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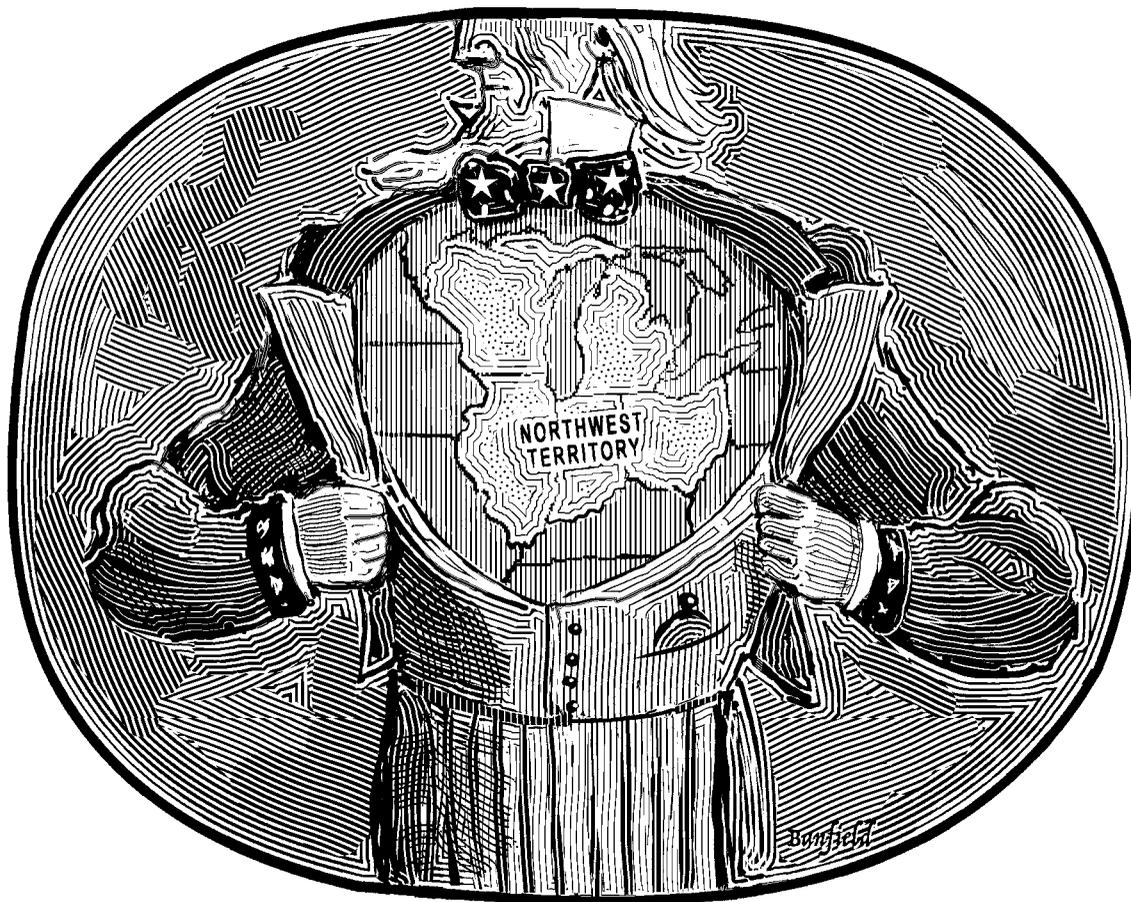
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Book Review by Christopher Flannery

LAND OF THE FREE

The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West, by David McCullough.
Simon & Schuster, 352 pages, \$30



IT WAS A RAINY WEDNESDAY EVENING on the Ohio River, November 15, 1843. John Quincy Adams was aboard the steamboat *Benjamin Franklin*, making his way up the river from Marietta, Ohio, to Pittsburgh. A few prominent citizens from the Marietta area accompanied him, among them Ephraim Cutler. Adams was a famous American, son of a president, a former diplomat and president himself, still an active member of Congress, known as “Old Man Eloquent” for the felicity of style with which he championed his staunch anti-slavery politics—which went hand in hand with his pro-American, pro-science, pro-humanity politics. He was returning from a trip to Cincinnati, whither he had gone, at some risk to his health, to lay the cornerstone for what David McCullough in *The Pioneers* notes “may have been the first public observatory in the western hemisphere.” As usual, Adams was thinking big. He wrote of this occasion as an

opportunity to build congressional support for the new Smithsonian Institution and generally to advance the cause of learning:

to turn this transit gust of enthusiasm for the science of astronomy at Cincinnati into a permanent and persevering national pursuit, which may extend the bounds of human knowledge and make my country instrumental in elevating the character and improving the condition of man on earth.

