THE FRONTIER REVIVED

Jane M. Loy and Nina M. Scott
University of Massachusetts—Amherst

THE FRONTIER IN LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY. By ALISTAIR HENNESSY. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978. Pp. 202. $12.50.)

For those of us who study the geographic "fringes" of Latin America, the recent publication of Alistair Hennessy's monograph, *The Frontier in Latin American History,* is a welcome event. In contrast to the attention that North Americans have paid the frontier since Frederick Jackson Turner began the debate in 1893, scholars of Latin America have largely rejected the concept as a useful tool, and comparative historians who study frontiers in Canada, Russia, Australia, and South Africa overlook Latin America because of insufficient knowledge of the region.[1] It is fitting perhaps that Hennessy, a British professor of American studies at the University of Warwick, would recognize in this little-explored approach not only a stimulating interpretation of Latin American development but also a way to compare the histories and cultures of Anglo and Latin America that will capture the imagination of students. Having used the book at the University of Massachusetts in Spring 1979 as the basis for an undergraduate seminar entitled "The Frontier in Latin American History and Literature," we found that it served as a challenging introduction to the topic on both a theoretical and pedagogical level.

In the preface, Hennessy outlines his major objectives, which include using the frontier experience as a common denominator around which to organize the diversity of Latin American history, examining the interweaving of history and myth, and presenting a broader treatment of American history from a North/South rather than an East/West perspective. To meet these aims he begins by reviewing the Turner thesis and comparing the historic roles of frontiers in the U.S. and Latin America. He contrasts the establishment of frontiers in the Spanish and Portuguese empires, and then goes on to discuss types of frontiers that have existed over several centuries—mission, Indian, Maroon, mining, cattle, agricultural, rubber, Anglo-Hispanic, and political. He identifies some frontier groups, such as the miners, outlaws, rubber gatherers, and gauchos, as well as some outstanding works of frontier literature. Under the heading of "The Contracting Frontier," he considers why in the twentieth century massive rural migration has been to the cities

rather than to undeveloped lands and lists frontiers of the future, such as the Brazilian Amazon. Finally, he places the discussion in comparative perspective by suggesting similarities and differences between Latin American frontiers and those of other parts of the world. Hennessy concludes that Latin American nations today are still in the frontier stage of development but, unlike the U.S., they are frontier societies lacking a frontier myth:

> Frontiersmen represent the primal vigour of the race and are the source for ideologies of rejuvenation. In Latin America, rural guerrillas operating in untamed wildernesses have fulfilled a similar function but with different expectations and assumptions. Whether these areas will become the foci of revolutionary change or will be tamed by the bulldozers of authoritarian technocracy is an open question—or is it one which has already been answered? (P. 159)

Much as the pioneers he describes, Hennessy is blazing a trail through an unknown jungle. In crisp, clear prose he has broached a number of fascinating themes, offering intriguing comparisons between the history of Brazil and Spanish America and between Latin and Anglo America. Nevertheless, if the book is to satisfy his underlying objectives, there are some fundamental difficulties that he needs to address, especially with his use of the frontier as a theoretical historical construct and with his analysis of the interweaving of history and myth.

The most frequent criticism of Turner—that he failed to formulate an adequate definition of the frontier—is true of Hennessy as well. Although in the preface he speaks of the "problem of territorial space and its conquest" and the "constant movement of peoples into unsettled regions," he soon jettisons "precise definitions" that "can cramp and distort as well as pinpoint and illuminate" (p. 3) to adopt R. M. Morse's much broader concept: "The frontier is not a line or a limit or a process either unilateral or unilinear. We must, in fact, speak not of a frontier, but of multiple complex frontier experiences, transactions and mutations" (p. 17).[2] This reluctance to define a term central to the essay creates confusion from the start. As did Turner, Hennessy uses "frontier" to mean a line between settlement and wilderness, a political boundary, a region, a community, or a state of mind. As he himself suggests, the result is that "almost everything in Latin American history has been subsumed under a capacious umbrella" (p. 3).

