JAMES C. MALIN: CREATIVE-ICONOCLAST

by

Burton J. Williams

"The historian should not apologize for the fact that history is useless. Not only is history useless, but the historian should take pride in its uselessness. Only in that way can he be free as a historian to pursue his study of history as intellectual enterprise in an objective sense--his sole motivation being human curiosity, and his sole objective, to know."[1] The foregoing are the words of the late James C. Malin, creative iconoclast.

It has been said that fools rush in where angels fear to tread. To categorically state that history is useless does not tend to put Malin on the side of the angels. Historians are painfully aware of the gnawing fact that history has lost its prominent position in the hierarchy of academic subjects; in the common or public schools and also in our colleges and universities. It has been judged, by those who are empowered to make such judgments, that history, if not useless, is often, at best, superfluous. But Malin's assertion that history is useless must not be confused with faddish Madison Avenue values which would list the current "market demand" for history as being severely depressed. Malin was completely uninterested in the "market mentality" which now, unfortunately, pervades the former hallowed halls of ivy.

Malin, the iconoclast, declared history to be useless in an effort to demolish the simplistic notion that the value of history lay solely in its functional utility. "The study of history," he stated, "is intellectual enterprise, and the object is to reconstruct historical reality in all its uniqueness -- the person, when present, and the space-time situation." And, he added, "Uniqueness must be recognized as the first principle of history."[2] In short Malin vigorously opposed those who would make history serve a particular "function," no matter how noble or utilitarian that function might appear to be. Malin insisted on emphasizing the uniqueness of history, whether it be the uniqueness of individuals or the uniqueness of a whole space-people-time situation. In effect Malin concluded that because of its unique qualities history was not, indeed could not be treated as a social science. To put it in his own words, "History and social science therefore are irreconcilable."[3] Irreconcilable because, as Malin put it, "The formulation of social laws, approximations of human behavior in the aggregate, which purposely eliminate the uniqueness of the human person, is the subject of social science."[4]

Be that it as it may, having risked alienation of the "historian-social scientists," the late James C. Malin,

(February 8, 1893 - January 26, 1979) long time professor of history at the University of Kansas, has gradually, perhaps almost grudgingly, received increasing attention by historians. In 1972, he was the subject of a session of the Western History Association which met in New Haven, Connecticut that year. Under the general heading entitled, "Historiography of James C. Malin," papers on Professor Malin were presented by Gould P. Colman of Cornell University, Thomas Le Duc of Oberlin College and Robert W. Johannsen of the University of Illinois.[5] That same year, 1972, Robert Galen Bell published an article on Professor Malin in Agricultural History.[6]

In 1973 a festschrift was published in honor of Malin which included a complete bibliography of his published works numbering some 114 books and articles. In addition, the festschrift contains the names of some 104 of Malin's graduate students, plus the titles of their theses and dissertations.[7] Also in 1973, Robert P. Swierenga paid tribute to Malin in an article published in the Historical Methods Newsletter.[8]

In 1979, a memoriam article was published on Malin which appeared in Kansas History, A Journal of the Central Plains. Also in 1979 two additional articles on Malin made their appearance, one by Thomas B. Colbert simply entitled, "James C. Malin" which appeared in the Great Plains Journal. The other, by Allan G. Bogue, which was also entitled simply "James C. Malin," was published in the American Historical Review.[9] Still another article about Malin appeared in 1980 in Arizona and the West titled, "A Dedication to the Memory of James C. Malin, 1893-1979."[10] But in spite of such a display of interest, Malin was probably accurate when he confided to me that it was his impression, ". . . that historians . . .(are) not well represented among my readers."[11]

Malin's impression was, no doubt, correct. But why? Without elaboration there are two fundamental reasons as to why Malin received less attention than he deserved; historians in general and editors in particular did not like what he wrote and they did not like the way he wrote it; consequently most of his significant book length monographs were privately published with commensurate limitations in publicity and sales.

