The Frontier in History

North America and Southern Africa Compared

EDITED BY

Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson

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LEONARD THOMPSON

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Foreword

Seven Springs Center's aim is to promote scholarship, creativity, and understanding concerning matters of intellectual, cultural, and public significance. Accordingly, the Center warmly welcomed the suggestion by Professors Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson of Yale University that it sponsor a systematic comparison, under their guidance, of the frontier experience of peoples—indigenous and intrusive—in southern Africa and North America. This volume is the richly rewarding result of the scholarship they have inspired, selected, and assembled, and the Center is greatly indebted to them.

The project was supported in large part by a much appreciated grant made to Seven Springs by The Rockefeller Foundation. Allocations were also made from corporate contributions in support of the Center's programs.

Joseph N. Greene, Jr.

Mount Kisco, N.Y.
March 1980

Preface

This book is the outcome of professional cooperation over a number of years. We first conducted a joint graduate seminar on comparative frontier history at Yale University in the spring semester of 1971. Discovering that students of American and African history relished the challenge of being obliged to stretch beyond their regional specializations, we have repeated the seminar in alternate years. By the late 1970s, the subject having given rise to numerous vigorous cross-cultural debates and some excellent seminar papers, we decided to plan a book, to consist of a carefully structured series of essays by the most appropriate scholars. Following a conference at Seven Springs Center in April 1979, at which the essays were discussed, each author made substantial revisions in his first draft.

We introduce the book in the first chapter. Here, it remains for us gratefully to acknowledge the contributions of many people. We thank Joseph N. Greene, Jr., and his staff at Seven Springs Center, and the Rockefeller Foundation, for their generous support. We also thank the members of the Yale-Wesleyan Southern African Research Program, who submitted drafts of the first chapter to critical scrutiny, and the donors of that program—the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation. Not least, we pay a tribute to the authors of the various essays, who have given much time and thought to meeting our editorial requests, and to the following scholars who also took part in the discussions at Seven Springs and, in most cases, supplied written comments on essays: Charles Ambler, Robert Baum, Jeffrey Butler, William Cronon (a most efficient conference rapporteur), Leonard Doob, George Fredrickson, Stanley Greenberg, Leonard Guelke, Alastair Hennessy, Francis Jennings, John Juricek, Richard Ralston, Robert Shell, Deryck Schreuder, Jane Scott, and Jerome Steffen. Recently several of the above people have continued to provide substantial suggestions and

Leonard Guelke supervised the production of the four southern African maps. We have also benefitted from comments and criticisms by Colman Cooke, William Foltz, Robert Harms, and Dunbar Moodie.

Others, too, have made valuable contributions to this book. Marty Achilles, Pamela Baldwin, and Mary Whitney typed most of the manuscript; William Worger compiled the index; and Barbara Folsom, copyeditor, and Charles Grench, history editor, brought expert and sensitive professionalism to the production of the book by the Yale University Press.

Howard Lamar
Leonard Thompson

New Haven, Connecticut
May 1981

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Introduction

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LEONARD THOMPSON AND HOWARD LAMAR

Comparative Frontier History

The dominant tradition in historical scholarship is one that deals in single cases. The time, energy, and talents of the typical historian are fully engaged in the discovery, organization, and interpretation of data on the history of his own society or his own culture. This focus has created a tendency for mainstream historians to refrain from questioning some of the fundamental assumptions that are current in their own environments. Historians who specialize in the history of alien cultures have not made much impact on their own society, nor have their perspectives greatly influenced many of the most prominent historians who dominate the profession. Moreover, the parochialism of some of the most talented and widely read professionals percolates down to the popular mind in a simplified form, stripped of nuance and qualification. The cultural chauvinism that is a regular concomitant of human conflict is, wittingly or unwittingly, propagated by many historians.

