Introduction

ROUGHLY ONE-FIFTH of the territory of the United States lies in the area generally designated as the Great Plains—a vast tract stretching from the eastern slopes of the Rockies to a nebulous line west of the Mississippi and in the vicinity of the ninety-eighth meridian. It was in this area that the last act in the long drama of American settlement was played out; as much as forty years had elapsed between the time of acquisition and the fact of settlement, and during that period the Plains were crossed and recrossed by itinerant trappers and by settlers moving through to the more attractive lands of the Pacific Coast. The image of the Plains as a great ocean of grassland and limitless horizons that had so appealed to earlier observers still held good at the midpoint of the nineteenth century—save that there were now well-traveled sea lanes as well as empty expanses; an ocean that for centuries had supported its own distinctive life now felt the presence of strange craft and narrow lines upon its surface. Those who crossed took only what they needed for the moment; they showed no inclination to stay, for to them the Plains were simply a wide corridor to the Promised Land, and of no intrinsic importance.

In the thirty years that followed the end of the Civil War, the eastern heartland of the United States entered into the industrial age with a vengeance, and the products of its factories made it possible for the herdsman and the cultivator to mount the first concerted assault on the grasslands that stretched from west of the Mississippi to the Rockies. Urbanized northeasterners, who were only one generation away from their own roots in the soil, forged the rails that brought the iron age to the Plains; the nomads of the Plains and their seminomadic white counterparts made way for the pastoralist and the tiller of the soil, and the same technology that had brought these new inhabitants to the Plains made it possible for them to grow food for those who tended the machines, both at home and abroad. For a brief period two different stages of development stood side by side on the one continent and within the one civiliza-

tion—the city and its processing mechanisms, the Plains with their meat and grain. Though closely interlocked, heartland and colony stood for a moment sharp and clear within a single polity; a generation later, and the lines of demarcation were already becoming blurred.

The elements of contrast should not be overstressed; most of those who settled the Plains in those decades had been reared in the framework of a common cultural heritage and took with them a general commitment to a common set of values and assumptions that already had the weight of a century of national life behind it—even allowing for the great trauma of the Civil War. The relatively few cultural differences that did survive into the second half of the nineteenth century had little chance of prevailing against the impact of a catapulting technology that eradicated distance and laid conduits for the printed and spoken word across even the most extensive deserts and plains. Colonial appendages though they were, the settled areas of the new West were not allowed to savor their physical isolation for very long; incorporation proceeded alongside development and exploitation, ensuring the extension to the West of that larger sense of identity that marked the American off from the world community. So effective was this process of continuous assimilation and cross-fertilization that within a generation a distinctively western type—the cowboy—had won acceptance as a symbol at the national level.

But beneath the network of steel and wire that riveted the nation together at the very point when its population spilled over into the prairies and into the new industrial cities, some of the tensions and the frustrations that are characteristic of the colonial experience struggled for expression and release in the West. Those who had moved to the new West in the decades after the Civil War were more troubled by the harshness of their physical existence than by any sense of cultural isolation. Their cultural needs were relatively few and uncomplicated and were adequately met from the store of tradition brought with them from the older sections of the country in which they had spent their formative years. Once the initial tasks of establishing homes and farms had been completed, the sense of urgency that had driven them in the early years gave way to the assumption that permanency and stability had been achieved. The farmer still had to struggle for his livelihood, but it was now a struggle against predators of his own kind—the politicians and middlemen who coveted his meager gains. With all their problems, the settlers knew that the social order they represented had triumphed

over the wilderness and that there would be no turning back; individuals might falter, but the wider community had appropriated the Plains and would hold them permanently for its children.

But their offspring had no memories of an older land against which to measure their experience of life. For them, the Plains environment was an unavoidable and ever-present fact that bore down on their existence at every level and demanded recognition and comprehension. Their situation was not unlike that of the children of the immigrants who poured into the eastern cities in the same period. Both groups faced the same problem of establishing an acceptable identity in a world very different from the one their fathers had known. They could not identify with a traditional world, because it lay beyond their direct experience; at the same time, those who grew up on the frontier were formed by communities that in many cases were less than a quarter of a century old and had not as yet developed a life of their own.