Moreover Malin was, at times, almost vehement in his rejection of the frontier hypothesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. This did not tend to endear him in the minds of many "frontier" or Western historians, who often made acceptance of Turner's thesis the orthodox creed of frontier historiography and a test of historical fellowship. An example of Malin's views regarding the Turner thesis is best stated in his own words, "The Turnerians, with their geographical determinism, were victims of a Great Paradox similar to that of the Marxians, with their economic determinism. But once determinism is accepted as the basic premise of any system there can be no escape merely by an ipse dixit" (an assertion without proof).[12]

In addition to mounting a major assault on the Turner thesis, Malin, the free thinker, as he referred to himself, went in pursuit of other sacred (historical) cows.[13] During the heyday of New Deal conservation measures, Malin denounced several such programs as bureaucratic collectivism which, as he put it, was ". . . the loss of faith in the common man, and surrender to the bureaucracy of so-called experts."[14] He was particularly incensed over the claim of Hugh Bennett, of the United States Department of Agriculture, that prior to settlement the Missouri River ran clean, or clear. This propagandist dictum, or ipse dixit, brought the following unequivocal response from Malin, "It's perfectly absurd, but it didn't seem to bother him to even investigate-to find out whether . . . the river should have run clean."[15] Malin buttressed his own position by pointing out that ". . . the records of the U.S. Geological Survey indicate that no greater quantity of water or silt passed Baton Rouge into the Gulf of Mexico in 1951 than when records began, upwards of a century earlier."[16] Malin also pointed out that the devastating flood of the Missouri River in 1951 did not exceed the high water mark of the Missouri River flood of 1844.[17] And, perhaps adding insult to injury, he further declared that ". . . the great flood of 1951 in the Kansas Valley was of great benefit, by and large, from the standpoiut of agricultural resources as reflected in improved productivity of bottom land . . . for the Mississippi Valley as a whole, or for the Kansas Valley as a whole, natural resources in terms of water erosion meant, primarily, only a movement of soil from one place to another within the valley, and not a dead loss."[18]

Such declarations by Malin put him immediately at odds with the USDA and with the administration of the University of Kansas. Said Malin, "If I'd made an open fight on these things my job wouldn't have lasted five minutes."[19] As it turned out Malin was finally suspended from his teaching assignments at the University of Kansas for several years.[20]

Even more galling to the New Dealers was Malin's convincing claim that the dust storms of the 1930's were not caused ". . . by the plow that broke the plains."[21] As proof of his claim he pointed out that ". . . archeologists can find successive levels of occupation by primitive people, one on top of the other, with dust between. So the dust storm is essentially characteristic of the area . . . not something that was introduced by man and his agriculture."[22]

Such pronouncements, regardless of their validity, intensified the anger of reform-minded USDA officials.[23] Malin saw the USDA as a conglomerate of ". . . extreme reformers . . . prone to claim too much and of course to justify their exaggerated claims for the future they unconsciously or consciously misrepresent the past . . . ."[24] To Malin the short term or "quickie" research sponsored by the USDA resulted in policies based more on propaganda than on proof. To avoid being victimized by the bureaucrats, in this nation or any nation, Malin urged historians to take the long view of history which historians in general have not tended to do.

Malin claimed that historians who refer to the Pleiocene and Pleistocene periods as "pre-history" were dead wrong. As Malin put it, to refer to such periods as being pre-history was ". . . not solving a problem . . . it's merely dodging it."[25] Malin had not dodged the problem and consequently became involved in public controversy and a personal crisis.

In reflecting on his disputes with the USDA in general and the University of Kansas administration in particular Malin mused on the whole question of academic freedom as follows, "The spirit of the present age (1972) . . . has so largely been that academic freedom is to protect the propagandist rather than to protect intellectual freedom. And there's a wide difference between."[26] Indeed Malin's independent views subjected him to continuing controversy involving a wide range of subjects. He was critical of historian colleagues for not "re-tooling" in their efforts to deal with the growing complexities of society. He lauded the fact that scientists were constantly re-tooling in an effort to forge ahead in their scientific inquiries, but historians had lagged behind. Admonished Malin, "We've constantly been re-tooling our culture and the historian . . . has to face that same problem . . . I think that's one thing . . . that's been wrong with history . . . ."[27]

Malin believed that "real" history was the most difficult of all disciplines and bemoaned the fact that all too often history attracted less than the best students, students who were unwilling or unable to master the mathematics and languages that science required. Consequently, instead of the most difficult of subjects, said Malin, "History's the easiest . . . [subject] because the historian really hasn't defined his field . . . [they] don't know what history is."[28] To Malin's way of thinking, the "typical" historian was often no more than a sophisticated antiquarian who consciously, or unconsciously was in danger of becoming little more than a purveyor of propaganda. In summing up his disappointment with historians, he confided the following: "The magazine Science provides me with the most stimulating reading, and a few scientists are doing some provocative thinking. I become a little discouraged with historians."[29] Obviously, such sentiments did not tend to win or influence historian friends.

