

## ROUNDTABLE

# Walter Nugent and the Broadening of U.S. History

William Deverell<sup>1</sup>, Nancy Unger<sup>2</sup>, Donna Gabaccia<sup>3</sup>, Alan Lessoff<sup>4</sup>, Charles Postel<sup>5</sup> and Annette Atkins<sup>6</sup>

### Abstract

Former SHGAPE president Walter Nugent passed away in 2021. On April 1, 2023, historians gathered at the Organization of American Historians (OAH) annual meeting in Los Angeles, California, to remember him. William Deverell, Nancy Unger, Donna Gabaccia, Alan Lessoff, Charles Postel, and Annette Atkins spoke about Walter Nugent as a scholar, a colleague, a mentor, and a friend; then the audience joined in with their own memories and stories. The following roundtable is a lightly edited version of the panelists' comments from that day, including an introduction that William Deverell wrote for the journal. We have included a Walter Nugent Reading List at the end—a selected bibliography of his books and articles, as well as works about him.

**Keywords:** historiography; immigration history; populism; Walter Nugent; western history

### Introduction

**William Deverell:** Friends at The Huntington let me take a picture of Walter Nugent's "reader's card" (Figure 1). These were dutifully filled out and filed back in the day, each card a short biography of every scholar who came to do research at that magnificent library. Walter's card dates from late in 1979 and, on the reverse, is updated each time he returned, all the way to 2006.

Two things about this card especially delight me. One is the line at "Published works," which simply says "books, etc." That's right to the point. Walter published books, etc. for decades, each one deeply researched, cogently argued, and, at least in my reading of them, field changing.

The second thing that catches my eye are Walter's references. Ray Allen Billington and his former student, Martin Ridge. Big figures in western history, big personalities at The Huntington. Walter did not need referees to vouch for him by 1979; he had been publishing important works for over a decade by then. But, just in case he needed

---

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. William Deverell, Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, San Marino, CA, USA. Email: [deverell@usc.edu](mailto:deverell@usc.edu). <sup>2</sup>Corresponding author. Nancy Unger, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, USA. Email: [nunger@scu.edu](mailto:nunger@scu.edu). <sup>3</sup>Corresponding author. Donna Gabaccia, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada. Email: [donna.gabaccia@utoronto.ca](mailto:donna.gabaccia@utoronto.ca). <sup>4</sup>Corresponding author. Alan Lessoff, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA. Email: [ahlesso@ilstu.edu](mailto:ahlesso@ilstu.edu). <sup>5</sup>Corresponding author. Charles Postel, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA. Email: [postel@sfsu.edu](mailto:postel@sfsu.edu). <sup>6</sup>College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN, USA. Email: [aatkins@csbsju.edu](mailto:aatkins@csbsju.edu).

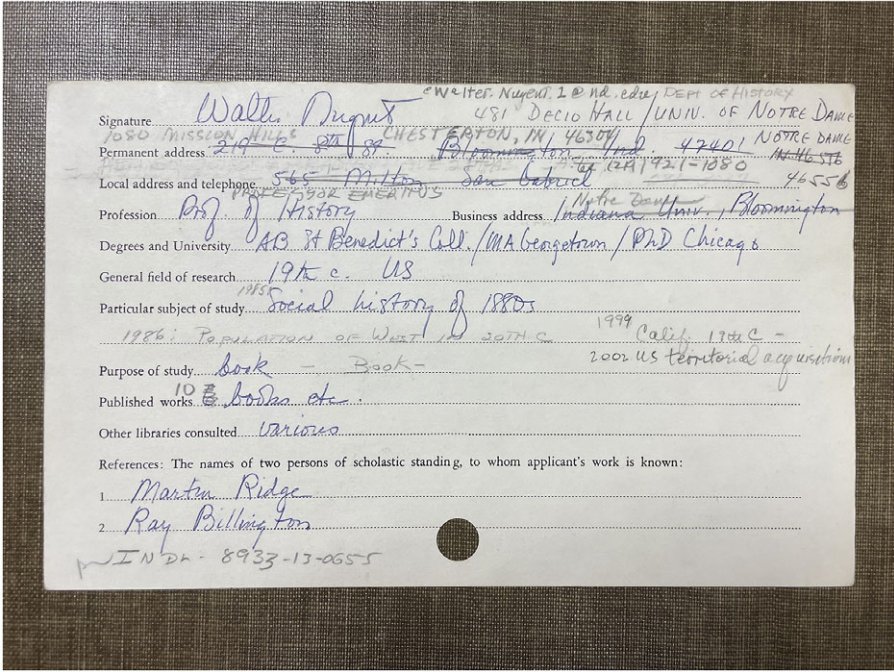


Figure 1. Walter Nugent's "Reader's Card," The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Photograph courtesy of William Deverell. This photograph is an image of a reader's card, filled out by hand, and signed by Walter Nugent.

additional *bona fides* to gain access to Huntington materials, these two gentlemen would have provided more than enough endorsement.