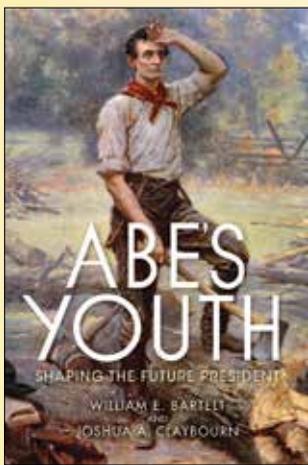
Ephraim Cutler was one of a handful of the obscure “pioneers”—including his father Manasseh Cutler, Rufus Putnam, Joseph Barker, and Samuel Hildreth—who brought higher learning and much else to the wilds of Ohio and who are McCullough’s heroes in this book. For half a century, McCullough has won Pulitzer Prizes and National Book Awards by turning out bestsellers about fa-

mous Americans like John Adams, Teddy Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and the Wright Brothers. So much is he identified with America’s story that he was the natural pick to narrate Ken Burns’s acclaimed documentary, *The Civil War* (1990). Now he has written a book “about a cast of real-life characters of historic accomplishment who were entirely unknown to most Americans,” as he puts it. He had wanted to write such a book since he first saw Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, as a young man. “I always thought it would be wonderful to write a book like *Our Town*,” he says, “but I would write about real people instead.”

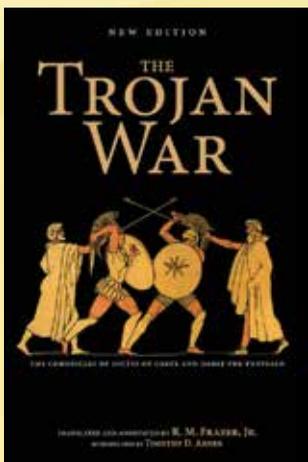
CUTLER AND ADAMS WERE THE SAME age, 76, and their fathers, both New Englanders, had known one another back in the heady days of the 1770s and ‘80s. They talked long into the night as the *Benjamin Franklin* carried them up the river. Among their topics was John Adams’s role



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—James M. Cornelius, Ph.D., Editor, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*



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—From the Preface

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in "securing the Northwest Territory for the United States" in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. This is the historical beginning of the story of *The Pioneers*: the acquisition by America, as a result of victory in the war for independence, of "all the lands controlled by the British west of the Allegheny Mountains and northwest of the Ohio River east of the Mississippi." This was the first land owned by the government of the newly sovereign United States of America, "265,878 square miles of unbroken wilderness." It was an area larger than France, and half as large as the entire territory of the 13 states that had fought for and won independence. It had over 3,000 miles of shoreline on four of the five Great Lakes. Eventually the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin would be carved from this vastness. But in 1783, it was a "howling wilderness," with no road, bridge, town, church, school, store, or tavern.

When Cutler expressed the gratitude of Ohioans for the statesmanship of Adams's father a lifetime ago, he "saw the tears gather" in Adams's eyes. Another witness to the conversation recalled that "Adams's voice faltered in saying that 'he rejoiced to find that there were some who still remembered the services of his beloved father.'" But immeasurably more important than the acquisition of this immense domain were the distinctly American moral and political purposes that would govern it. These purposes came to be memorably expressed in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. "One of the most far-reaching acts of Congress in the history of the country," as McCullough calls it, the Northwest Ordinance ranks with Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence as a great milestone in the history of human freedom. In it is found the moral core of McCullough's story.

