitably. Responses to the plight of the farmer were frequently politically or economically motivated, but journalist E.V. Smalley, author of the following excerpt, focused on the social aspect of agriculture. His depiction of life on prairie farms gave readers of the respected Atlantic Monthly a sense of the solitude facing families on the Great Plains.

Questions to Consider:

1. According to E.V. Smalley, what factors led to the farm families’ isolation on the Great Plains?

2. Explain the living and working conditions for the small farmer on the Great Plains.

3. For what reasons does Smalley believe that farm life on the Great Plains will improve?

4. Why would easterners or immigrants be attracted to the conditions described by Smalley?

. . . Every homesteader must live upon his claim for five years to perfect his title and get his patent; so that if there were not the universal American custom of isolated farm life to stand in the way, no farm villages would be possible in the first occupancy of a new region in the West without a change in our land laws. If the country were so thickly settled that every quarter section of land (160 acres) had a family upon it, each family would be half a mile from any neighbor, supposing the houses to stand in the center of the farms; and in any case the average distance between them could not be less.

But many settlers own 320 acres, and a few have a square mile of land, 640 acres. Then there are school sections, belonging to the state, and not occupied at all; and everywhere you find vacant tracts owned by Eastern speculators or by mortgage companies, to which former settlers have abandoned their claims, going to newer regions and leaving their debts and their land behind. Thus the average space separating the farmsteads is, in fact, always more than a half a mile, and many settlers must go a mile or two to reach a neighbor’s house. This condition obtains not on the frontiers alone but in fairly well-peopled agricultural districts.
If there be any region in the world where the natural gregarious instinct of mankind should assert itself, that region is our Northwestern prairies, where a short, hot summer is followed by a long, cold winter and where there is little in the aspect of nature to furnish food for thought. On every hand the treeless plain stretches away to the horizon line. In summer, it is checkered with grain fields or carpeted with grass and flowers, and it is inspiring in its color and vastness;

...When the snow covers the ground, the prospect is bleak and dispiriting. No brooks babble under icy armor. There is no bird life after the wild geese and ducks have passed on their way south. The silence of death rests on the vast landscape, save when it is swept by cruel winds that search out every chink and cranny of the buildings and drive through each unguarded aperture the dry powdery snow.

In such a region, you would expect the dwellings to be of substantial construction, but they are not. The new settler is too poor to build of brick or stone. He hauls a few loads of lumber from the nearest railway station and puts up a frail little house of two, three, or four rooms that looks as though the prairie winds would blow it away. Were it not for the invention of tarred building paper, the flimsy walls would not keep out the wind and snow. With this paper the walls are sheathed under the weatherboards. The barn is often a nondescript affair of sod walls and straw roof. Lumber is much too dear to be used for dooryard fences, and there is no enclosure about the house. . . .

In this cramped abode, from the windows of which there is nothing more cheerful in sight than the distant houses of other settlers, just as ugly and lonely, and stacks of straw and unthreshed grain, the farmer’s family must live. In the summer there is a school for the children, one, two, or three miles away; but in winter the distances across the snow-covered plains are too great for them to travel in severe weather; the schoolhouse is closed, and there is nothing for them to do but to house themselves and long for spring. Each family must live mainly to itself, and life, shut up in the little wooden farm-houses, cannot well be very cheerful.
4. Opening Montana (1867)

Elizabeth Chester Fisk, born in 1846 in Connecticut, was among the first white women to settle in Montana, and in her letters to her New England family, she chronicled its early growth with a sharp but sympathetic eye. What did she find to be the most appealing aspects of life in the rugged frontier town of Helena? What did she miss most about her native Connecticut? What were the raw new community’s greatest problems?

Helena, Montana, July [21], 1867

My dear Mother:

Our steamer reached Fort Benton on the afternoon of Sunday last. We came into port amid the firing of cannon and shouts of the people assembled on shore. We had been long and anxiously expected and many fears entertained concerning our safety. Our passengers were more delighted than words can express to know that their long “Misery” was at an end.…. Fort Benton was a pleasanter town than I expected to see and wore an air of life and animation. The ox and mule teams awaited their loads of freight were drawn up on the river banks, while further back, on the broad plain on which the town is built, were hundreds of cattle and mules feeding on the rich grass…. Our route lay over the most beautiful prairie, a level natural highway. At evening we came to Sun River where we were delayed four hours waiting for the coach from Helena…. While our coach stopped to change horses, I stretched myself out on the seat and took a little nap, awoke thoroughly chilled and entering the little cabin warmed myself by the fire and drank a cup of hot tea. Soon we came to the crossing of the Dearborn, and forded the stream and rushed on our way as before. The rain was falling fast.
and at every steep hill our gentleman passengers (I was the only lady) were obliged
to unload and walk up the mountain side. They were wet to the skin and a more
dismal looking party could not have been found....