It's funny. Billington and Ridge belong to an earlier era of western history, one that the field has moved well past in the last half century. Seeing them here reminds me that Walter was of that earlier scholarly period, too. But he was and he wasn't. Just a glance at the list of Walter's "books, etc." reveals how he moved across fields, how he learned new methods of research and analysis, how he was anything but mired in dated scholarly concerns. An annotated list of Walter's book and article publications would be not only a tribute to his breadth and curiosity, it would be a benchmark historiographical work of American history and culture from the second half of the nineteenth century to the recent past. Someone should do that work. They'd learn a great deal, and we'd all be the beneficiaries of that kind of stock-taking of the man and his mind.

The need for that kind of assessment is what brought a group of us together at the Los Angeles meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) annual meeting in spring 2023. Alan Lessoff pulled us together, and we each offered personal and professional thoughts about this deeply talented and decent man. Some on the panel never had the chance to meet Walter. But we all, panelists and audience members, came away with even greater appreciation for what he had accomplished and for who he was as scholar, mentor, family member, and friend. Our fellow panelist, Annette Atkins, closed the

session with special grace; Annette opened a bottle of scotch, and we all raised a Dixie-cup toast to Walter Nugent.

### Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, April 1, 2023, Los Angeles, California

**Nancy C. Unger:** Walter Nugent (1935–2021) was president of the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (SHGAPE) from 2000 to 2002. During that time, he played an important role in the founding of the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* and then served on the journal's editorial board from 2002 to 2004. Nugent also was president of the Western Historical Association (WHA) in 2005–2006. His prolific scholarship helped to shape our field, as did his kindness, enthusiasm, and encouragement of emerging scholars, myself included.

In a career that spanned a half century, mainly associated with Indiana University and the University of Notre Dame, Professor Nugent was a central figure in the effort to integrate social history into the regular practice of U.S. history. He exerted a large and enduring presence and participated in the effort to reimagine, within a transnational context, multiple subfields of U.S. history—populism and western history, for example—hitherto regarded as exceptional or provincial. Author of more than a dozen books and a prolific, eloquent essayist, Nugent showed a consistent talent for weaving together social history, geography, economics, and politics in surprising and innovative ways that reshaped the thinking of his wide circle of readers. As department chair at Indiana and then as Andrew V. Tackes Professor at Notre Dame—and as the president of SHGAPE and WHA—Nugent encouraged and mentored generations of scholars.

**William Deverell:** I'm honored to be part of this roundtable celebrating the life and career of Walter Nugent. Of course, he would be uncomfortable with the personal stories and reflections, but I can't help but mix his scholarly career and accomplishments with my sense of the man.

I don't know when I first met Walter Nugent. In my mind's eye, I was a graduate student, so it was probably at the Western History Association meeting somewhere. That is an organization Walter was closely aligned with—he served as president—and the WHA's best collegial and scholastic attributes are ones Walter embodied. I was a graduate student of Walter Nugent's—not at IU or Notre Dame, but in every other unofficial, nondegree program kind of way. He intimidated me at first; I knew that stack of books and their sheer intellectual range. And I knew that stack to be growing. I wanted him to think well of me, and he had absolutely no interest in intimidating me or anyone else as far as I could tell.

Martin Ridge probably introduced us. These two men were dear friends. Martin Ridge was also a mentor to me, if an acerbic one at times. Walter took the edge off Martin. Sort of. Martin gave off an impatience, a kind of “get to the point, tick tock, you're nearly wasting my time” demeanor. Martin was the only man I ever heard my career military officer father call “sir.” But not Walter. Walter was, once he was no longer Professor Nugent, well, Walter. He was, to me, a bit shy, even bashful; he was utterly accessible and without any filters of pedigree or accomplishment getting in the way. Walter wanted to know what you thought and why. He had piercing eyes to go with that piercing mind, but he smiled a lot, laughed quietly, and blushed with frequency.

He wrote almost as much as he read, and he very nearly seems to have read everything.