There was little that could act as a point of attachment for the rising generation, yet the urge to find some point of contact, some sense of being part of a wider community, was an important part of the process of establishing a sense of personal identity. Very few of those who were born on the frontier were equipped to examine their own relationship with their physical and social environment in any detail; relative isolation and the thin spread of population in the early stages of settlement meant a slowing down in the movement of ideas, and a lack of social intercourse made it difficult for those who lived in the area to achieve a sense of identity, either as individuals or as communities.

It is within this broad framework that the career of Walter Prescott Webb should be examined. The son of a pioneer schoolteacher and farmer, Webb grew up tantalizingly close to the cattle kingdom and witnessed its disappearance. From his vantage point on the edge of the Plains, he saw enough of that vanishing era to feel drawn to it and to need some way of identifying with its style and values. But he was also the son of a dirt farmer, and prolonged exposure to the tedium and apparently pointless labor involved in farm life produced a determination to have done with it. Webb became one of the characteristic western types—the young man who turned his face eastward in search of opportunity and the better life, but could never cure himself of the habit of looking back over his shoulder and wondering about the land he had left. Yet there was one element that marked him off from the backtrailers depicted in Hamlin Garland's midwestern novels: though Webb turned away

from the land of his childhood, he never moved far from its edge. As the years went by and he became more aware of the bonds that held him to that land, his focus began to shift and eventually fixed itself on the continuing struggle between man and the hostile environment of the Plains. ("I have never been able to get away from the dry country. I returned to it intellectually after having escaped it physically. I have sought to understand what I hated and feared . . .")[1] He was to cling almost grimly to that land as long as he lived, and he found his greatest satisfaction in trying to plumb its character.

No one knew better than Webb that the edge of the Plains was not the most pleasant or satisfying environment for an intelligent and sensitive youngster, and he respected it at a distance. But it is important that he did respect it; with all its limitations, it was the home of his own people, and it had sheltered the friends and neighbors of his childhood. It had helped to form his personality in ways that he could only partially understand, and he could never separate himself from a mold that had in fact become part of him. In the course of time, he found himself impelled to probe the history of the region in which he had spent the first twenty years of his life and to write of it in a way that demanded recognition—compelled, perhaps, by the realization that without such knowledge and the recognition that went with it, his own personality would in some way remain disjointed and incomplete. The possibility that the humble lives of his own parents and the men and women of their generation might slip unnoticed into the forgotten past disturbed him—and in part because some element of his own existence would inevitably follow them into obscurity. That this should happen while the chronicles of the older parts of the country were being probed and weighed with minute care seemed to Webb to be an arrogant and willful act of injustice, and, until that situation was rectified at least in part, he remained at war with those he felt to be chiefly responsible.

A student by choice and a scholar by accident, Webb represents several strands in the attempt to form what might be called a western mind, in the sense in which author Wilbur J. Cash applied the term to the South. His role in fixing the image of a major segment of the western landscape can hardly be questioned; forty years after its publication, *The Great Plains* still stands as the point of departure for most studies of the region, and Webb's interpretation of the process of settlement has bitten deep into the public mind. But the book also represents one of the most successful attempts by a first

generation westerner to produce an integrated view of his immediate historical context, over and against the national perspective that inevitably followed on the heels of political and economic incorporation. Though as ardent a nationalist as any of his generation, Webb also harbored the characteristic resentments of a colonial toward the arrogant assumptions of superiority on the part of the imperial heartland. The urge to demonstrate that there was something unique about the experience of the Plains communities that marked it off from that of the older sections of the country and gave it a special character is never very far below the surface in Webb's work; it is an element that may help to explain his lifelong reluctance to identify himself as a follower of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose vision of the frontier as a distinctive force in American history dominated the thinking of a generation of western historians. By the time Webb came to write *The Great Plains*, the Turner approach was almost a part of the orthodoxy against which he needed to assert the special claims of the Plains region. A midwestern view was, in his eyes, not all that different from a northeastern one: Boston and Chicago seemed like close neighbors when viewed from the perspective of North Central Texas.