AS HE WRITES, "THE NORTHWEST ORDINANCE was designed to guarantee what would one day be known as the American way of life." He emphasizes especially articles 1, 3, and 6 of the Ordinance, respectively securing freedom of religion, providing for education, and prohibiting slavery:

Art. 1. No person, demeaning himself in a peaceable and orderly manner, shall ever be molested on account of his mode of worship or religious sentiments, in the said territory....

Art. 3. Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged....

Art. 6. There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.

If family records can be relied on, Manasseh Cutler, Ephraim's father, as the agent for the Ohio Company of Associates meeting with members of Congress in New York in July 1787, played an important role in ensuring that these American principles would be carried to the then-wild West. McCullough relies largely on Cutler family records, and he concludes that Manasseh played perhaps "the most important role by far" or even an "all-important part...in the creation and enactment of the Northwest Ordinance" and in particular the inclusion of the anti-slavery clause. A portrait of Cutler included in this attractive volume is accompanied by the explanation: "against all odds, [he] almost singlehandedly persuaded Congress to pass the Northwest Ordinance." McCullough acknowledges that the historical record is inconclusive on these points. The decisive fact is that, whoever deserves the credit, it was through the Northwest Ordinance that "the American Ideal" gave political form to the Northwest Territory.

THE CLAUSE PROHIBITING SLAVERY above all expressed the "American Ideal" of McCullough's subtitle, brought west by the pioneers. This would have been the most poignant subject of that evening's conversation on the *Benjamin Franklin*. Like John Quincy Adams, and like their fathers before them, Ephraim Cutler was an anti-slavery man. He got a chance to stand up, or lie down, for his principles when he was selected as a delegate to Ohio's constitutional convention in 1802, where—despite the existence of the Northwest Ordinance—an attempt was made to introduce slavery into the Ohio Constitution. According to one account, the seriously ill Cutler was carried from his home to the assembly to speak and cast a vote against the pro-slavery measure, and the measure was defeated by one vote. As his daughter Julia would later record, "To Ephraim Cutler, more than to any other man, posterity is indebted for shutting and barring the doors against the introduction into Ohio of the monstrous system of African slavery." His eulogist would say of Ephraim, "to him must ever belong the high honor of drafting that article in the first constitution and fundamental law of the great state of Ohio which makes it the home of the free while the state shall last." When Cutler told Adams about his experience in the Ohio constitutional



convention and the exclusion of slavery from Ohio, Adams said, “with emphasis”: “slavery must and will soon have an end.” But that end would not come soon enough or easily. Both men would die before the great crisis over slavery nearly destroyed the country.

The fact that the two old men were traveling on a steamboat was itself remarkable. When the American settlers came to the territory back in the 1780s and ‘90s, they had to make their own canoes and flatboats, which were powered by water currents and human muscle. Steam power did not arrive in the western territories until 1811, and by revolutionizing travel and commerce up and down the nearly 1,000-mile Ohio River, it came to define an era. By 1820 there were 63 steamboats operating on the river, some of them as large as 200 tons, double-deckers, with 12-foot-wide paddlewheels—the kind of thing that entranced Mark Twain in his boyhood.

FOLLOWING THE STEAMBOATS WERE the railroads, but when the first pioneers arrived in the territory in 1788, there were no roads at all, much less railroads. To travel or transport goods on land, the pioneers had to cut their own roads through virgin forests. Forests, rivers, mountains, seasons, and weather play significant roles in McCullough’s story. The pace of the story is the pace of the first pioneers: 48 men, carefully selected by the Ohio Company of Associates, starting out in December 1787 from Ipswich Hamlet in Massachusetts and Hartford, Connecticut, to walk 700 miles—at about one mile per hour—to the headwaters of the Ohio River, near Pittsburgh, the Gateway to the West. There they would have to build boats to carry them and their equipment 140 miles or so to a place they would eventually name Marietta, “in tribute to Queen Marie Antoinette of France, who... had done more than anyone...to persuade the King of France to lend support to the American cause.”