In addition to the scientists Malin expressed the following enthusiasm for geographers, "The geographers do better than the . . . historians on recognizing the problems of environment, variations in environment, and how man can of course manipulate environment to his own advantage."[30] And because man could and did manipulate the physical environment Malin contended that there was no such thing as a "state of nature." Malin dismissed this concept of a state of nature and the "noble savage" with abruptness: "The state of nature as it is commonly accepted is nonexistent. When man appeared upon the scene he destroyed such a state, because he possessed the unique capacity to act with a purpose. No matter how primitive, he introduced the factor of planning, and the element of choice."[31] Likewise Malin dismissed the "back to

nature" movement by the younger generation of the 1970's as "nonsense."[32]

In retrospect Malin almost seemed to be spoiling for intellectual frays. When asked about this, Malin explained that he really didn't know why he became involved in so much controversy, but he also added ". . . I suppose it's something . . . some way in which I'm deficient about dealing with people. I just don't know."[33]

Whether Malin's assessment of his own nature be true or not, he certainly did not shy away from controversial subjects, not even the politically explosive subject of racial integration. Malin argued that, "Equality is a false foundation upon which to pretend to base freedom. . . Any pressure program to eliminate races by amalgamation or genocide violates the singularity (uniqueness) of race. Each racial group possesses unique characteristics and is capable, theoretically, at least, of making its unique contribution to human culture, and possesses the right to make its peculiar contribution. Who knows the answer to such a question or has cared enough about the importance of minorities to investigate the issue in such a body of relationships? The advocates of racial equality by compulsion are the real discriminators against minority peoples."[34] This statement was published in 1954 and it may or may not contain a reference to the epic Supreme Court decision of that year: "Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas."

Malin trod on the toes of the large and the small, the great and the not-so-great; he deplored the emphasis that historians and editors placed on literary style declaring that, "In the history field there's too much hangover of the idea that history is literature . . . ."[35] He was equally annoyed with those who continually contrived to get grants stating that, "You've lost a certain freedom of flexibility of your research project 'cause you're tied down to a grant . . . and certain (expected) results . . . on which you justified your application."[36] In addition, he was often critical of the University of Kansas School of Education and the manner in which it prepared students to become public school teachers.[37] And he was particularly incensed about what was not taught in the elementary schools saying, "They don't have history in the elementary schools. They have social studies."[38] Not even Lyndon B. Johnson escaped his analytical notice. In a letter to me, he commented on Josiah Royce's book the Great Community, published in 1916, stating, "I wonder if it supplied some of the ideas and inspiration for President Johnson's 'Great Society' speech of 1964 -- if so, of course, at the instances of his idea men and speech writers, because, no one would accuse Johnson of reading Royce."[39] And as for the whole of mankind Malin surmised that, "He's merely a . . . link in the chain of existence and he shouldn't get glorified ideas of his own importance."[40]

In reflecting on man's role in the history of the earth, Malin posed questions which, today at least, appear to have no satisfactory answers. He was intensely interested in the

"cause and effect" syndrome which so often was no more than over-simplification of a complex historical phenomenon. As a high school teacher in Oklahoma City, Malin, as he put it, ". . . met up for the first time with Einstein's ideas on relativity and they attracted me."[42] (This is not surprising inasmuch as Malin had undergraduate equivalent majors in history, mathematics, biology, psychology, and philosophy.) Much like Einstein, who was skeptical of parochial views of the universe, Malin was skeptical of the cause and effect syndrome of parochial historiography. To Malin, history was dynamic; that is to say that there are principles or forces acting in any field, physical or moral. To Malin, these forces were continuously and simultaneously active and virtually inexhaustible. Consequently Malin believed it difficult, if not impossible, to segment or abstract a definitive history, of whatever subject, out of the milieu of changing forces operating in space and time. As Malin put it, "The study of history is intellectual enterprise which deals with change, or sequential relations of unique situations in space and time."[42] Malin put it still another way, "At best, any historical work is only a progress report on the enlargement of knowledge."[43] In a letter Malin expressed his disappointment in the fact that "book reviewers and other commentary have not given attention to this aspect (dynamic aspect) of my record as a historian. Needless to say, that fact has been a major disappointment."[44]

Einstein had neatly tied together the mystery of space-time in ten complex "field" equations which were published in 1916 as his general theory of relativity. Einstein's view of a changing, dynamic universe was totally at odds with the accepted beliefs of that day. In a similar fashion, Malin envisioned a "field theory" for history whereby the dynamic forces of history were continuously and simultaneously interacting.[45] In other words, since a complex, multiplicity of factors or forces were continuously interacting, no specific historical phenomenon could be ascribed to a single cause. To go back to the roots of any historical phenomenon would, theoretically, take us back to the "Big Bang" theory, which is, of course, an impossible journey. However, Malin's approach to history, whether a history of Edwards County, Kansas or the Great Plains in general, took him back into time as far as the current stage of knowledge would permit. Thus, even though the ideal, or the holistic "causes" of a given historical phenomenon could not be achieved, Malin came much closer to that ideal than most, if not all of us have come. Indeed, for Malin there was no such thing as "pre-history."