The chapter on frontier types magnifies the problem. Hennessy identifies one institutional frontier (missions), four commodity frontiers (mining, cattle, agriculture, rubber), two human frontiers (Indian, Maroon), one international frontier (Anglo-Hispanic), and one miscellaneous frontier (political). If we accept this framework, then we might begin by suggesting other frontiers that Hennessy overlooked—the cacao frontier of Brazil; the Eastern Andean frontier of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador

and Colombia; or the demographic frontiers that exist between Colombia-Venezuela, Haiti-Dominican Republic, and El Salvador-Honduras, across which large groups of illegal immigrants pass. Yet, we may be only comparing apples with oranges. Is a frontier that is defined as a line of missions the same as a frontier defined as the Indians who existed beyond European settlement? What are the common denominators between the cattle frontier and the Maroon frontier? What about regions such as the Colombian Llanos where mission, cattle, Indian, and agriculture "frontiers" existed side by side?

Lack of definition is an even greater liability when Hennessy talks about frontier dynamics. Although he deals with the rural crisis, the failures of Latin American frontiers to develop democracy, and frontiers of the future, he never comes to grips with the interrelationships between the frontiers and the interior, how frontiers change from wilderness to settlement, or why some frontiers have disappeared in the twentieth century while others remain.

In short, Hennessy does not go far enough. We feel that if "frontier" is to become a helpful heuristic device, a more precise theoretical model can and must be elaborated. To begin with, we propose a clear, restrictive definition: the frontier is a geographic area where the edge of Hispanic or Brazilian settlement meets the wilderness. This definition purposely excludes complex topics, such as frontiers of knowledge or cultural frontiers between Latin America and the U.S., to focus upon the remote geographic regions where European civilization has been penetrating since the sixteenth century. Given the vast diversity of these territories, a further distinction should be made between temperate regions, such as the pampas of Argentina and Brazil, the forests of Chile, Patagonia, and the tropical lands of the eastern Andes, the Llanos, the Gran Chaco, and the Amazon. While wishing to avoid geographic determinism, it seems evident that the temperate lands proved easiest to dominate. In many cases these regions were characterized by colonial and nineteenth-century frontiers that have since disappeared. The tropics, on the other hand, have more often become "permanent frontiers," where institutions established in the colonial era—such as missions and ranches—remain little changed despite four centuries of continuous European settlement.[3]

The identification of common institutions is a further area of potential investigation. The adelantados, missions, presidios, ranches, haciendas, towns, and planned colonies are all entities that can be compared from one frontier to another. Distinctive communities and individuals also regularly appeared on the frontier—the gaucho, llanero, farmer, rancher, rubber gatherer, bandeirante, Maroon, and Indian can be studied. Finally, within this more precise framework, it would be

possible to investigate frontier processes—the role of technology in development, boom-and-bust growth, demographic migration, stages in development, moving frontiers versus permanent frontiers. Once rational constructs have been devised, cross-cultural comparisons will carry greater weight, and it will be easier to contrast the distinctive characteristics of Latin American frontiers with others throughout the world.

Hennessy's attention to the interweaving of history and myth in explaining Latin American institutions is crucial to his study, for an understanding of a nation's particular mythology and cultural symbolism is fundamental to grasping the image of its national identity. He recognizes that the impact of the Turner thesis on U.S. institutions is "a problem in intellectual history as well as an analysis of the American past" (p. 8), functioning as it did as a mythic force in the development of a national ideology. Turner's thesis had enormous repercussions precisely because it was a poetic idea attuned to the prevailing national myth, but to grasp the implications of his study, one must remember that it was the *product* of a long-standing agrarian tradition, not the originator of the pastoral myth that captured the popular imagination. Hennessy does not make this point strongly enough, referring only to the fact that Turner put "into shape a good deal of thought which had been floating around rather loosely . . ." (p. 6). Since Hennessy uses the Turner thesis as his principal tool for explaining why Latin American frontiers are not like those of North America, he should provide the reader with more background on the traditions that produced Turner in the first place. An interesting case could have been made in contrasting the agrarian nature of the North American myths of the garden and the yeoman farmer with conflicting Hispanic ideals of *hidalguismo* and all that that term implies. This comparison would have clarified the chapters on "The Turner Thesis and Latin America" and "Frontier Society and Culture."