We tell our graduate students to read the work of X or Y or Z scholar. My students *must* read their Nugent, but I could also give them permission or encouragement to write to Walter or, best of all, when he and Suellen were on one of their regular Huntington visits, talk to Walter. I am certain he never said no. “He scares me,” an undergraduate of mine said once because I’d sent him to have coffee with Walter to talk populism. “There’s no need for that,” I’d said, “and he doesn’t mean or want to.”

I have two additional personal stories. I remember Walter and Suellen walked our street when they were out this way, when my wife and I were in our stroller phase of parenthood. Walter and Suellen would also stop to say hello, to chat with our toddler, and you could see that they loved it. The twinkle in Walter’s eye got brighter.

There was a time at the Western History Association meetings when several of us had grown weary of the conference tours. So we went golfing on that day. We took Walter with us. He was a good golfer, and it was so Walter: no muss, no fuss. Hit it straight. Hit it again. Move on. Have fun. And listen more than you talk.

And then there’s this book *Into the West: The Story of Its People* (1999). Allow me to quote from the preface, which so well captures Walter’s voice and charm:

When I was a teenager in northern New York in the late 1940s, soon to be shipped off to college in Kansas, I was talking with a few buddies. Someone asked, “Whatever happened to so-and-so?” and another said, “He went out west somewhere; Chicago, I think.” In those days Chicago was still, in our eastern minds, the gateway to the Great West. When I arrived in Atchison, after changing trains in Chicago from the familiar New York Central to the exotic Santa Fe (now that was truly western!), I thought I had reached the edge of the earth. Anything west of Wichita was as mythical as the lands beyond Columbus’s western ocean in the year 1500: full of demons, deserts, and Amazons.

Not until I was twenty did I lay eyes on the Colorado Rockies, not until I was thirty-one did I see San Francisco, and not until the late 1970s did I truly experience Los Angeles and Seattle. I knew that California existed because in B movies and “Dragnet,” cops and villains sped along streets lined with palm trees. But they were not places I had ever seen, and I accepted their reality only by willingly suspending disbelief.

This passage beautifully reveals Walter’s insatiable curiosity and his elegant imagination. He dug into these mysteries; he wanted to know everything about the people who journeyed “into the West.” Who they were, where they came from, how they lived and died, the everyday dignity and fabric of their lives (which you can see from the cover photographs chosen for *Into the West*). He placed those utterly human stories against the backdrop of deep social, cultural, and economic change, about which he knew as much as anyone. This is such a beautiful, such an important book. Powerful, moving, interpretively ambitious, and wrung out of both this scholar’s creative mind and the archives he loved to prowl.

**Donna Gabaccia:** I am grateful to have this opportunity to remember Walter Nugent as a mentor, colleague, and friend. Let me begin by wondering out loud whether I am the only person present today who read Walter’s wonderful first book already as an undergraduate. That book was of course *The Tolerant Populists*, published in 1963. I read it in a social history class taught by Charles Trout at Mount Holyoke College, probably in spring

1970 or 1971. *Tolerant Populists* was on the syllabus not only to introduce important topics like rural unrest and Gilded Age and Progressive Era reform movements but also to introduce us to historiography. I do not recall whether or not we also read the work of Richard Hofstadter. However, I am quite sure that Mr. Trout referred to the two men's contrasting interpretations of the populists in his lecture on the topic. I will always associate Walter with confronting the concept of historiography and beginning to understand how and why historians sometimes disagree so vehemently. At the time, I was a sociology major and Trout's history course was one of only three I took in college. But when I began history graduate study at the University of Michigan in 1973, I was relieved to find that I already grasped the importance of historiography and historiographical disputes. I will remember *The Tolerant Populists* for helping me to understand why Walter's portrait of populists differed so significantly from Hofstadter's.

Although I didn't appreciate the fact as an undergraduate, Walter's portrait of populists rested on his insistence that he read, understand, and give voice to the voiceless. Furthermore, attention to the immigrant populists of Kansas and to their writings forced Walter to reconsider the supposed xenophobia of Hofstadter's backward-looking populists. Giving voice to the voiceless and acknowledging always the presence and influence of immigrants on American life would become central elements in my own training and work as a historian, which eventually brought me back to Walter.

If I am not mistaken I was introduced to Walter Nugent at a critical juncture in my life by my friend, colleague, and mentor Dirk Hoerder, probably sometime around 1990. At that time Walter was preparing for publication his wonderful book *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations*, which was published in 1992. By then I could recognize the common ground that linked our scholarship. In *Crossings*, Walter used the tools of demography, his eye for the Wallersteinian big picture of border-crossing economic systems, and his analytical talents for comparative work to address most of the main social and cultural themes engaging both those scholars who still called themselves immigration historians and those, like Hoerder, like me, who increasingly saw ourselves as writing histories of migration that could not be contained within the historiography of any one nation state. Beginning in the 1990s, I looked forward to attending the annual meetings of the Social Science History Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association as an opportunity to share an occasional meal with Walter.

