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The Portrait of Uncle Sam. American History in a New Era

Hugh Brogan

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A valedictory lecture given at the University of Essex on 28 June 2000 by Professor Hugh Brogan, M.A.

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The Portrait of Uncle Sam
American History in a New Era.

I must begin by saying how touched I am by the eagerness with which my colleagues took up the casual suggestion that I should give a valedictory lecture, and by the efforts which have gone into organising this occasion. At the same time I feel slightly foolish, since you have not, I hope, seen or heard the last of me. I have retired from full-time employment at the University, but I am still putting in a part-time stint, and I can tell you that this seems to give me the best of all possible worlds – just as much money, and no departmental meetings. For those present who are not members of the History Department at Essex I should perhaps state explicitly that I did not retire because of any grievance against the University, or my profession, or my country. I have never been much good at organising my time, and when I passed my sixtieth birthday in 1996 I suddenly realised that it was running short. There were several big projects that I wanted to complete, and I could not rationally gamble (if it is ever possible to gamble rationally) on having years and energy enough in hand to do so unless I shrank my work-load by doing less teaching and no administration. So after checking with my independent financial adviser I took the plunge, and I have no regrets. I have made substantial progress towards finishing the first of my big projects, and I maintain a vital connection with the University. I am not saying good-bye, and I hope it will be years before I have to do so.

Still, a valedictory lecture seemed to be in order, partly because I had something to say which would not get so much (or any) attention if uttered in any other form, and partly because if a professor doesn't take stock of himself and his subject on his retirement, when will he do so? I might have done as much in an inaugural lecture, but we have no tradition of inaugural lectures at Essex - perhaps unfortunately. We have no tradition of valedictory lectures either, so I have had to decide what should go into this one by first principles. And it seems to me that this is not an occasion for scolding the Vice-Chancellor, even about those frightful advertisement hoardings on the steps between Squares Three and Four. On the contrary: since my retirement I have discovered how important it is that those who have voluntarily side-lined themselves should not try to meddle in the continuing business of the institution. Yours, my colleagues, is the future and the shaping of it; all I have the right to do is to cheer you up as much as possible (very easy: we pensioners are always in a good humour). You must not suppose from this that I am entirely happy about the way things are going. In fact I could easily devote a whole hour to abusing Whitehall and Downing Street for their wicked plans to destroy one of the finest university systems in the world, to lamenting the degree of success which those Philistines have already achieved, and to inciting you to resistance. But that too would be a wasted opportunity, since what can be more profitless than preaching to the converted? Nor do I think I should try to entertain you with a lecture on a restricted historical subject, however enthralling. What I ought to do, it seems to me, is to attempt a survey of current problems and opportunities in writing U.S. history, in this way throwing a little light on the United States itself, and perhaps suggesting certain ideas which should, and probably do, preoccupy most professional historians and conscious citizens of the world. The fact that I am by chance speaking as a new century approaches (as a historian knowing that every century must have a hundred years, I have no doubt that we are still in the twentieth century and the second millennium) makes this enterprise doubly timely, and the end of the Cold War makes it inevitable. It is a moment to take a fresh look at Uncle Sam and his story. I claim no originality in this assertion, or indeed in anything else I say. When I first settled on the theme of my lecture I thought that I was a little daring, but I have since discovered that the project is extremely fashionable. Everybody's doing it. My duty this evening is merely not to botch the job. This may not be easy. My best lectures usually take either five minutes or five months to prepare. This one, for reasons outside my control, has taken less than five weeks, and may therefore be considered half-baked. The difficulty is that, like the old lady in the story, I never know what I think till I see what I've said, and then I usually disagree. To be worthy of this audience this lecture should have been mulled over for at least another month. Being what it is, it needs all your indulgence – and so do I. My hope was to build my lecture upon two points: the state of American history today and the question of how we should write it tomorrow. As I look at what I have written, I see that my assertions on the first point are not supported by enough evidence, and as to the second point, as to which I am trying to say something new, I shall be gratified indeed if you can follow my wanderings through the thickets of my thought. So if, as I hope, there is a discussion afterwards, and you feel like making strong criticisms, by all means go ahead. You will be continuing the undertaking most valuably.[1]

My thoughts first turned to my theme when, about two years ago, I was called on to revise my *History of the United States of*