The impulse to explore and delineate the social context that had shaped a generation was one thing; translating it into action was a far more difficult problem. Lonely and introspective as a youngster, Webb had to discover in painful and solitary fashion the concepts that would allow him to organize his view of the world around him and the vocabulary to express and link them together into a satisfying whole. In itself, the slow expansion of his intellectual and imaginative framework constitutes something of a case study in the formation of a western mind under the conditions operative in the first decades of the century. Webb's intellectual development reflected some of the limitations inherent in the social conditions prevailing in a remote segment of an outlying state. Some of those limitations had a permanent impact and made it difficult for him to function as an intellectual or a professional historian in the way that most of his colleagues took for granted; others he circumvented or developed into compensatory strengths, giving his intellectual profile something of the curious flatness and imbalance that are characteristic of the landscape of his region.

At the same time, Webb's educational development was something more than a chronicle of deficiencies. Almost by chance, he became the heir to a set of ideas and an intellectual orientation that had its roots deep in nineteenth century European scholarship and

came to him as a variant of what was generally known as institutional history—a variant that stands apart from the germ theory that Turner had earlier rejected as irrelevant. When Turner was at the height of his career, Webb was captivated by the lectures of a man whose approach to history ran along lines rather similar to those Turner had adopted but was applied on a global rather than a national level. Webb was to apply the approach he had learned from Lindley Miller Keasbey to explore the development of his own region, but he never lost the inclination to look for the underlying structures that ran beneath the political and social framework and gave meaning to the fabric they supported. Toward the end of his career, he was to give this tendency full rein by reverting to Keasbey's global perspective, while at the same time remaining anchored, in a way that Keasbey never was, to his own hearth and the ways of his people. It is this exposure to the workings of a formidable and exciting intellect that marks Webb off from those of his generation who followed the same path from frontier obscurity to professional standing and that accounts for the curious tension between his tenacious provincialism and his penchant for global generalization.

This study is an attempt to trace the making of an environmentalist by placing his development within the framework of his own intellectual and social setting and, in a sense, subjecting his career to the same type of scrutiny that he advocated as the basis of the study of evolving cultures. The procedure itself is a familiar one; those who tabulate the changing modes in the writing of history take for granted the need to relate the work of a mature scholar to the climate of ideas prevailing during his productive years. Few would regard a major piece of historical writing as an autonomous deposit quite distinct from the personality of the author; questions concerning the nature and scope of his education, the impact of the individuals and the institutions with which he was associated, and shifts within the relevant schools of interpretation—all are recognized as elements that can condition an individual historian's approach to his subject. The assumption is that a faithful adherence to the canons of the discipline ensures that the historian reduces the impact of such influences to an acceptable level or at least controls them by being aware of their existence.

In Webb's case, however, there are unusually strong grounds for probing the relationship between the writer and his milieu. In the case of *The Great Plains*, the final work was not the outcome of an intellectual process in which rationality was simply tempered by the operation of psychological and emotional considerations; if any-

thing, the conventional approach was reversed, and disciplined rationality became the handmaiden of a deeply founded emotional reaction. Webb was right to stress that he would have preferred to have been a creative writer rather than an academic historian, and there is a sense in which he is best cast as a writer who found that history provided him with the only material he knew how to use—material that had some bearing on his inward concerns.

All of this points to the need for a much closer study of the relevant biographical material than is customary and a questioning of the assumption that scholarly habits are an adequate proof against the assertion of the individual psyche. To suggest that Webb wrote *The Great Plains* to justify the Plainsman and his works and that the task drew as heavily on his emotional resources as on his intellect does not reduce the significance of the work itself, but it does add an additional perspective that is not evident at first reading. What one can observe here is a first generation colonial, brought up in a community without a clearly articulated sense of its own identity and then trained to value the ability of older societies to specify their heritage, grappling with the contradictions of his own situation. Like others of his generation, he tried to define that sense of community with the land and those who live close to it that often seems to become all-important to men uncertain of their place within the wider community; in reaching out for that definition, in trying to merge the subjective and objective worlds, Webb slowly built up a picture of the interplay between a rigid geographical framework and the fluid patterns of social life that emerged within its boundaries. What he saw there convinced him that there were present elements of creativity and adaptation that satisfied his sense of the special character of the Plains experience. In making his examination, he was less concerned about method than about the ultimate goal to be achieved; regional sensitivity easily mastered any loyalty to academic disciplines whose methodological principles he only partially accepted.