I take this as my opportunity to publicly express my gratitude to Walter Nugent for all that he did for me and all that he meant to me. I can thank him for introducing me to his wonderful wife Suellen Hoy and to her work on the history of housekeeping. He was correct that she could and would offer me sage advice about finding a wider audience for my work in women's history and food studies. I can also thank Walter for the letters of support he wrote me as I sought to leave Mercy College, and its four-four teaching load, for an institution that would better support me as a researcher and mentor of graduate students. Who could understand better than Walter and Suellen what it felt like to teach and live within Catholic institutions—and what it would require to shift out of that Catholic world into the big public universities where I had felt most comfortable since leaving the Seven Sisters behind? I remember laughing with them about my Mercy College office, located on the second floor of the Sisters of Mercy convent, and sharing tales of where and how progressive religious women—like the Sisters of Mercy and their supporters—might find their roots and reconcile their goals with a male-dominated, authoritarian church. Finally, I can thank Walter for helping me to see myself, at least part of the time, as an historian of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Walter, along with Bob

Cherny, facilitated my move into service within SHGAPE. Walter was president in 2002. I would follow him a few years later and I remember very consciously imitating Walter in cultivating younger women scholars I thought held potential for leadership within the new organization.

Most important, however, was Walter's wonderful example as a scholar capable of wearing many historiographical hats. It allowed me to feel at home both in U.S. history and histories well beyond this nation's borders, including Italy, the Atlantic, and the world. For fine meals, great conversation, support, sympathy I will always be thankful to Walter, and I honor his life and remember him personally with great fondness and admiration.

**Alan Lessoff:** I would have given a great deal to be with so many friends talking about a person who encouraged and inspired us all and who drew us together.<sup>1</sup> In geographic terms, we associate Walter most with the U.S. West and secondarily with Indiana and the Midwest. In terms of social and political history, we identify him with what he labeled the "frontier-rural mode" in North American history. But Chicago connects the four of us, Walter, Suellen, Ann [Durkin Keating], and me. Since Frederick Jackson Turner spoke at the Columbian Exposition in 1893 and even before, so many observers who set out to define and activists who set out to engage with the United States as a phenomenon of historical geography have, at one point or another, looked out at the continent from Chicago. Walter, of course, started as an upstate New Yorker—another common pattern—though by the time he began his Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago in the mid-1950s, he already had lived in Kansas and Washington, D.C., and had gained a sense of perspective on what the United States had been and was becoming. In the preface to *Into the West*, Walter recounted passing through Chicago for the first time in the late 1940s on the way to college in Atchison, Kansas. "In those days," he wrote, "Chicago was still, in our eastern minds, the Gateway to the Great West." As he switched from the New York Central to the Santa Fe Railroad, he remembered, "I thought I had reached the edge of the earth." Now, of course, we are talking about him in Los Angeles, which in the twentieth century half-supplanted Chicago as the city that epitomized what Walter termed the "metropolitan mode" of U.S. history. Los Angeles also interjected its own regional perspective on the United States as geography, environment, and presence in the world

But it was other places, not Chicago, that Walter and I spent the most time discussing. As he was writing his history of U.S. territorial acquisition, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (2008), I was putting together my book on Corpus Christi, Texas, where I had lived in the 1990s. In the summer of 1845, Zachary Taylor's army landed at this Anglo-Texan trading post on the margins of the former Texas Republic in order to lay claim to the disputed territory between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande. James K. Polk's administration knew that such actions might provoke Mexico into war and thereby provide a pretext for the marches across the continent that would end with U.S. occupation of the area where today's session is taking place. Walter's book managed to convey especially vividly the connections between U.S. scheming along the Nueces River and Los Angeles as an Anglo-American gateway to the Pacific.

