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Francis Parkman on the Oregon Trail: A Study in Cultural Prejudice

L. Hugh Moore

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Georgia Institute of Technology L. HUG HMOORE Francis Parkman on the Oregon Trail: A Study in Cultural Prejudice Young Francis Parkman claimed that he turned to the western wilderness to escape the “invincible commonplace,” the pallid and “emasculate” life of the East.¹ Yet a study of The Oregon Trail reveals that his escape was never real; it was merely physical, never intellectual or emotional, so that the young Parkman provides a near perfect example of a cultural prisoner. The book becomes, contrary to the author’s intention, not a serious study of the West but rather a drama of cultural confrontation in which little is learned, no real insights gained. Since much of the present conception of the American frontier and Indian culture has derived from such seemingly objective descriptions as The Oregon Trail, an understanding of

what in fact this book really is is relevant today. A close look at this popular, highly regarded, and influential work shows that deep-seated cultural prejudices inform every observation that Parkman made, so that his book unintentionally reveals his own culture while it falsifies the other cultures he tried to study. Yet *The Oregon Trail*, despite these shortcomings, has several distinctions. It is, first, good escape and adventure literature, exotic, exciting and fast-paced enough to be tremendously popular ever since its publication. More importantly, it provides the best first hand surface description of the Ogallala Sioux while their culture was still intact. 1 Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Parkman Reader* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1955), p. 13. 186

Western American Literature But the real value of the book as literature lies in its evocation of a sense of discovery, of newness, wonder, and excitement as the traveller responds to the unique landscape, its flora, fauna, and Indian life, the same quality found in the writings of early American explorers and naturalists — Catesby, Wilson, Audubon, and Bartram. Parkman begins . . . give me the rocky hillside, the shaggy cedar and shrub-oak — the wide reach of uncultivated landscape. All is new, all is rough. . . . Fierce savages have roamed like beasts amid its rugged scenery. . . .”² One of his major assumptions apparent in his later histories also gives impetus to his vivid natural descriptions. The landscape was always to him an integral part of historic action. This organic view of the natural setting, with the wilderness pervading every action, already is apparent in *The Oregon Trail*. Yet the value of *The Oregon Trail* both as literature and natural observation is severely limited precisely because Parkman, despite his efforts, could not escape his culture, class, and economic position. Francis Parkman was born to wealth, social position, and background in Boston. His heritage was patrician and puritan. His education was the typical Brahmin, classical one at Harvard, complete with the traditional European tour, after which he concluded his formal education at Harvard Law School. In college as in later life his heritage sat easily upon him, for smugness, a sense of superiority, and snobbery are apparent in his letters to his friends.³ He prided himself on being at Harvard, which he saw as the center of the intellectual aristocracy. Throughout his distinguished career he never fully escaped such smug provincialism. Perhaps his basic handicap as an objective observer of the West and the forces at work there was the inherited wealth that made his excursion possible. He was playing at a journey that thousands were making in deadly earnest. It was for him an outdoor adventure given a sanction of scholarship required by his Puritanism. Similarly, by economic position and heritage he was cut off from sympathy with Jacksonian democracy and equalitarianism. Meeting the Indians, emigrants, and frontiersmen on his trip west only validated his Brahmin sense of superiority. His inherited Federalism and Calvinism are apparent ²Mason Wade, *Francis Parkman, Heroic Historian* (New York: Viking Press, 1942), p. 178. “Although he tried, it was very difficult for him to throw off a cloak of superiority.” Wilbur R. Jacobs, *The Letters of Francis Parkman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), p. XXXVIII. L. Hugh Moore ¹⁸⁷ in all his works in his emphasis on force...

L. HUGH MOORE

Georgia Institute of Technology

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³Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Parkman Reader* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1955), p. 13.



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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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