America. I had made notes, over the years, of passages that could do with correction or improvement; and the publishers wanted an additional chapter to cover the Carter and Reagan presidencies. I think they would also have liked a chapter on the George Bush and Bill Clinton years, but I stood firm: one of the things I have learned from my trade is that we cannot begin to have a true historical perspective until roughly thirty years have passed after events have occurred. Contemporary history is not quite a contradiction in terms, and indeed we cannot do without it, but it must always be even more highly provisional than chronicles of olden times, and as such it could not fit into a book which tries to present a generally acceptable account of America since 30,000 B.C. I did much in agreeing to write on Carter and Reagan, and have little doubt that this newest chapter is also the weakest. Whereas when, in a pub the other night, a young American student said to me in all sincerity, "What exactly was Watergate?" I realized that that particular episode was now, in the most important sense, history – which it wasn't when my book was first published, in 1985. However, my strongest feeling, when I look back, is that my *History* was a young man's book, and if I were mad enough to try and do the job afresh, from beginning to end, the outcome, if I ever achieved it, would be profoundly different, though probably not any better. My task, when I started work in 1968, was to write as beguiling an introduction to United States history as I could, while not omitting any major points which a beginner ought to learn. I tried to write a book that would have entertained me when I was sixteen years old, and although the age of that imagined reader tended to creep up as I worked – I think he had just turned twenty-one when I finished – I managed to stick pretty closely to my conception. But what now strikes me most is that I did not see anything problematic about that conception. The important themes, episodes and individuals in American history seemed to me to be self-selecting: the period of settlement, Indians, the American Revolution, George Washington, the Constitution, and so on. Such self-confidence is only possible to the young and ignorant, and I was both. If I were to start again today I would have to guard against a propensity to cram in far too much information, to dwell too long on topics which at the moment are the most hotly debated, and on the details of current controversies which are necessarily of little use or interest to beginners. My notional reader would be thoroughly middle-aged, puzzled and disillusioned: freshly retired, perhaps, from a professorial chair. There would be scant sales for such a book. But even if some young person now sets out to replace Brogan's *History* – if there is such a person, I hope it is a woman: for some reason most of the single volume, single-author histories of America have so far been written by men – a problem would soon make itself felt which has nothing to do with the sex, age or erudition of any one historian. Unless I am very much mistaken the academic discipline known as history, and U.S. history in particular, is facing a profound crisis, and I mean to devote the rest of this lecture to discussing it – somewhat obliquely.

My task seemed so easy to me, thirty years ago, because I had unconsciously absorbed what may politely be called the whiggish strain in American historiography. It was easy enough to avoid the Spread Eagle rant that disfigured so much early American writing, like this passage in the writings of the Brooklyn McGonagall, Walt Whitman:

> The Americans of all nations at any time upon earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses...[2]

(It is easy to see where Warren Gamaliel Harding learned his style.) But it is not all that far from Whitman to the great unexamined assumption, shared by almost all American historians (Henry Adams and Richard Hofstadter are the only exceptions who come immediately to mind) that U.S. history is an epic of triumphant progress. America, the legend runs, was the first country to achieve modern freedom and democracy, as the glorious Declaration of Independence made plain. The Civil War was a tragedy, but it had a nobly positive result (just the other day I came across William Dean Howell's remark that "what the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending"). The tired and poor were welcomed in millions by the Statue of Liberty, and lived happily ever after. The astounding energy and ingenuity of American businessmen and inventors, coupled with the bounty of God's own country, created the great capitalist civilisation destined to conquer the world. In the twentieth century Uncle Sam thrice rescued the peoples of the world from brutal tyranny. That was his mission. That was the heroic story which great Americans in each generation – Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy – proclaimed to their countrymen and the world; that was the story which, as Ronald Reagan was quick to assert, was validated for ever by the fall of the Berlin Wall. But that occurred more than ten years ago (soon students will be asking, “What exactly was the Berlin Wall?”) and a sense of anti-climax is inescapable. American institutions, American enterprise and the American way of life may have been vindicated by the collapse of almost all alternatives, but no-one to the left of Senator Jesse Helms is likely to pretend that the condition of America today bears much resemblance to, for example, the republic of virtuous farmers praised by Thomas Jefferson

> Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue ... The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.[3]

Rather, the United States today is, even at its best, very recognisably the country so mercilessly and amusingly depicted by John Updike:

> People don’t make money an hour at a time any more; you just get yourself in the right position and it comes. I know guys, lawyers, guys in real estate, no older than me and not as smart who pull in two, three hundred K on a single transaction. You must know a lot of retired money down here. It’s easy to be rich, that’s what this country is all about.[4]

If that proposition is really the end to which the years since 1776 or 1607 have been labouring, a candid observer is bound to say, “Is that all? Is that the point of American history? If so, it was hardly worth making.”