I am much pleased with this country, and can already think of it as home. We
passed through Prickly Pear Canyon on our way from Benton. Here is some of
the most beautiful scenery in the world. The loftiest mountains, their peaks covered
with snow, towered above our heads, while in the valley were the most lovely wild
flowers in bloom—roses... blue bells, and many other of whose names I cannot
tell. The mountains rise all about our home, their sides sometimes covered with
pine and cedar and again only with the green grass. The snow still lingers on the
tallest peaks and the wind is cold and wintry which sweeps down from their
sides....

Helena, Sept. 2nd/67

My dear Fannie:

[For two weeks I have been enjoying your most troublesome complaint,
diarrhea....] Medicine seemed to have no effect unless I entirely abstained from
food.... But I am well again now, which is to be chiefly attributed to the exercise
I have taken, both out and in doors, not less than to food better adapted to an
invalid....

I made bread on Saturday and would like to send you a piece, it is very nice.
Fabricated some pie, too, after my most approved style and sent some to the office
hoping to get [an editorial] puff, but it doth not appear. Can you credit my words
when I tell you that, in this country where milk well watered is one dollar per gal-
lon, and eggs one dollar and a half per dozen, I made cream pies. And today, I have
been guilty of the further extravagance of cooking for supper a spring chicken for
which I paid only $1.25 in [gold] dust. Such is the fact, and not a bone is left to tell
the tail, but we had visitors at tea, Stuart and Jackey, and we don't have chickens
every day.

Today has been election, the day so long [and] anxiously awaited and on
which events so much depends. We can as yet have no idea of the result, but can
only hope that our territory will have no such delegate in Congress as James M.
Cavanaugh.

The day has been one of much interest yet in this city it passed off very
quietly. Had it not been for an event which occurred late in the day we might
have been proud of the manner in which our citizens conducted themselves. The
negroes of course voted and this raised some dissatisfaction among the rebels. Late
in the afternoon an Irishman shot a negro without the slightest provocation and
for no reason at all, unless it were the color of his skin. The colored man cannot
live it is thought, and the son of Erin will without doubt be hung, with little
delay and not much of a trial. The Vigilantes keep things in order here, and I truly
believe there is less of crime in this city than in any town east, of the same number
of inhabitants. This I consider high praise, remembering the elements of which
society is in a great measure composed....
Chapter 26  *The Great West and the Agricultural Revolution, 1865–1896*

What would you think of a town with no grass, no trees, no flowers, only dust and stone in the streets and yards. Such is our town....Nothing grows here without irrigation. This however might easily be accomplished since ditches run through all the principal streets. I intended making a garden another year. Send along the seeds please, both flower and vegetable, as soon as you gather them and they will be in season....

Your sister
Lizzie

Helena, May 24th, 1868

My dear Mother:

...I sent you a long letter by Tuesday's mail, but as news has just come to us that the eastward-bound coach was robbed yesterday, near Pleasant Valley Idaho, I deem it possible that this letter of mine may have been one of those torn up by the desperadoes, and cast to the winds. We seem to be living over again and the early days in the history of our territory when murders, robberies, depredations and lawlessness were on every side and the Vigilantes were engaged in their terrible, awe-inspiring works. These Vigilantes must again organize in every part of our domain and bring miscreants to swift punishment. Mild measures will never do for reckless savages or still more daring white men....

I have not much faith in mankind. The world is selfish, supremely selfish, and no part of it more so than....Montana. People coming here, leave behind all the grace and goodness they ever possessed, and live only for money getting. They are true to no principle of right or justice, make friends only to advance their own interests....The temptation is often great to make my home, when I shall gain it, my world, to seek no companionship outside its little circle.

Could I only decide the question—Shall I, too, selfishly address myself to money getting and ignore the claims of society upon me, or shall my influence be used to bring about a better state of things and beget a little public spirit. I should then with all my heart and soul address myself to the one or the other.

Love untold for all.
L. C. Fisk

5. *Sodbusters in Kansas (1877)*

Migrants to the treeless prairies had to invent new ways of living—including new kinds of houses—at least until they could import more traditional building materials from the East. The following diary entries were written by a Kansas homesteader in

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