As we worked together to develop the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, one of Walter's many contributions to the profession, we spent a lot of time mulling over how notions like disputed territory, border wars, pacification, occupation, colonization, and empire might apply to this sequence of events, which redirected the history of the

continent. Some of this conversation showed up in Walter's 2006 presidential address to the Western History Association, "The American Habit of Empire and the Case of Polk and Bush." This essay was one of a number of reflections he had published since the 1980s on how "frontier" societies such as the United States, Brazil, Canada, and Argentina had engaged in a species of empire building, a variation on the overall story of modern, Western imperialism. Since the current term, "settler colonialism," was not yet commonplace when Walter was doing this work, he was one of those U.S. historians who stuck with the term "frontier" despite the critiques leveled against it by the New Western History. As had Turner in a quite different intellectual context a century earlier, Walter argued that the various ways of that historians conceptualize frontiers—as process, place, and experience—allowed for cross-national comparison and therefore helped to undermine the self-referential provincialism of American historiography. I still find the comparison Walter drew in that 2006 WHA address between Polk's provocation of a war to conquer long-coveted territories in North America and George W. Bush's blundering into Iraq for who-knows-what purpose to be strained. The underlying agenda, however, seems typical of Walter, who long maintained that disciplined attention to comparative social and political history could help Americans transcend what he derided as "the axiom of exceptionalism."

The fields in which Walter mainly worked—populism and progressivism, immigration and ethnicity, frontier settlement and the West—all acutely illustrated, in the years when he rose to prominence in the profession, the background of the charge of cul-de-sac provincialism that mid-century U.S. historians threw at one another. In their different ways, the accomplishments of the other contributors to this roundtable illustrate the route out of that cul-de-sac that Walter and his contemporaries charted: how social science, geographic and demographic methods, and regional, comparative, and transnational perspectives, as well as a variegated understanding of modernity can enable a U.S. history woven into the world. As the people in this room know, Walter was about three steps ahead of the internationalizing project articulated in the OAH's La Pietra Report of 2000.

Beyond an interest in the Nueces River, the two of us shared a background in historical demography and were to some extent wistful for the noble dream that quantitative and behaviorist methodologies could provide a sturdy frame—like the frame of a Chicago School skyscraper—around which one could construct a durable, yet vital social history.<sup>2</sup> In Walter's 1981 book, *Structure of American Social History*, the structure is demography and what population, migration, and property patterns suggest about class in U.S. history. From ruminations on Malthus, Tocqueville, Turner, and the shortcomings of the mechanistic modernization models of the 1950s–70s, Walter was able to move on to a sweeping, opinionated, but sociologically grounded portrait of the United States in a centuries-long perspective. Walter's 1992 *Crossings*—an innovative, transnational account of transatlantic migration—starts from another noble dream that we had shared, for a Braudelian total history founded upon geography as well as demography. "The Atlantic was the center of the late nineteenth-century" world, he remarked, as much as the Mediterranean stood at the center of Braudel's sixteenth century. "Why not, then, a book in the Braudelian mode on the transatlantic world of the 1880s," one "that treated Europe, North America, South America, and Africa as a regional unity?"

"I can only sympathize," Walter wrote in a friendly critique of Richard White, another versatile scholar given to experiments, "for having been overly intrigued with a social science theory that has proved rather transitory." Even as he refrained from harsh

judgment of others' theoretical experiments, Walter felt compelled to defend his own in a brief memoir published in *Reviews in American History* in 2011. By temperament, he remarked, he sided with the prospectors of the historical profession against its miners: "Prospectors hope to strike it rich, but probably won't; miners' returns are moderate but much more predictable." "Alas, I could do no other," he added. None of us here would have wanted him any different.

**Charles Postel:** I had the good fortune of having the opportunity to compare notes with Walter Nugent at Agricultural History Association conferences, and we corresponded from time to time about our common interests regarding populist history. But I mainly knew Walter from reading his books. His first book, based on his dissertation, made an outsized impression on me.

Originally published in 1963, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* played a key role in the controversy over the meaning of populism and its legacy. Walter would later quote Jeffrey Ostler to the effect that this controversy was "one of the bloodiest episodes in American historiography," an episode in which Walter himself contributed his share of metaphorical bloodletting. Richard Hofstadter, in his Pulitzer-prize winning *The Age of Reform* (1955), looked for the sources of McCarthyism, and discovered that the populists of the 1890s had been the taproot of intolerance, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism in American life—a claim echoed by an influential cohort of political scientists and other social theorists. A host of historians pushed back, with C. Vann Woodward and Norman Pollack among the early combatants. The political scientist Michael Rogin, who was one of my advisers at Berkeley, pushed back as well, writing a dissertation that became his first book with the core finding that what the populists and the McCarthy supporters shared in common was that they both had been in Wisconsin. In all of this brilliant scholarship, however, it seems to me that no one pushed back with the force that Walter Nugent did.