Other countries have had to face the moment when their national myths break down. In Britain, in the period from, roughly, 1918 to 1960, the surest way to make a great reputation as a historian – or, at any rate, a reputation as a historian of markedly sound judgement – was to attack the Whig historians, by whom you usually meant Lord Macaulay or Bishop Stubbs. After the First World War the self-congratulation which was so marked an aspect of the British national outlook seemed intolerable, both morally and intellectually, and the demolition men went to work. It was necessary, but the assailants proved unsuccessful at replacing the outworn consensus. To mention but two names: Herbert Butterfield strayed to the very margins of fascism, and the realistic conservatism espoused by Lewis Namier seems, in retrospect, as sterile as, and a good deal more heartless than, the Victorian liberalism which it replaced. In the 1960s the New Left, and in the seventies the feminists criticised British history, in my opinion, much more persuasively than the conservatives, and originated a tradition, still operating, which is anything but sterile; however, their work was yet another solvent of the national myth, and recently the impact of Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalism have carried the dismantling process still further. Perhaps the tide has begun to turn at last; perhaps it is once more becoming possible to read Macaulay with respect for more than his artistry and erudition; perhaps we can now admit that, on the whole, British history has been a success story, and ask ourselves the interesting question, What sort of a success?; but even if I am right it has taken us nearly a century to reach that point, and meanwhile history – by which I do not mean the fanciful volumes of journalists and other amateurs – has lost its once central place in the national culture, replaced, like so much else, by a vulgar obsession with football, television and computer games.

This, it may well be objected, is a caricature, but I hope it serves to clarify the dilemma now facing historians of the United States. The best of them, highly trained and intelligent men and women, can only give, at most, half-hearted assent to the American Whig myth, yet are far from sure that they can do without it.[5]

One tempting recourse would be to rely on a new, or counter-myth. Taking hints from Plato, Jefferson and Karl Marx it might be argued that the history of the great Republic is one of erratic but perpetual degeneration, so that it is now a full-blown oligarchy in which nothing counts but money; an oligarchy which has rotted democratic institutions so completely that they are crumbling shells, while civic virtue is almost nowhere to be found and justice is barely even a memory. I call this counter-myth tempting because every week brings new evidence to support it. For instance, in the summer of 2000 the House of Representatives voted to abolish the inheritance tax, which brought in $30 billion per annum and was levied only on estates of more than $675,000 (which was soon to be a cool million) – 2 per cent of the total. It was a bill for the relief of millionaires and billionaires, and any shortfall in the public revenues which it caused (had the Senate and President Clinton agreed to it) would have to be made good either by increasing other taxes, or increasing the national debt, or by cutting public expenditure.[6] (The matter was still undecided in December, although George W. Bush endorsed the attack on what Republicans call "the death tax"). But we ought to admit that the counter-myth is objectionable for exactly the same reason that its Whiggish counterpart is: it is not truly historical, since historians, not knowing the end of the story, have no way of knowing whether it is right or wrong (and nor do social scientists); it cannot be proved or disproved; it can scarcely be intelligently discussed. There are dangers, which have to be accepted, in bringing present concerns to the study of the past, though inevitably we do so; but as to the future, all we know is that we will be surprised by it. We betray our calling if we look at our subject through either rose-tinted or dark glasses.

We may do without a grand overarching myth altogether, if not without lesser ones. This possibility is illustrated to some extent by what is already happening. For instance, the *American Historical Review* has recently published yet another symposium on slavery.[7] It is still quite easy to be Whiggish on that subject. We find that this cruel and wasteful labour system arose in the depths of the past, but in recent centuries (says the myth) has been put on the road to extinction, and has long been extinct in the United States, thanks to the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, and the enslaved people themselves; but much work has still to be done to redeem the lives of the slaves' descendants and the souls of the descendants of the master-race. It is an exhilarating business. Or take women's history. Here is a still-continuing story of liberation from bondage. As such it is immensely attractive to readers, writers and researchers, and will remain so for some time. Neither of these popular fields of study (or any of the many others) seems to need the prop of an agreed myth about American national history, and the probable result of such specialised enthusiasm, unless I am very much mistaken, will be the steady diminution of national history in the curriculum. And what's the harm? All our most important questions about the past arise from present concerns, and as a firm believer in applied history, that is, in trying to answer the questions which people really want to ask, I cannot for a moment recommend that scholars and students and general readers should be barred or deterred from going wherever the spirit leads them.[8]