This phenomenon is conspicuous in frontier historiography. In South Africa, the migrations of the *voortrekkers* from the Cape Colony to the interior in 1836 and the following years form the centerpiece of Afrikaans historiography; but despite all the attention that has been paid to their Great Trek, there has been little attempt to distinguish what was truly original about it by systematically comparing it with other mid-nineteenth-century landward migrations that were prompted by ideological as well as economic factors, such as the Mormon migration to Utah.[1]

1. For example, C. F. J. Muller, ed., *Five Hundred Years: A History of South Africa* (Pretoria and Cape Town, 1969); also idem, *Die Oorsprong van die Groot Trek* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1974). There are broader perspectives in W. K. Hancock, "Trek," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser. 10, n. 3 (1958): 331–39, and E. A. Walker, *The Great Trek*, 5th ed. (London, 1965). P. J. van der Merwe has written the following distinguished works on the *trekboer*: *Die Noordwaartse beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek (1770–1842)* (The Hague, 1937), *Die*

In the United States, Frederick Jackson Turner, father of the famous frontier hypothesis that the frontier experience shaped both the American character and American institutions, has exerted an extraordinarily profound influence over his successors.[2] His ideas were formulated in a nationalist ethos permeated by social Darwinism and the rise of the United States to the status of a major world power during the 1890s. Ray Allen Billington, his principal interpreter, continued to claim that the American frontier experience was unique and that it is therefore incomparable,[3] leaving Americans to stand apart even from the history of western Europe, the region from which most American immigrants came. In fact, of course, everything is unique; but everything is also related to other things in systematic and comparable ways. One of the least persuasive claims of the frontier hypothesis is that American frontiersmen had faith in the equality of all men, an assertion which is contradicted by the fact that these same frontiersmen excluded Indians, Mexicans, and blacks from equal status.[4] Indeed, Turner and most of his successors have almost completely disregarded the fact that two societies were involved in the frontier process in North America: an indigenous Indian society as well as an intrusive European one.

From the perspective of this volume, the experience of the indigenous society is as significant as the experience of the intrusive one. In this respect we agree with Jack D. Forbes, who has defined a frontier as "an intergroup situation."[5] Furthermore, despite numerous and far-reaching variations, we consider that the frontier should be seen as a phenomenon with common

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Trekboer in die geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie (1657–1842) (Cape Town, 1938), and *Trek: Studies oor die mobiliteit van die pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap* (Cape Town, 1945).

2. Turner's paper was first published in *The Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893*, pp. 199–207; it is also available in the Bobbs-Merrill Reprint Series in History, no. H-214. Among the most perceptive of the many appraisals of Turner's work are: Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier," *Political Science Quarterly* 59 (1954):321–53, 565–602, which, too, is available in the Bobbs-Merrill Reprint Series, no. H-64; Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York and London, 1968); Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York, 1969), pt. 2; David M. Potter, "Abundance and the Frontier Thesis," in *People of Plenty* (Chicago, 1958), pp. 142–65; and Jackson K. Putnam, "The Turner Thesis and the Westward Movement: A Reappraisal," *Western Historical Quarterly* 7 (1976):377–404. There are useful bibliographical essays in Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, pp. 470–77, and Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 4th ed. (New York, 1974), pp. 666–71.

3. Ray Allen Billington, "Frontiers," in *The Comparative Approach to American History*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York, 1968), p. 76.

4. Ibid., p. 80. Billington, who has written copiously on Turner and the American westward movement, summarized his ideas in *The American Frontier Thesis: Attack and Defense*, American Historical Association Pamphlet no. 101, 1971 ed.

5. Jack D. Forbes, "Frontiers in American History and the Role of the Frontier Historian," *Ethnohistory* 16 (1968):207.

basic characteristics wherever and whenever it has existed in history. As Robin F. Wells has written, a frontier system is "a distinct socio-cultural type."[6] On the other hand, neither Forbes nor Wells is very helpful in setting limits to the frontier concept. In particular, Forbes sees a frontier situation as continuing to exist so long as there are ethnic differences between indigenous and immigrant communities, or between succcessive immigrant communities, long beyond the time when, in our perspective, the zone has ceased to be a frontier. While "an inter-group situation" is intrinsic to our definition of a frontier, it is only part of a full definition.

The comparative approach has been used by anthropologists ever since their discipline began to emerge in the nineteenth century. Today, committed though they have become to intensive field research, anthropologists still conceptualize their material in a universal framework. Sociologists and political scientists also use general models and take cognizance of institutions in Africa and Asia.[7]

Historians have been less committed to systematic comparative studies. The great French medievalist Marc Bloch used comparisons as a method of testing hypotheses, but the scope of his work was limited to western Europe, and predominantly to medieval western Europe.[8] At the global level, Arnold Toynbee regarded "civilizations" as the only intelligible fields of historical study, and his mammoth *Study of History* is structured as a comparative study of civilizations; but his work was uneven and he failed to provide a consistent meaning for his basic concept.[9] During the last three decades, however, some historians—including Bloch's successors in the Annales school—have been applying the comparative approach more rigorously than Toynbee and across a wider range of human experience than Bloch. Slavery is a notable example of an institution that has been receiving comparative treatment from historians.[10] Recently, some have extended their purview beyond the history of slavery in Western culture to include

6. Robin F. Wells, "Frontier Systems as a Sociocultural Type," *Papers in Anthropology* 14 (1973):6–15.

7. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Barrington Moore, Jr., are notable contemporary examples.