Rereading *The Tolerant Populists*, I was reminded of just how good this book is, and of its enduring relevance. Walter argued that in his research he had found "some dozens" of references that might sustain Hofstadter's arguments, but that he had found thousands of references that were either neutral or pointed in the opposite direction. And Walter read those thousands! If nothing else, the archival foundation of *The Tolerant Populists* set it apart. This allowed Walter to probe the political map, with county breakdowns of election results, with the dexterity (and much deeper knowledge) of a Steve Kornacki on election night. Walter was also a social historian, and he wanted readers to know something of the sound that ears of ripe corn made in the heat stove as farm families burned their devalued corn for fuel. He attentively charted how these farmers came to Kansas, a sign of his later interest in immigration and world history.

Walter showed an empathy for and a close proximity to his populist subjects, interviewing, for example, the son of a populist state chair who had supported Sig Lehman, the Jewish mayor of the small town of Chetopa, Kansas. Walter was empathetic yet clear-eyed. Where C. Vann Woodward's portrayal of Tom Watson and the Georgia populists, for example, may seem outdatedly romantic in light of more recent scholarship, Walter's treatment of Kansas populists was nuanced and complex. Instead of romantic heroes, he often found the populists splitting the political difference between the two main parties, even when critical issues of tolerance and intolerance were at stake. Walter would later explain that he would have written more about women and gender in Kansas



populism, and it would have been important to have a closer treatment of the African American community in Topeka and beyond. Nonetheless, it is remarkable how well *The Tolerant Populists* has withstood the tests of time.

In spring 2012, the University of Chicago Press published a second edition of *The Tolerant Populists* to mark its fiftieth anniversary. It could not have been more timely. The Tea Party movement, with its right-wing, intolerant, xenophobic, and racist agenda, had captured the political moment, with both journalists and political scientists explaining that this was a reawakening of “populist anger.” I imagine that as he worked on the second edition Walter must have felt like a modern Sisyphus, pushing for historical clarity about who the populists were and what they stood for, only for distortion and confusion to descend once again. We shared notes about whether or not the work of clarification was a masochistic and impossible endeavor. But Walter kept at it. He remained committed to setting the record straight. Moreover, he hoped that keeping alive the populist past would provide historical footing for a more tolerant, inclusive, and progressive future. The next time someone asks you if Donald Trump or Marjorie Taylor Green (of “Jewish space laser” infamy) are “populists,” please recommend Walter’s wonderful book.

**Annette Atkins:** I was lucky to meet up with Walter Nugent. I was a girl from big Catholic family in South Dakota who liked school. I’d started college in 1968 and stood with one foot on each side of the earthquake that was cracking open *the* world and *my* world. Books by Michael Harrington, Rachel Carson, James Baldwin, Betty Friedan, and Ralph Nader formed my coming-of-age reading list. The thunder of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movements, the Women’s Movement, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, was shaking the foundations of the United States and blasting through college campuses and curricula. Everything seemed to be shifting—including me, but toward what I wasn’t clear.

I did well enough as an undergraduate at Southwest Minnesota State College to get into Indiana University in 1976 but not so well that I was offered a fellowship or money. I went anyway. Walter’s Modern America seminar was my first class in my first year. It astonished me. I don’t remember even what other courses I took. He assigned four books and several articles per week. It’s what we had to do to get up to speed! Ouch. But, by the end of that semester I had learned how to read like a graduate student. I was beginning to understand what it meant to be an historian. I’d become a fan of Walter Nugent.

Walter was chair of the history department that year. Seeing something in me the admissions committee had not seen, he found me money for the second semester and urged his buddy, Martin Ridge, to hire me on at the *Journal of American History*. That act of advocacy gave me a path through graduate school. More importantly, it gave me a glimpse into myself that was transformational. In my dissertation I thanked him for that glimpse, for the confidence it inspired, the hope it engendered, the possibilities it opened up. His faith in me and his loyalty and friendship sustained and inspired me through my career.

His own work and the trajectory of his career have also inspired me. The man I encountered in my IU years was in his international phase—Israel and Poland and Ireland (always Ireland). Thank you, IU for supporting his interests in International Studies. He was then transforming himself from the Walter T. K. Nugent of the *Tolerant Populists* into the Walter Nugent who would write *Into the West*, *Crossings*, and *Habits of Empire*. He was in the midst of lots of time abroad. He loved traveling, but more he loved

the wind that such experiences put under his wings, the greater perspective his travels allowed him, the better historian this perspective made him.