Yet the same issue of the *AHR* contains a book review which prompts very different reflections. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen have brought out a book, based on an elaborate survey, which seems to show that Americans on the whole no longer have much interest or trust in the offerings of academic or even non-academic historians.[9] They remain fascinated by the past, but it is the past of individual or family history, as captured or retained in photographs, diaries, letters, family reminiscences and reunions, or genealogical investigations. They enjoy going to museums and historical sites, but they rank history professors and school teachers beneath grandparents and eyewitnesses as sources of historical information, and history books even lower – only just ahead of movies and television. What this seems to show is that nowadays there is a great danger that history in its classical form – the history which has a Muse for its guardian, and of which so many learned, searching, moving and exciting specimens are still regularly published – risks losing its importance to society altogether; and although national history may be the first form to break down the others will not be slow to follow them, for the intellectual challenge of modern history, that extraordinary blend of art and science which has been steadily perfecting itself since the Age of Enlightenment, will simply be too demanding for an uneducated majority of ordinary people. The specialists will be left talking only to each other (a distinguished historian said to me the other day that even now most learned journals are mere exercises in vanity publishing) – and where will their salaries come from?

Now I am not so unfair as to say that this crisis, which is certainly not confined to the United States, is entirely, or even principally, of our own making. We (historians in the West) live in a profoundly anti-intellectual age, which seems to get more trivial and silly with every year. Nor am I prepared to assert dogmatically that the problem is going to get worse, or that it will not generate its own cure. For instance, as I know well, the study of slavery demands a constantly broadening scope of investigation, into religion, economics, ideology, class structure, Europe, Africa, America, Asia, the ancient world, the Middle Ages, *et cetera*. It is a liberal education in itself. But with regard to American history, I do say that more can and should be done to reclaim Clio's throne; I think there is a profound obligation on us to make the attempt, and reasonable prospects of success.

I deal first with the obligation. I said a moment ago that we live in a profoundly anti-intellectual age, but it is also the age of the triumph of the natural sciences. It is a triumph that was long in the making, as those Essex students lucky enough to have taken the Enlightenment course are well aware, but it has only been in the twentieth century, perhaps only in the last fifty years, that its impact has been irresistible and universal. I much admire the great British and American writers of the *entre deux guerres*, but all too often when reading some of their less inspired works I feel mentally stifled: they seem to live in the mediaeval world, without that world's enthusiasm for investigation and exploration. They simply have not absorbed the implications of the scientific method, the scientific outlook, and the universal fact of evolution. The name which most completely represents this defect is T. S. Eliot, but there are all too many others from that age. Their hankerings for a closed society are impossible nowadays for any but deliberate obscurantists, and these in turn have no reliance except on the present Pope and the sixteen-million-strong Southern Baptist church – and neither looks convincing as the Rock of Ages. Even Orthodox Jewry has its back to the wall. The rest of us accept that we have to come to terms with the challenge of science. Historians must do so if they wish to avoid being either mere antiquarians or mere altar boys for the social scientists. In particular historians, if they are to enjoy that sense of vast significance and possibilities from which, in the last analysis, all great work arises, must reflect on what the geologists, physicists and Darwinians have done to our sense of our own material – time.

