



LAND OF HOPE

An Invitation to the Great American Story

WILFRED M. MCCLAY

The most balanced, nuanced history
of the United States

I have read in the past 50 years.

DANIEL HENNINGER

The Wall Street Journal

A GREAT NATION NEEDS AND DESERVES A GREAT narrative as an expression of its own self-understanding. In *Land of Hope*, Wilfred M. McClay presents a vivid account of one of the greatest epics in human history: the exciting, perilous, and immensely consequential story of the United States.

Readers will dive into the expansive river of our shared past and discover the events and individuals that combine to form the arc of our common story. *Land of Hope* is a wise and honest exploration of how these narratives unite us as a people – and a refreshing antidote to the plethora of fashionably fractured views of American society.

Above all, *Land of Hope* imparts those essential things we Americans must all learn to become informed citizens, capable of understanding and appreciating the nation we call home, and eager to realize our own exciting role in the next chapters of this enduring story.

WILFRED M. MCCLAY is the G. T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma and the Director of the Center for the History of Liberty. His book The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America was awarded the 1995 Merle Curti Award of the Organization of American Historians for the best book in American intellectual history. Among his other books are A Student's Guide to U.S. History, Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America, Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past, and Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America.



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Praise for **LAND OF HOPE**

At a time of severe partisanship that has infected many accounts of our nation's past, this brilliant new history, *Land of Hope*, written in lucid and often lyrical prose, is much needed. It is accurate, honest, and free of the unhistorical condescension so often paid to the people of America's past. This generous but not uncritical story of our nation's history ought to be read by every American. It explains and justifies the right kind of patriotism.

GORDON S. WOOD

author of *Friends Divided:*

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson

No one has told the story of America with greater balance or better prose than Wilfred McClay. *Land of Hope* is a history book that you will not be able to put down. From the moment that 'natives' first crossed here over the Bering Strait, to the founding of America's great experiment in republican government, to the horror and triumph of the Civil War, and to the stirring election of Barack Obama, McClay's account will capture your attention while offering an unforgettable education.

JAMES W. CEASER

Professor of Politics, University of Virginia

Those who are acquainted with Wilfred McClay's writing will not be surprised that *Land of Hope*, his latest book, is a lucid and engaging account of the 'great American story.' McClay is a charming storyteller – and a first-rate scholar and appreciator of America's political and cultural development.

MICHAEL BARONE

resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute,
senior political analyst at the Washington Examiner,
and coauthor of *The Almanac of American Politics*

In a time when America seems pulled in opposite directions, Wilfred McClay has written a necessary book – the most balanced, nuanced history of the United States I have read in the past fifty years.

DANIEL HENNINGER

deputy editor, editorial page,
The Wall Street Journal

I wish *Land of Hope* had been there when I was teaching U.S. history. It is history as literature – broad, detailed, compassionate – and it can help anyone who wants to know where we came from and how we got here. Professor McClay has made a welcome gift to the history of our country.

WILL FITZHUGH

Founder, *The Concord Review*

BEGINNINGS

SETTLEMENT AND UNSETTLEMENT

HISTORY ALWAYS BEGINS IN THE MIDDLE OF THINGS. It doesn't matter where you choose to start the story; there is always something essential that came before, some prior context that is assumed. This is why the past can't be divided up into convenient self-contained units, with clear and distinct beginnings and endings, much as we might wish it were otherwise. Instead, the spectacle that lies before us when we gaze backward is more like a sprawling, limitless river with countless mingling branches and tributaries, stretching back to the horizon. Like a river, time's restless force pushes ever forward, but its beginnings lie far back, extending far beyond what we can see, fading into the mists of time at the edges of lands beyond our knowing.

Consider the story of your own life. The story didn't begin with you. You didn't call yourself into existence out of the void. You didn't invent the language you speak, or the foods you eat, or the songs you sing. You didn't build the home you grew up in, or pave the streets you walked, or devise the subjects you learned in school. Others were responsible for these things. Others, especially your parents, taught you to walk, to talk, to read, to dress, to behave properly, and everything else that goes with everyday life in a civilized society, things that you mainly take for granted.