He was always a meticulous scholar—I laughed when I recently dug up his twenty-six page CV. What a record of recordkeeping even that was. That same careful, scrupulous attention to detail characterizes nearly all of his nineteen books, including his most recent, *Color Coded: Party Politics in the American West, 1950–2016* (2018). As the reviewer in the *American Historical Review* wrote: “the 55 pages of tables detailing the results of every presidential, House, Senate, and gubernatorial race in the western states ... between 1950 and 2016 ... is a marvel of patient and dogged scholarship. This alone would make Nugent’s book an invaluable companion for scholars of postwar Western politics.”

What I saw then and have admired especially in the years that followed was his drive for a wider, bigger, richer vision. Not content to know more about a particular subject, he wanted to know bigger and bigger about a lot of subjects and the networks that connected them, and the amazing repercussions forces and ideas and “habits” had on people’s—indeed nation’s—lives.

He wanted fuller pictures. And he painted them.

*The Tolerant Populists* was a focused, smart, important book. *Into the West* was a big book, ambitious, sweeping, in fact, ranging over 500 years and a West expansively defined. Alan Bogue called it “magnificent.” *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870–1914* was a bigger book again. *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion*—a wider book. And with other books in between and before and after, we see Walter always exploring, expanding, and growing.

To go back to that CV: He included there his work as church organist at St. Bride’s Church when he was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. He also included his personal labor of love *Making Our Way: A Family History of Nugents, Kings and Others*. He knew that he was made by the fullness of his past.

He—and his work—were made, too, by the fullness of his life: by how much he loved Ireland, including the novels of Benjamin Black, a good symphony, good food, golf, and a double Glenlivet. How much he loved Suellen. His children, now amazing adults, and his grandchildren. How much and for how long he loved Bernie Weisberger, his University of Chicago mentor, friend, and fellow-concert goer, and his colleague and friends Jim and Jeanne Madison. Dare I say it, how much he loved me. Finally, how much he loved the learning and doing of history and tried to harness its power for good.

In honor of all of that I want to quote an essay called “The Sense of the Past” by Irish poet Seamus Heaney that I think captures some notions about history that Walter practiced: “Breadth and refinement,” Heaney writes, “are two of the most desirable and valuable effects of education and our education towards these ends will be partly achieved by the contemplation of things mellowed by age.” This contemplation, in turn, will “emphasise the truth of the old catechism definition” that “My neighbour ... is all mankind.” Even though a knowledge of our ancestors may not solve all “problems,” concedes Heaney, “it could widen and clarify the lens through which we inspect the question of who we think we are.”

And the poet concludes: “Sensitivity to the past contributes to our lives in a necessary and salutary way. It is not just a temperamental or intellectual accident ... but a fundamental human gift that is potentially as life enhancing and civilising as our gift for love.”

Walter Nugent had a gift for love and a gift for history, for which I and we all, I’m sure, are truly grateful.

## Selected Works by Walter Nugent

### Books

*The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. First published in 1963 by University of Chicago Press.

*The Money Question during Reconstruction*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1967.

*Creative History: An Introduction to Historical Study*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1967.

*Money and American Society, 1865–1880*. New York: Free Press, 1968.

*Modern America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

*From Centennial to World War: American Society, 1876–1917*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977.

*Structures of American Social History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

*Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870–1914*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

*Into the West: The Story of Its People*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

*Making Our Way: A Family History of Nugents, Kings, and Others*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Print Services, 2003.

*Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

*Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

*Color Coded: Party Politics in the American West, 1950–2016*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018.

### Chapters in Books

“American Farmers and the Market Economy, 1880–1920.” In *Agricultural Distress in the Midwest, Past and Present*, edited by Lawrence E. Gelfand and Robert J. Neymeyer, 1–17. Iowa City: Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States, University of Iowa, 1986.

“City-Country Conflict in the Populist Movement.” In *Citta e Campagna nell’Éta Dorata: Gli Stati Uniti tra Utopia e Riforma*, edited by Valeria Gennaro Lerda, 49–60. Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1986.

“The People of the West since 1890.” In *The Twentieth-Century West: Historical Interpretations*, edited by Gerald Nash and Richard Etulain, 35–70. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

“Comparing Frontiers and Wests.” In *The Oxford History of the American West*, edited by Clyde A. Milner II, Carol O’Connor, and Martha Sandweiss, 803–33. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

“New-World Frontiers: Comparisons and Agendas.” In *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History*, edited by David J. Weber and Jane Rausch, 72–85. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994.

“Migration from the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires to North America.” In *The Cambridge Survey of World Migrations*, edited by Robin Cohen, 103–08. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

“Demographic Dimensions of European Migration Worldwide.” In *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives*, edited by Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, 70–89. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996.