In addition to his "field theory" of history, Malin referred to his concept of orders of magnitude. As he saw it, "When we've reached a limit of development of a particular combination . . . (whether man, plant, or animal) then maybe a . . . different combination may be found which establishes another level or plateau, (another) order of magnitude which may provide the basis for a whole unexpected and new type of (life) combination."[46] Malin's conception of orders of magnitude came long before current "genetic

engineering" and the creation of new laboratory life forms. Indeed, Malin posed questions that historians have hardly considered, e.g., ". . . how does evolution work . . . new species; new types; elimination of old types; eventually, of course, man. Was he the chemist's final product or is he merely a way station in further development?"[47] As startling as his insights and theories were, and are, Malin lamented the fact that he had ". . . never seen any discussion of the question by historians, though, as to . . . what they think about my analysis. So far as I know they just ignore it."[48]

Near the close of his life, Malin's optimism began to wane somewhat. His relentless commitment to a better future through man's "contriving brain and skillful hand" were less intense. His struggle against the various forces of determinism, knowing that he was fighting a lonely battle, began to take its toll. Nevertheless, he held on to a guarded optimism, believing that the "open system," the unlimited options which lay before mankind were still there, but with less opportunity for success. "I think it's still there . . ." he once said, ". . . but . . . it doesn't have, I suspect, the opportunity it once did because people can't finance projects (research) unless you can outline the project and a method of pursuing it and do all the things that's necessary to get a grant. The independent investigator has a pretty tough time of it . . . The fact is that a great many under our educational system won't do the research work unless they do get a grant. Its almost come to that."[49] And on another occasion he simply said, "Maybe some of us are getting a little skeptical about the open system."[50] In an even more melancholy mood Malin almost despaired for the future of mankind: "Travel, science, exploration of the universe, and going to the moon, etc., are only versions of the F. J. Turner ideology. They only postponed [sic] the inevitable disillusionment that [such] . . . pursuits have gotten nowhere . . . Thus my Contriving Brain, etc., only postpone Turner's closed frontier."[51]

Although seemingly disillusioned, Malin continued his tireless devotion to research. When he was well past the age of 70 he completed a book entitled Power and Change In Society which was published posthumously in 1981.[52] Malin regarded this last book as comparable in importance to his Grassland and John Brown books.[53] Historians would do well to pay attention to what Malin has to say, not only in this recent book, but in the five score plus books and articles which he has left to us as his legacy. From a conversation with him many years ago, I can paraphrase some of his words which are indelibly inscribed in my memory; "Truth is a demanding master and for many of us the price is often too high." James C. Malin, creative iconoclast, paid the price for truth and the price was high indeed when the cost is reckoned in controversies, suspensions, and a semi-obscurity which was, in part at least, self-imposed.

Because of a sometimes caustic pen in his fierce defense of free thinking and because of his disdain for "conventional" history, Malin has often been regarded as a consumate critic and the personification of pessimism. In actuality, Malin

was a supreme optimist. His lifelong labors were dedicated to the limitless opportunities that awaited mankind if he were free to use his contriving brain and skillful hand; which by the way is the title of one of his more provocative books. In referring to his own hopes for the future, Malin put it this way, "I'm afraid I am kind of an idealist who at least would like to have things a little better . . . different, at least, than what they are . . . ."[54]

Nearing the close of his life, Malin penned this sage advice, "In a universe so vast as the one man is exploring, man cannot safely be arbitrary about the 'imponderables.'"[55] Historians have made their discipline and its world too small, but Malin has pulled aside the curtain of self imposed limitations and he has shown us a larger world if we are but willing to see it. Truly a remarkable man has passed our way. Perhaps the next generation of historians will accord him the acclaim he so justly deserves and perhaps, just perhaps, his name will become as familiar among future historians as the names of Turner, Webb and Billington are now. James C. Malin, creative iconoclast, deserves no less.