8. Marc Bloch, "Pour une historie comparée des sociétés européenes," *Revue de Synthèse Historique* 46 (1925):15–50; English translation without footnotes, "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," in *Enterprise and Secular Change*, ed. Frederic C. Lane and Jelle C. Riemersma (Homewood, Ill., 1953), pp. 494–521; William H. Sewell, Jr., "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History," *History and Theory* 6 (1967):208–18.

9. Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Study of History*, 10 vols. (London: 1935–54). In the last four volumes of this work, Toynbee shifted from "civilizations" to "higher religions" as the intelligible fields of historical study.

10. Laura Foner and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Slavery in the New World: A Reader in Comparative History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1966, 1975).

precolonial African versions of slavery.[11] They have been preparing the way for scholars to formulate general hypotheses concerning the rise and decline of property in human beings, as well as the varied forms that the institution has assumed in different periods and different political cultures and economic systems. Adopting an even broader perspective, historians may eventually attempt general histories of labor systems and provide explanations for why different systems have prevailed in different times and places.

Comparative frontier historiography is much less mature than comparative slavery historiography. It has suffered from two main methodological weaknesses. First is a lack of clarity in defining the subject and a lack of rigor in identifying and classifying comparable entities within the subject. Such a judgment is not meant to denigrate the useful and careful testing of the Turner hypothesis on specific frontiers. Works by Paul F. Sharp, Fred Alexander, and H. C. Allen, and the provocative essays in Walker D. Wyman and Clifton B. Kroeber's well-known *The Frontier in Perspective* all test aspects of Turner's hypothesis on the Australian, Canadian, and other frontiers; and W. K. Hancock has written an imaginative essay applying Turner's ideas to southern Africa.[12] In 1977 David Harry Miller and Jerome O. Steffen edited a symposium entitled *The Frontier: Comparative Studies*, in which they permitted each author to attach his own meaning to the term *frontier*. The result is a series of scholarly essays on societies as disparate as the Roman Empire and modern Brazil, without any organizing principle or common factors of analysis.[13] We ourselves, when we conducted our first graduate seminar at Yale University on this topic in 1971, committed the same error.

Second, the historical discipline is such that most individuals are essen-

11. Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); Suzanne Meiers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, Wis., 1977). On comparative history in general, see the articles on "Comparative History in Theory and Practice" in the *American Historical Review*, vol. 85, no. 4 (October 1980); also George M. Fredrickson, "Comparative History," in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), pp. 457–73.

12. Paul F. Sharp, "Three Frontiers: Some Comparative Studies of Canadian, American, and Australian Settlement," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 24 (November 1955); Fred Alexander, *Moving Frontiers: An American Theme and Its Application to Australian History* (Melbourne, 1947); H. C. Allen, *Bush and Backwoods: A Comparison of the Frontier in Australia and the United States* (East Lansing, Mich., 1959); Walker D. Wyman and Clifton B. Kroeber, eds. *The Frontier in Perspective* (Madison, Wis., 1957); W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, 2 vols. in 3 (London, 1937–42), 2 (1): 1–72.

13. David Harry Miller and Jerome O. Steffen, eds., *The Frontier: Comparative Studies* (Norman, Okla., 1977), p. 6. Most of the essays in this book are specific studies without any comparative features; but there are illuminating comparative passages in David Harry Miller and William W. Savage, Jr., "Ethnic Stereotypes and the Frontier: A Comparative Study of Roman and American Experience," pp. 109–37.

tially one-region specialists who have looked rather cursorily beyond the case they know to find matching attributes elsewhere, instead of attaining a higher level of abstraction and giving the different regions treated equal weight. Thus, American frontier historians tend to regard the American case as a model against which they have analyzed and evaluated other frontier histories. This was the conceptual basis Marvin W. Mikesell used in an important review article, "Comparative Studies in Frontier History," in 1960.[14]