“The Finding of the West.” In *Frontier and Region: Essays in Honor of Martin Ridge*, edited Robert C. Ritchie and Paul Andrew Hutton, 3–26. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

“Wallace Stegner, John Wesley Powell, and the Shrinking West.” In *Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision: Essays on Literature, History, and Landscape*, edited by Curt Meine, 97–106. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997.

“The Religious Demography of an Oasis Culture.” In *Religion and Public Life in the Mountain West*, edited by Jan Shipps and Mark Silk, 19–47. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004.

### Scholarly Articles

“Some Parameters of Populism.” *Agricultural History* 40 (October 1966): 255–70.

“The American People and the Centennial of 1876.” *Indiana Magazine of History* 75 (March 1979): 53–69.

“Tocqueville, Marx, and American Class Structure.” *Social Science History* 12 (Winter 1988): 327–47.

Suellen Hoy and Walter Nugent. “Public Health or Protectionism? The German-American Pork War, 1880–1891,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 63 (Summer, 1989): 198–224.

“Frontiers and Empires in the Late Nineteenth Century.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (November 1989): 393–408.

“Where Is the American West? Report on a Survey.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Summer 1992): 2–23.

“Western History, New and Not So New.” *OAH Magazine of History* 9 (Fall 1994): 5–9.

“Four New-World Migration Targets: Some Comparisons.” *Americastudien/American Studies* 42 (1997): 391–406.

“Welcome to the Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (January 2002): 7–9.

“Richard White’s Early Work.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 33 (Summer 2002): 138–42.

“Catholic Progressive? The Case of Judge E. O. Brown.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2 (January 2003): 5–47.

"The American Habit of Empire, and the Cases of Polk and Bush." *Western Historical Quarterly* 38 (Spring 2007): 5–24.

McMath, Robert C., Peter H. Argersinger, Connie L. Lester, Michael F. Magliari, Walter Nugent, and David B. Danbom. "Agricultural History Roundtable on Populism." *Agricultural History* 82 (Winter 2008): 1–35.

"Tanner Lecture: The Mormons and America's Empires." *Journal of Mormon History* 36 (Spring 2010): 1–27.

"Where Have All the Flowers Gone ... When Will They Ever Learn?" *Reviews in American History* 39 (March 2011): 205–11.

"Comments on Wyatt Wells, 'Rhetoric of the Standards: The Debate over Gold and Silver in the 1890s.'" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (January 2015): 69–76.

### About Walter Nugent

Walter T. K. Nugent Papers, 1823–2012. Indiana University Archives, Bloomington, Indiana.

Calhoun, Charles W. "Making History: The Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: A Retrospective View." *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (January 2002): 13–24.

Creech, Joe. "The Tolerant Populists and the Legacy of Walter Nugent." *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (January 2015): 141–49.

Beeby, James. "Review: The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism, 2nd ed.," *Agricultural History* 89 (Spring 2015): 306–07.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the OAH panel, Alan Lessoff's comments were read by Ann Durkin Keating, Dr. C. Frederick Toenniges Professor of History at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup> Walter, unsurprisingly, wrote a lengthy, politely skeptical review of Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity" Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See "From Founding Myth to False God," *North Carolina Historical Review* 66 (Apr. 1989): 233–37.

**William Deverell** is Professor of History, Spatial Sciences, and Environmental Studies at the University of Southern California and Director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. He is 2023 president of the Western History Association and author or editor of more than a dozen books, including *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (University of California Press, 2004), and *Railroad Crossing: Californians and the Railroad, 1850–1910* (University of California Press, 1996).

**Nancy C. Unger** is Professor of History at Santa Clara University and past president of the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Her books include *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

**Donna Gabaccia** is Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto, and past president of both the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era and the Social Science History Association. She is the author

or editor of more than a dozen books, including *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* (Princeton University Press, 2015), and *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (Rutgers University Press, 1988).

**Alan Lessoff** is University Professor of History at Illinois State University and a former editor of the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. His books include *Where Texas Meets the Sea: Corpus Christi and Its History* (University of Texas Press, 2015), and *The Nation and Its City: Politics, "Corruption," and Progress in Washington, D.C., 1861–1902* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

**Charles Postel** is Professor of History at San Francisco State University. His books include *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1866–1896* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019), and *The Populist Vision* (Oxford University Press, 2007), which won the Bancroft Prize in 2008.

**Annette Atkins** is Professor Emerita of History at College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in Minnesota. Her books include *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), and *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873–78* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984).