This point strikes me, and possibly you, as so obvious, even banal, that I need not argue it today; but perhaps I can convey my sense of its importance by a reminiscence of my visit to the Grand Canyon in April last year. Like all other visitors I was almost baffled by the sheer size of the chasm; looking down from the South Rim you seem to be gazing into a fantastic junk-yard where some dissatisfied sculptor among the gods has dumped hundreds of half-carved sphinxes and pyramids, each the size of a mountain. But presently I began to read those sphinxes for what they are: each is a demonstration in stone of the forces of erosion, which have been at work for hundreds of millions of years; and as my eyesight adjusted, so to say, and particularly as I started to make descents into the Canyon, I began to see that those forces were still immensely at work. At one point, for example, we passed a huge rockfall. It had scattered enough white marble over the ground to provide material for several temples, and it was quite recent – it had split from the cliff only the previous winter, making the Canyon at that point a few yards wider. This sense, of the rock itself moving before my eyes, is something that I have never had anywhere else. I found that it sharpened my awareness of what I think we call the biosphere – the birds and beasts, flora and insects. If the stone lived in time, they did not. It is true that the squirrels of the North Rim now form a different sub-species from those of the South Rim, so long have they been divided from each other by the gorge and the river, though they come from a common stock; but essentially they, and all the other living inhabitants of the Canyon (with one exception) live in an eternal present. I encountered the one exception most memorably on my last day. Our party was walking up the tributary Havasu canyon, wild, beautiful and empty; the trail bent sharply, the rim of the canyon came into view ahead, and across and down it came the whole of America, an army in single file, carrying back-packs and mobile phones and emanating a cheerful air of the suburbs even from a distance. “It’s Friday,” explained our guide. The effect was inexpressibly ludicrous, but it led me to reflect seriously. In what sort of time did we tourists live? (for I could not exempt myself from the question). At first thought we seemed mere mayflies, for our civilisation is so delicately complex an achievement, and rests at no great remove on so finite a supply of natural resources, that it is easy to predict an almost immediate (in geological terms), complete and irreparable breakdown, after which the Canyon will be left as before to the ravens and the rattlesnakes. But historians must avoid such speculations. Future possibilities are of value to our trade only as they sharpen our sense of what questions we may ask of the past. At least as important to my understanding was a visit I paid a few years ago to the Grand Coulee dam on the Columbia river in Washington state. This, the mightiest monument of the New Deal, was for long the biggest dam in the world, and is still the biggest in North America. To stand deep inside it, watching the turbines, was to get a sense of the irresistible power of modern technological society, making Greenpeace and all similar agitators seem totally futile. But in six hundred years – another blink in the eye of geology – the huge lake behind the dam will have silted up, and the Grand Coulee dam will be no more than a vast cataract, a man-made Niagara Falls.

These experiences, and others like them, have convinced me that philosophical historians must train themselves to exchange belief in myths, whether national or ideological, for a sense of human evolution as the big story. Like all evolution, it is necessarily open-ended: we must disembarrass ourselves of all vain ideas that we know the end to which our development is tending, for there will be no end (I note without distress that I seem here to be chiming with the thought of Michael Oakeshott). But human evolution includes one ingredient, one random variation, which makes our story distinct from that of the squirrels: human intelligence. Humans do not merely adapt to nature, they exploit it. In the scientific age we are better equipped than ever before to make informed choices about our modifications of planetary conditions, and it is the duty, as well as the pleasure, of historians, among all their investigations, to study the past in this light.