Here, building on ideas advanced by Martin Legassick and by Hermann Giliomee, and by several of our students in unpublished essays, as well as on an article by Marc Bloch and more recent publications by Giovanni Sartori, William Sewell, and others, we and the other contributors are attempting to overcome these weaknesses by pooling our knowledge of two distinct regions, defining our concept of a frontier in universal terms, and explaining its application at different levels of analysis.[15]

We regard a frontier not as a boundary or line, but as a territory or zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies.[16] Usually, one of the societies is indigenous to the region, or at least has occupied it for many generations; the other is intrusive. The frontier "opens" in a given zone when the first representatives of the intrusive society arrive; it "closes" when a single political authority has established hegemony over the zone. When the frontier has closed in a given zone, the intruders may have exterminated the indigenous people (as in Tasmania); they may have expelled them (as in North America from east of the Mississippi); they may have subjected them and incorporated them into their own political and economic system (as in South Africa); the intruders may themselves have been incorporated by the indigenous people (as happened to the Portuguese in the Zambesi valley between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries); or

14. Marvin W. Mikesell, "Comparative Studies in Frontier History," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 50 (March 1960): 62–74.

15. Martin Legassick, "The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780–1840: The Politics of a Frontier Zone" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1970), pp. 1–29, 634–68, and "The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography," *The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies 2 (1971): 1–33; Hermann Giliomee, "The Eastern Frontier, 1770–1812," in *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1820*, ed. Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee (Cape Town and London, 1979) pp. 291–337; Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 44 (1970): 103–53; and the articles by Marc Bloch and William H. Sewell, Jr., listed in note 8 above. Alastair Hennessy, in *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque, N. Mex., 1978), uses a conceptual framework compatible with ours.

16. The term *frontier* has had a checkered history. John T. Juricek, "American Usage of the word 'Frontier' from Colonial Times to Frederick Jackson Turner," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 10, no. 1 (February 1966): 10–34, and Fulmer Mood, "Notes on the History of the Word 'Frontier,'" *Agricultural History* 22 (April 1948): 78–83.

they may have reached a stalemate (as was the case with the eighteenth-century frontier of New Spain in the provinces of Texas and New Mexico).

Most cases are more complex than we have indicated so far. Two or more intrusive peoples may be competing with one another as well as with the indigenous inhabitants for control of the frontier zone (as with the French and English in the Mohawk and Hudson River valleys); or the indigenous populations may be so sharply divided among themselves that they persist in devoting more energy to their competition with one another than to resisting the intruders. In some cases it may not be possible to distinguish between indigenes and intruders: such frontier zones are areas where two societies meet and compete (as with the French and the Germans in the Rhineland, or the Germans and the Slavs in eastern Europe). However, there are three essential elements in any frontier situation as we conceive it: territory; two or more initially distinct peoples; and the process by which the relations among the peoples in the territory begin, develop, and eventually crystallize. We shall examine these three elements separately.

First, the geography of a given frontier zone provides the opportunities and sets the limits for human activity there. The geographical variables include temperature and precipitation; contours and catchment areas; soils, vegetation, minerals, and fauna; and the spatial relationship between the frontier zone and the territory from which the intruding people originate. The carrying capacity and attractiveness of land varies prodigiously, from near zero in the case of deserts to very high figures in the case of exceptionally well-favored areas; so that those who, following Turner, have attempted to define frontier zones in terms of population density are not providing a useful tool.[17] Even within the United States, which was Turner's concern, there were immense differences in the carrying capacities of different sections of the frontier. Furthermore, in the course of time discoveries and technological advances have dramatically altered a territory's attractiveness and carrying capacity, as when gold was discovered in California in 1848 and on the Witwatersrand in 1885, or when dry-farming techniques assisted in the intensive white settlement of the North American Great Plains.

Second, the qualities of the basic cultures of the interacting societies go some way toward explaining the nature of their interactions. Hunting, herding, mixed farming, and industrial societies all have different capabilities and different ranges of social structures, political organizations, and belief systems. Further, no society is monolithic. Within a single society, different

17. Throughout the period 1870 to 1914, "the U.S. Census considered a density of between two and six per square miles to indicate a 'frontier' condition." David J. Wishart, Andrew Warren, and Robert H. Stoddard, "An Attempted Definition of a Frontier Using a Wave Analogy," *The Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal* 6 (1969): 73–81.