Building boats was a skill not possessed by many, and it required a sawmill. Sawmills operated on water power; but when the pioneers arrived at Sumerill’s Ferry on the Youghiogheny River, the water was frozen. Once they got working, it took nearly two months to build the necessary boats and canoes and a galley, named the *Mayflower*, that could carry 50 tons. They arrived at Marietta on April 7, 1788. Once arrived, they needed to clear land and build shelters. It could take one man three to four weeks to “chop down a single acre of hard-wooded forest, leaving the stumps in the ground.... Many of the gi-

ant surviving stumps were to last for decades.” Then because of the wet weather, the huge piles of logs had to be constantly rolled and re-piled to keep them from rotting. A great part of McCullough’s charm is his nearly inexhaustible interest in the world around him, especially the American part of it. He is interested in what it takes to walk several hundred miles in winter over mountains and through wilderness with no roads; to know where you’re going; to repair wagons, build boats, and make your way down (and up!) rivers in different seasons; to make and acquire provisions, stay healthy, bear illness, design and construct shelters; to clear forests, plant and harvest crops; and to establish laws, start libraries, and found universities in the middle of nowhere. McCullough’s book delights in this drama of human purpose, endurance, and skill.

IT MAY BE SOUND TRADITION NOT TO judge a book by its cover, but this book deserves to be judged in the first instance by its title and subtitle. They fully express the unashamed admiration the author has for his subject. McCullough’s pioneers were heroes, because of what they did and how and why they did it. A pioneer, according to the standard dictionaries, is a person who goes before others to prepare or open up the way; one who begins, or takes part in beginning, some enterprise or course of action; an innovator, a forerunner. To this day, local sports teams in the Marietta area proudly call themselves “pioneers.” No one has passed a law against it yet. Christopher Columbus, the Puritans, Lewis and Clark, unnamed thousands in covered wagons on the Oregon Trail, generations of astronauts—all were pioneers. Venturing forth into unknown worlds is something that is essential to the West broadly speaking and to America and the American West. It is heroic partly because stepping into the unknown is intrinsically heroic. It takes courage—maybe even daring or recklessness—and a kind of intrepidity to walk, or sail, or fly away from all that is familiar into regions where everything that happens will depend on you and the elements, unknown forces, and luck. Even the “brought” of the title is powerful.

McCullough is a man of this West. He is a native of Pittsburgh, where a bridge is named after him. He is grateful that the pioneers brought the American way of life, defined by the American Ideal, to this wild country in place of whatever the uncertain alternatives might have been. This meant above all that slavery would be forever prohibited in this territory. It would be the home of the free.

Bringing this American freedom to a large expanse that might otherwise have remained or become subjected to one form or other of despotism is what crowns the heroic accomplishments of the pioneers.

THE STORY OF AMERICA IS PRECISELY the heroic story of pioneers who bring the American ideal again and again to the West. In 1788, the West was the largely unknown country northwest of the Ohio River. The West would keep moving west, as the frontier receded. But West is not just an earth-bound geographical direction; it is an idea. As we have been reminded this year, with pictures of Buzz Aldrin placing an American flag on the moon 50 years ago, the cosmos itself is the West. As long as Americans are American, as John Quincy Adams might say, they will extend the bounds of human knowledge and make their country instrumental in elevating the character and improving the condition of man on earth and even in the heavens. Or as Abraham Lincoln put it, the American principle of liberty for all gives hope and industry to all and is constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

America today is deeply divided into two parties: those who celebrate this American spirit and those who condemn it. The former would embrace McCullough’s title and everything it implies; the latter would make it impossible to grant a Pulitzer Prize or a National Book Award to anyone using it. It is a fair barometer of our current politics that this book would simultaneously leap to the best-seller lists and be morally condemned by Harvard and Columbia University professors on social media and in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Too much white perspective, old stereotypes, an outdated narrative of American progress and exceptionalism; it should have focused on “indigenous” peoples and been told from their perspective, and so on and tediously and insidiously on.

“What then is the American, this new man?” asked J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, 60 years before John Quincy Adams and Ephraim Cutler made their way up the Ohio River. As long as the American story continues to unfold and is not replaced by someone else’s story, this answer will suffice: he is a pioneer.

Christopher Flannery is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute, contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books, and author of The American Story podcast.

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