But it's important to remember that those others didn't come into the world knowing these things either. Your parents didn't invent themselves any more than you did. And the people who taught them were just the same in that regard, taught by people before them, who were taught by people before them, and so on, in an ever-lengthening chain of human transmission that soon carries us back into the misty unknown. We carry the past forward into the present much more than we realize, and it forms a large part of who we are. Even at the moment of birth, we already find ourselves in the middle of things.

So how far back would you go in telling your own story? You could go back pretty far, if you wanted to. Many people are fascinated by tracing out their family histories, their genealogies. The details can be surprising and intriguing, and they may reveal unsuspected things about your ancestors. But too much of that will get in the way of relating the most important parts of the story and illuminating the pattern of your own life. Too much detail muddies the picture and defeats the ultimate purpose.

What we call “history” is the same way. It is not the sum of the whole past. It doesn’t include everything, and it couldn’t. Instead, it is a selection out of that expansive river of the past, like a carefully cropped photograph, organized wisely and truthfully, which allows us to focus in with clarity on a particular story, with particular objectives in mind.

The story that this book seeks to tell, the story of the United States, is exactly like this. It is not going to be the story of everything. It’s a story about who we are and about the stream of time we share; it is an attempt to give us a clearer understanding of the “middle of things” in which we already find ourselves. And it is crafted with a particular purpose in mind: to help us learn, above all else, the things we must know to become informed, self-aware, and dedicated citizens of the United States of America, capable of understanding and appreciating the nation in whose midst we find ourselves, of carrying out our duties as citizens, including protecting and defending what is best in its institutions and ideals. The goal, in short, is to help us be full members of the society of which we are already a part.

So where to begin? After all, there is a long, complex, and fascinating prologue to this story. We could go back many thousands of years, to the very edges of the mist, and examine what we know, or think we know, about the ancient origins of this country. And as in a family genealogy, we would find some surprises.

For one thing, it turns out that there are no peoples that could truly be called “native” to America, because all appear to have migrated there from other parts of the world. In other words, the entire western hemisphere, including both North and South America, was from the start populated by immigrants, by peoples who came there from someplace else, in search of something new and better.

Our best guess at present is that the first human settlers came over into the western hemisphere twenty thousand to thirty thousand years ago from northeastern Asia, probably by crossing over an icy land bridge or by island hopping across what is now the Bering Strait, the frigid waters that separate Russia and Alaska. From there, we believe that these first immigrants to America gradually filtered outward and downward, thinly populating all of North and South America, from the frozen Yukon to the southernmost tip of Patagonia, and east to the Atlantic coast and the forests and rivers and swamps of the American Midwest and South.

Some of those migrant peoples would long remain confined to the life of Stone Age nomads, for whom the elemental power of fire, along with crude implements made of stone or bone, were their chief shields against the pitiless ferocity of

nature. Others, however, moved into more settled forms of habitation, adopting the practice of agriculture and, in some cases, eventually developing into highly advanced cultures. These cultures rose, flourished, and fell, blazing a trail across time but leaving behind for us little literature or history, only a few poignant material reminders of them. Most impressive of these to us today were the classic cultures of Middle and South America, the Mayas and Aztecs of Mexico and the Incas of Peru, which erected formidable civilizations featuring splendid cities filled with elaborate pyramids, temples, and courts, some of which structures survive to the present day.

Far less grand but just as intriguing are the remains of the North American settlements, such as those of the Adena and Hopewell cultures, that left large earthworks and burial mounds scattered across the landscape of the American East and Midwest, still readily visible today in ordinary places like Chillicothe, Ohio, or Romney, West Virginia. These, too, are eerily silent clues to a once-flourishing but now vanished way of life. Much the same can be said of the ancestral Pueblo peoples of the arid Four Corners region of the American Southwest, sometimes called by the Navajo name “Anasazi,” a peaceful and highly organized people who left behind their startlingly modern-looking multistory cliff dwellings tucked in beneath overhanging cliffs, structures whose remnants can still be seen today in places like Mesa Verde, Colorado, and the Chaco Canyon area of northwestern New Mexico.