Although Hennessy states that Latin America has no frontier myth at all, it is probably more correct to say (which he also does, but not firmly enough) that Latin America has no unified myth, as was the case in the U.S., and that the geographic and ethnic diversity of the continent spawned many myths rooted in particular regions and societies. The same is true with regard to mythical hero-figures in literature. Whereas Latin America produced no universally popular Western hero in the North American sense, Hennessy himself mentions the gaucho and the bandeirante as having entered the national mythologies of Argentina and Brazil. In recent years authors such as Carpentier and Miguel Angel Asturias have done their part to incorporate the black and the Indian into the mythology of Hispanic culture.[4]

Apart from not recognizing that Latin America has a diversified frontier myth, Hennessy fails to emphasize that its frontier experiences engendered myths that are essentially negative in nature. Beginning with Sarmiento and Da Cunha and continuing with such frontier classics as *Doña Bárbara, La vorágine,* and *Terras do Sem Fim,* most encounters between man and wilderness end in failure rather than triumph. Latin America's frontier myths tend to be tragic, and the environment is most often perceived as overwhelming and telluric rather than gardenlike and brimming with promise. The mythic perception of the environment is essential to an explanation of the interaction between man and frontier. In his bibliography, Hennessy cites Richard Slotkin's famous and exhaustive study of U.S. frontier mythology[5] with its premise that the archetypal hero of North American literature was characterized by acts of violence against the wilderness and its inhabitants. An elaboration of this study might have provided a fruitful *punto de partida* for his chapter on "Frontier Society and Culture."

Hennessy's third objective, of presenting American history from a North/South perspective, made his book an exciting text for our seminar. He brings a wealth of information to his commentary and, with his transatlantic perspective, approaches the development of the Americas in a way that few indigenous scholars have thus far attempted. Our students were seniors with a knowledge of Spanish or Portuguese and considerable background in Latin American studies. They enjoyed the clear format of the book, which includes two excellent maps and an extensive bibliography, as well as Hennessy's lively style, but were confused by the structural flaws we have mentioned here—the lack of precise definition of "frontier" and the need for clarification of the nature and function of myth. The design of the text is more suited to history than to literature courses, but we assigned several frontier novels to supplement it. There are also fine films that can be incorporated into the course materials—*The Green Wall* and *Aguirre-Wrath of God,* to mention only two.

Despite our reservations, Hennessy should be commended for the courage and sense of humor with which he tackles a difficult task. As he states in the preface: "Inevitably, an ambitious synthesis on a small scale, with little space to develop points or anticipate objections, invites the ire of specialists; but if it serves the purpose of enticing those who might otherwise have continued to paddle in shallow waters, I shall be well pleased" (pp. 2–3). After a semester of immersion in deeper waters, we feel that *The Frontier in Latin American History* is indeed a valuable contribution to the field of comparative frontier studies.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Dietrick Gerhard, "The Frontier in Comparative View," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1959), pp. 205–29. Marvin Mikesell in "Comparative Studies in Frontier History," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 50 (1960), pp. 62–74 and Ray Allen Billington, *The American Frontier Thesis: Attack and Defense* (Washington, D.C.: AHA Pamphlets, 1971) include Latin America in their discussions but in a peripheral manner.
2. Richard M. Morse, *The Bandeirantes* (New York, 1965), p. 30.
3. Geographers were the first to develop the idea of "permanent" frontiers. See Isaiah Bowman, *The Pioneer Fringe* (New York, 1931), Raye Platt, "Opportunities for Agricultural Colonization in the Eastern Border Valleys of the Andes," in *Pioneer Settlement*, American Geographical Society Special Pub. No. 14 (New York, 1932) and Dieter Brunnschweiler, *The Llanos Frontier of Colombia* (East Lansing, 1972). For a historian's approach see Jane M. Loy, "The Llanos in Colombian History: Some Implications of a Static Frontier," University of Massachusetts, International Area Studies Programs (1979), Occasional Papers Series no. 2.
4. See especially Carpentier's *Ecué-yamba-o* and *El reino de este mundo* as well as Asturias's *Hombres de maíz*.
5. *Regeneration through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*. (Middletown, Conn., 1973).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100028223 Published online by Cambridge University Press