NOTES

1. James C. Malin, On The Nature of History (Privately Published, 1954), p. 39.

2. Malin, On The Nature of History, p. 1 and p. 35.

3. Ibid., p. 6.

4. Ibid.

5. Colman's paper was entitled, "History in Recent America: The Life of James C. Malin;" Johannsen's paper was entitled, "James C. Malin: An Appreciation" and was published in The Kansas Historical Quarterly, 38, no. 4, Winter 1972, pp. 457-466. Thomas H. Le Duc had more than two decades earlier, elaborated on Malin as historian in an article entitled, "An Ecological Interpretation of Grasslands History: The Work of James C. Malin as Historian and as Critic of Historians," Nebraska History, 31, September 1950, pp. 226-233.

6. Robert Galen Bell, "James C. Malin and the Grasslands of North America, "Agricultural History, 46, no. 3, July 1972, pp. 414-424.

7. Burton J. Williams, ed., Essays in American History in Honor of James C. Malin. (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973).

8. Robert P. Swierenga, "Towards the 'New Rural History': A Review Essay," Historical Methods Newsletter, 6, no. 3, June 1973, pp. 111 ff.

9. The three articles referred to here are as follows: Burton J. Williams, "James C. Malin -- In Memoriam," Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains, 2, no. 1, Spring 1979, pp. 65-67; Thomas B. Colbert, "James C. Malin," Great Plains Journal, 18 (1979), pp. 48-54; and Allan G. Bogue, "James C. Malin," American Historical Review, 84, June 1979, pp. 915-916.

10. Burton J. Williams, "A Dedication to the Memory of James C. Malin, 1893-1979," Arizona and the West, 22, no. 3, Autumn 1980, pp. 207-210.

11. James C. Malin to Burton J. Williams, Lawrence, Kansas, December 29, 1969.

12. Malin, On the Nature of History, p. 100.

13. Interview with James C. Malin, March 29, 1972. This interview was conducted by Gould P. Colman, Director of the Cornell Program in Oral History. It was taped and transcribed into a 118 page manuscript which is available through the Cornell Program in Oral History. For this citation see p. 64 of the aforesaid manuscript. Hereafter references to this manuscript will simply read "Malin Interview" with appropriate page Citations.

14. Malin Interview, p. 40.

15. Malin Interview, p. 108.

16. James C. Malin, The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to its History (Privately Published, 1947, 1956, 1961.) 1961 edition, p. 423.

17. Ibid., p. 423

18. Ibid.

19. Malin Interview, p. 41.

20. Ibid., p. 68. There is a difference of opinion over use of the term "suspended." No loss of pay was involved. However, while some of Malin's former colleagues claim he was given an assignment as "research professor," others claim the "assignment" which took him out of the classroom was a punitive act on the part of the central administration because Malin was a tough grader, had low enrollments in his classes and had, by his forthright positions in print, embarrassed the University. Malin regarded his "reassignment" as a suspension.

21. Ibid., p. 61.

22. Ibid.

23. For correspondence concerning Malin's disputes with the USDA see the Malin collection of letters on deposit in the Manuscript Collection of the Kansas State Historical Society.

24. Malin Interview, p. 110.

25. Ibid., p. 38.

26. Ibid., p. 81.

27. Ibid., p. 77.

28. Ibid., p. 78.

29. James C. Malin to Burton J. Williams, Lawrence, Kansas, January 11, 1969.

30. Malin Interview, p. 9.

31. Malin, The Grassland of North America, p. 417.

32. Malin, Interview, p. 57.

33. Malin Interview, p. 68.

34. Malin, On The Nature of History, pp. 35 and 36.

35. Malin Interview, p. 115.

36. Ibid., p. 112.

37. Ibid., p. 70.

38. Ibid., p. 78.

39. James C. Malin to Burton J. Williams, Lawrence, Kansas, March 30, 1970.

40. Malin Interview, p. 83.

41. Ibid., p. 4.

42. Malin, On the Nature of History, p. 1.

43. Malin, The Grassland of North America, p. vi.

44. James C. Malin to Burton J. Williams, Lawrence, Kansas, August 7, 1972.

45. Malin Interview, p. 52.

46. Malin Interview, pp. 16 and 17.

47. Ibid., p. 18.

48. Ibid., p. 53

49. Ibid., p. 43

50. Ibid., p. 16.

51. James C. Malin to Burton J. Williams, Lawrence, Kansas, April 25, 1974.

52. James C. Malin, Power and Change In Society - With Special Reference to Kansas 1880-1890. (lawrence: Coronado Press, 1981).

53. Malin Interview, p. 24.

54. Malin Interview, p. 67.

55. James C. Malin to Gould P. Colman, Lawrence, Kansas, April 25, 1972.