It is no accident that the reminiscences which I have laid before you come from the American West. For it is in the West – which for present purposes may be defined roughly as everywhere beyond the 95th meridian – that all the large issues which I have been hinting at, and more besides, are making themselves felt ever more concretely and urgently in law, politics, economics and history. It is in the West that the future of the United States is being decided. There is a particular pleasure to be taken in this fact, because as the poet told us in the eighteenth century, “Westward the course of empire takes its way": one of the oldest of American myths is re-emerging as something like everyday fact. The spirit of F. J. Turner's celebrated essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", walks again. Turner, to be sure, was the arch-mythologist among American historians. I doubt if there is a single point argued in his main works which has not been overthrown by the realism and research of later historians: he has had a worse fate than Macaulay. Even his two principal themes, frontier and section, require so much qualification that they hardly seem fit for use any more. Yet "The Significance of the Frontier" ought still to be on every student's reading-list, it is still the best point at which to start thinking about the meaning of American history, above all because Turner's imagination caught fire from the continent itself, from its rivers, prairies, mountains, forests and deserts, and historians today can still catch fire from him. The "New Western History" is essentially Turnerian in this sense, though fiercely critical of Turner's many factual blunders and, to be plain, his colonialist attitude. Yet these historians – Richard White, John Mark Faragher, Patricia Nelson Limerick, to name but three – have not resurrected Turnerism from any fashionable perversity. They are driven by history itself. From the Civil War until just the other day – shall we say, again for convenience, until 1989? – the chief struggles of the American people, when not international, were concerned with ordering the legacy of the nineteenth century: industrialism (including industrialised agriculture), mass immigration, systematic racism, the emancipation of women, the expansion of consumer society, the taming of capitalism. But today these matters have been routinized, for the most part, and where they have not, where they retain dynamic power, their theatre will from now on be in the West, where new issues are also jostling for resolution.[10] Historians are helpless against the pressure of such times. To give but one example: the recent decades have witnessed a dramatic change in the position of the American Indians, a change which can only, I think, accelerate. On the one hand many of the descendants of the aboriginals are more thoroughly adjusted to Euro-American society than ever before, and are reaping the benefits; this process will certainly continue. On the other, they are insisting that the history of the West must be re-written more thoroughly than ever before to take account of their peoples' presence, their point of view, their experience; and they enjoy huge support for this programme from Anglos – it is easier to sell books about Indians than about any other topic of American history. For one thing, it goes back continuously a much, much longer way. For another, its recovery is intensely political: after centuries of contempt, violence and exploitation, the Indians (still the poorest of ethnic groups) need passionately to recover their self-respect, and the recapture of their pre-Columbian past is an essential part of the enterprise. It can be done – and the corresponding enlargement of American history from a few hundred years to many thousands is in itself a vast intellectual gain – but because Indian society was pre-literate the techniques that have to be used, by archaeologists and ethnologists, go beyond those which most historians can reasonably be expected to command, though they must certainly avail themselves of the results of such research; and perhaps this is the point at which to say that my devoutest wish for the future of American studies at Essex is that the University should before long move effectively towards establishing centres in archaeology and geography: I don't believe that any of the social sciences can prosper indefinitely without such associates, and I am certain that American studies can't. Finally, the story of the Indians is to a large extent that of adjusting to the forces I alluded to earlier in this lecture. To take but one example: the North-West Indians knew that Mount St Helens was dangerous long before the 1980 eruption; they called it Lawalla Clough, the Smoking Mountain, and would never settle on its slopes. The Anglo-Americans refused to learn from them, with calamitous results. American Indian history is largely one of coping with famine, disease, tribal warfare, cultural interchange, wolves, buffalo, bears, salmon. Most fascinating of all, the study of Indian origins begins to make immediate a radically new vision of the human past. It begins to seem possible that the genetic strain, once called proto-Mongolian, which eventually filled the Americas, was not the only human family which came to the northern continent in prehistoric times, though it was the only one which established itself; the Vikings, in this reading, were only the last of various groups from the Old World which tried in vain to survive in the New. The Indians (or at least their career spokesmen) do not like this; they have their own myths to protect; but I believe that any authentic demonstration of the oneness of humanity and of human history is valuable. And apparently there is little doubt about one of the most suggestive of these recent theories: that bows and arrows were not invented independently in the two hemispheres, but were brought to America, long after they first appeared in Eurasia thirty to fifty thousand years ago, by the Inuit. This useful invention then diffused gradually through North America, reaching the Caribbean not long before the Spanish did; at any rate, some of the peoples of the islands had not acquired the weapon, even by 1492, and were therefore easy victims of attacks from their mainland neighbours.[11] Many morals might be drawn from this story; William H. McNeill, from whom I take it, uses it to illustrate the importance of trade in history; but to me it shows, above all, that any idea that American society was static before Columbus is ridiculous and that, in the *longue duree* of evolution, even the period from the end of the latest Ice Age to the European conquest is short. Humanity was separated for a time, but not divided; in the end, cultural diffusion always asserted itself, working slowly but irresistibly against the legacy of Babel. In the last analysis, the history of the North American Indians is also our history.