There is something haunting and melancholy about the remaining traces of these earliest civilizations. Hints of their once-grand presence still linger in the American landscape, like faded echoes of a distant drama. Their mysteries intrigue us. But they are in only the most remote sense a part of American history. They do not play an important role in this book, simply because they had no direct or significant role in the establishment of the settlements and institutions that would eventually make up the country we know as the United States.

Neither did the later discovery and exploration in the early eleventh century of a New World by adventurous Norse seamen like Leif Eriksson of Iceland, an enterprising fellow who sought to plant a colony on what is now the large Canadian island of Newfoundland. He and other Norsemen tried their best to establish a settlement in this newfound land to the west, to which he gave the cheerful name of “Vinland,” but their efforts came to nothing and are generally counted as historical curiosities – interesting false starts on American history, perhaps, but no more than that.

But not so fast. Maybe this statement needs to be modified. Maybe the lost civilizations of the first Americans and the episodic voyages of Eriksson and other Norsemen, taken together, do point powerfully, if indirectly, toward the recognizable beginnings of American history. For they point to the presence of America in the world’s imagination as an idea, as a land of hope, of refuge and opportunity, of a second chance at life for those willing to take it.

Perhaps that seems a fanciful statement. After all, we can never be sure exactly what forces and impulses led those earliest Asiatic peoples twenty thousand years ago to cross over into Alaska and make the dangerous and costly journey to

populate a new continent. What was in their minds? Were they mainly pushed by dire necessity, such as war or scarcity? Were they hunters who were merely following their quarry? Or were they in part pulled into the new lands by a sense of promise or opportunity, or even adventure, that those lands offered?

We don't know. The answers to those questions will probably always remain beyond our reach. But we know that the Norsemen's brave impulse of over a thousand years ago, which drove them to go forth in search of new lands, came out of something more than mere necessity. They were drawn to cross the icy and turbulent waters of the North Atlantic by the lure of available western lands and by a restless desire to explore and settle those lands. And they were influenced by sentiments that were already widespread in their time, a thousand years after Christ and five hundred years before Columbus.

From the beginning, there was a mystique about the West. Leif's explorer father, Erik the Red, played upon that very mystique when he gave the alluring name of "Greenland" to the largely frozen island mass we know by that name today. He was appealing to an idea already long embedded in literature, myth, and religion that there were new lands of plenty and wonder and mystery out there – perhaps even an earthly paradise – waiting to be found, lying somewhere in lands beyond the western horizon. This message was especially alluring at the dawn of the new millennium, at a time when post-Roman Europe was stagnating, disorganized, and underdeveloped, still struggling to get back on its feet.

But the message itself was not new. The ancient Greeks had spoken this way a millennium and a half earlier. They sang of the Isles of the Blessed, where the heroes and gods of their mythology dwelled in a fertile land where there was no winter, and of the Elysian Fields, which the poet Homer located on the western edge of the earth, beside the stream of the world's seas. Centuries later, at the outset of a new age of exploration, Sir Thomas More's book *Utopia* (1516) described an ideal society located on an island in the West, as did Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1627), whose very title recalled one of the most enduring legends of the West – the strange story of the isle of Atlantis, a fully developed civilization with kings of great and mighty power that had been swallowed up by the seas and disappeared forever from view.

So the West had long been thought of, in Europe, as a direction offering renewal and discovery, a place of wealth and plenty, a land of hope – a vivid anticipation of what a New World could be like. And as we shall soon see, the shape taken on by this expectation would owe more to the yearnings of the Old World than to the realities of the New.