In the course of the present study, no attempt will be made to assess the value of Webb's later work or to make any more than a passing reference to his studies of the Texas Rangers or of economic sectionalism in the 1930's. The preparation and the writing of *The Great Plains* was critical enough to warrant the narrower focus —critical both in forming Webb's own historical perspective and in defining a regional sense of identity. Whatever the quality or significance of his later work, the importance of that initial base seems undeniable. Nor is any attempt made to determine whether Webb's

interpretation of the Plains experience is a valid one, or whether subsequent research in geography, anthropology, or other relevant disciplines has qualified or invalidated sections of the work; the focus remains limited to the relationship between an individual imagination and its formal expression.

If Webb had been an isolated figure, whose writings were known only to specialists and academic colleagues, the assessment of his early career might well take on a different form. But what makes him an especially interesting figure in the development of western historical writing is that he managed to project both his personality and his ideas across a wider section of his immediate community than is usually the case, and that he did this without in any way modifying his basic role as a university teacher. The accidental death of a retired historian does not ordinarily make front page news in a sizable community, and it is significant that Webb is one of the few individuals granted interment in the state cemetery at Austin on the basis of services to the state in other than a military or political capacity. More than ten years after his death, evidence of his impact on an important segment of his generation is more apparent in the general community of which he was a determined member than in the university where he spent most of his working life.

Yet Webb was not active in local politics or in many of the non-academic activities that sometimes earn a university teacher special standing in his community. His influence, both in terms of his students and of those who knew him only on the basis of more casual contacts, stemmed to some degree from a recognition that he took local people and local concerns seriously; even the fact that he invested heavily in the growth of his community was a tangible indication of a personal involvement in the everyday life of his community and his confidence in its future. But more important was the fact that he was willing to talk in simple terms of things that were of interest to his own people, to speak of their common past in a way that gave dignity and meaning to their historical experience. For that, the generation of which he was part remained grateful; another generation, brought to maturity in a very different social environment, would have less need for the kind of reassurance he offered.

Such an identification between a historian and his community suggests something about the character of his work that is worth exploring and which may throw light on the cultural and psychological pressures that operate in societies that are modern and at the

same time still in the process of formation. But apart from these interpretive premises, certain other considerations have held this study to what might be regarded as an unduly restricted framework, and some of these are of a personal and perhaps arbitrary character. This examination of Webb's early development is made from the perspective of one who never met or studied under Webb —the perspective of a foreigner whose contact with the United States and the university in which Webb spent most of his career does not go back beyond late 1969. Acquaintance with his work does go back earlier; the writer first came across *The Great Plains* during an undergraduate course at the University of Melbourne in the mid-1950's and found that its treatment of pioneer life showed some similarities to the experience of sections of the local Australian farming community.

To anyone familiar with life in the Australian wheat belt, where drought is a constant preoccupation and both the windmill and the wire fence are so much a normal part of the agricultural landscape that they are rarely noticed, Webb's account of the problems faced by the early settlers of the Plains had an obvious relevance. In neither area have man and nature ever come to a completely acceptable accommodation. That sense of grim and unresolved contest between the two, which Webb conveyed as few other students of the West have done, is also a very pervasive element in the Australian pioneering experience; drought and fire remain as weapons held in reserve and capable of wiping out the accumulated efforts of a generation.

Similarities of background and environment provide part of the basis for an interest in Webb and his interpretation of the Plains experience, but in no sense is this intended as a comparative study. Its framework is limited to Webb's social setting, and its purpose is to probe the relationship between that setting, the cultural matrix it supported, and a book that was at the same time both an attempt to define that setting and a product of it.


alan E. Cober '75