Indian nations, I must acknowledge, are also forcing the pace in the eastern and southern United States, but today their story is peculiarly Western because of the numbers of the people, the size of their reservations, and the continuing pressure resulting from the pace of development in the section. This last, it seems to me, is the key to everything that is happening in the West. I remember my shock when I was first told that it is now the most urbanised part of America, and I have never verified the statement, but when I consider the rapid growth of Los Angeles, Seattle, Denver, Albuquerque, Phoenix and the appalling Las Vegas, I can well believe it. Even Portland, Oregon, which I have known for nearly forty years, and which I first remember as an agreeably sleepy town, is swelling implacably over the forests, meadows and orchards which surround it. This growth is putting immense strain on the physical and human resources of the West. Water has always been a scarce commodity there, land is not cheap any longer, and the labour supply is so limited, in relation to demand, that legal and illegal Mexican immigrants are pouring in, creating all sorts of social problems and even threatening an informal reversal of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, by which in 1848 Mexico gave what are now seven states (including California) to the Union. It is doubtful if this influx will alarm historians familiar with the story of the Great Migration of the nineteenth century (rather, it looks like another demonstration of the great continuities of U.S. history); it is merely another development of which we cannot know the outcome; but the transformation of the West is a fact – it is happening in front of our noses, day by day – and it is right that historians should seek to characterise and explain it. My own view arises out of what I have said already. The old Whiggish view of American history was that it was a matter of building up a new, free, democratic, prosperous nation that was essentially English, or Anglo-Scottish, in origins, law, religion, politics and national character. This simple idea could not survive the challenges of the twentieth century, whether we consider the claims of the immigrants and their descendants, or those of the African-Americans, or of America's emergence as the world's superpower. Even the celebration of the great Republic's institutions no longer carries the same conviction: to my mind the old Constitution is creaking terribly.[12] But the continuity remains. The exploitation of the continent goes on, as it did from the moment when the first Americans came down off the glaciers; yet it does so under new constraints as well as with new opportunities, and in the process is redefining what we mean by the American people, their civilisation, and their history. Getting to grips with all this is surely work enough for the next generation of historians, and its importance to the work and play, to the imagination and investments and practical interests of all the West's inhabitants is to me so evident that I do not foresee any great falling-off in public support and private pursuit. But if Western Americans do begin to neglect the discipline of history I have no doubt that it will speedily discipline them with unpleasant effectiveness. You see that I venture to make one prophecy, and although it may seem unsupported, I make it with utter confidence.

And what does this entail for historians of America in Britain?

Here I really must stick my neck out. It seems to me that to understand the American present, and to use the American past in that undertaking, we must revive, not Turner's myth of the frontier (though that topic too has undeniable relevance) but his emphasis on the section. At present, in Britain, nothing could be less fashionable. I glance through the prospectus for the excellent MA in American Studies at the University of Sussex. I see that among the options listed are American Foreign Relations, the American Working Class, U.S. Women's Politics, Race and Ethnicity in American Literature ... and so on – but nothing on the country itself. I myself, when lecturing on the causes of the Civil War, take care to warn my students that the notion of the section was largely an invention of the planter oligarchy, trying to give a respectable disguise to the class interest which, in defending slavery, they pursued so ruthlessly. Yet I do not believe that the powerful localism and regionalism which underlies the political system are obsolete, either in fact or as fields of study; and at Cambridge Professor Tony Badger and his colleagues have built up a formidable centre for the study of the South. For British students of America, indeed, localism and regionalism are, or ought to be, all-important: necessary substitutes for the acquisition of a foreign language which is so essential a part of, say, Russian or Latin American studies. Here is the bedrock; to study it is to exercise the intelligence and stretch the imagination; without that study, and the knowledge it brings, all other study of the United States will be narrow and thin, and our hope of a comprehensive understanding of twenty-first century America will be vain.

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[1] I am glad to say that this invitation was accepted, and I have modified my text in the light of some of the comments made.

[2] Walt Whitman, preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

[3] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, Query XIX.

[4] John Updike, Rabbit At Rest (London: Penguin edition, 1991) pp. 39—40.

[5] Since I use this term pretty often in this lecture I had better explain what I mean by ‘myth’. It is a hypothesis believed in because it is emotionally (rather than rationally) satisfying. It professes to be factual, but where facts contradict it they are ignored, or bent, or explained away. Its natural expression is in the form of legend. Two conspicuous myths in American history are those of the Old South and of Manifest Destiny.

[6] Paul Krugman, "Pity the Pain of the Very Richest", *International Herald-Tribune*, 15 June 2000.

[7] *American Historical Review*

[8] During the discussion which followed my lecture Dr. Jon White suggested that there was a contradiction between this assertion and my earlier expression of reservations about contemporary history. I think that the inconsistency is more apparent than real. We may turn from the study of the present because we suppose (erroneously) that the facts of a more remote past are easier to ascertain; and although all our concerns are inspired by the present, not all the questions they give rise to can be answered by the study of current events. I think that women’s history illustrates this point very well.

[9] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: popular uses of history in American life* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998); reviewed, *AHR*, 105, ii (April 2000) pp. 511-12 by Robert R. Archibald.

[10] With exceptions, of which the most important is probably the Hispanic Shore from Miami west to Brownsville.

[11] See William H. McNeill, “A Short History of Humanity,” *New York Review of Books*, 29 June 2000, p. 10.

[12] *Sic*, in the lecture as delivered. I of course did not foresee (nobody did) how spectacularly the course of the presidential election in 2000 would justify my remark.