

# Albion's Seed

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**Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America** (America)

(Paperback)

by **David Hackett Fischer**

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## Book Description

**This book is the first volume in a cultural history of the United States, from the earliest English settlements to our own time. It is a history of American folkways as they have changed through time, and it argues a thesis about the importance for the United States of having been British in its cultural origins.**

**From 1629 to 1775, North America was settled by four great waves of English-speaking immigrants. The first was an exodus of Puritans from the east of England to Massachusetts (1629-1640). The second was the movement of a Royalist elite and indentured servants from the south of England to Virginia (ca. 1649-75). The third was the "Friends' migration,"--the Quakers--from the North Midlands and Wales to the Delaware Valley (ca. 1675-1725). The fourth was a great flight from the borderlands of North Britain and northern Ireland to the American backcountry (ca. 1717-75).**

**These four groups differed in many ways--in religion, rank, generation and place of origin. They brought to America different folkways which became the basis of regional cultures in the United States. They spoke distinctive English dialects and built their houses in diverse ways. They had different ideas of family, marriage and gender; different practices of child-naming and child-raising; different attitudes toward sex, age and death; different rituals of worship and magic; different forms of work and play; different customs of food and dress; different traditions of education and literacy; different modes of settlement and association. They also had profoundly different ideas of comity, order, power and freedom which derived from British folk-traditions. Albion's Seed describes those differences in detail, and discusses the continuing importance of their transference to**

**America.**

**Today most people in the United States (more than 80 percent) have no British ancestors at all. These many other groups, even while preserving their own ethnic cultures, have also assimilated regional folkways which were transplanted from Britain to America. In that sense, nearly all Americans today are "Albion's Seed," no matter what their ethnic origins may be; but they are so in their different regional ways. The concluding section of Albion's Seed explores the ways that regional cultures have continued to dominate national politics from 1789 to 1988, and still control attitudes toward education, government, gender, and violence, on which differences between American regions are greater than between European nations.**

**Albion's Seed also argues that the four British folkways created an expansive cultural pluralism that has proved to be more libertarian than any single culture alone could be. Together they became the determinants of a voluntary society in the United States.-- This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.**

### **Product Details**

**\* Paperback: 972 pages**

**\* Publisher: Oxford University Press; New Ed edition (March, 1991)**

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34 of 37 people found the following review helpful:

Reviewer: Stephen M. St. Onge "Stephen M. St. Onge" (Mpls, MN USA)

As with several other people, the biggest complaint I have with this book is that Prof. Fischer hasn't yet followed up with further works on U.S. cultural history.

But what's here is marvelous. Fischer traces the distinctive folkways and religious influence of the four great waves of English emigration to the American colonies, and shows how they combined to make modern USAmerica.

I have 19th century immigrant roots, and have never lived in the South or New England. I can't therefore confirm or dispute what Fischer and the various reviewers say about the distinctive regional U.S. differences that persist there today, and how they go back to the original English

immigrants. But as a modern USAmerican from California, I can see the various strands that make up our general culture in each of the four founding regions.

This is a long book, perhaps a bit too long, but I recommend it highly, and since discovering it I automatically read any book Fischer produces. I have yet to read a bad one by him. Now let's have further volumes in the series!

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13 of 14 people found the following review helpful:

Albion's Seed is Seminal in Understanding the USA!, March 15, 2004  
Reviewer: C. M Mills "Michael Mills" (Knoxville Tennessee)

Freedom's liberty tree is planted in the fertile soil of the many cultural groups who have made our land a "melting pot." In Fischer's brilliant work he traces with fascinating detail the transposition from Britain to the American colonies the folkways that have made each region distinctive. The four folk cultures he delineates are:

1. New England-the Puritans came from the East Anglia region of England. They were pious, hardworking and intoxicated with theology and order.

2. The Middle Colonies-the Quaker influence is profound in this region of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. William Penn and the followers of the Quaker founder George Fox were the most liberal minded of the quartet of folk cultures chronicled by Fischer. The Quaker culture was influential in the southwest and midland counties of Britain. Their belief in religious toleration has added much to American democracy.

3. The tidewater and coastal south was settled by southern English natives who were Cavaliers supportive of the Stuart dynasty. This society was hierarchical and based on honor and fueled by chattel slavery.

4. the backcountry region was settled by Englishmen from the northern border region of England, Scotland and Ulster Scotch-Irish. Exemplified by such paragons of this violent and emotional culture were men like Andrew Jackson and James Knox Polk. Composed of Hoosiers and Rednecks, Crackers and doughty pioneers this society believed in individual freedom.

The almost 1000 page book is filled with illustrations, population data and election results of Presidential elections which reflect how political choices

are reflected in the four major mass migrations made to America by Britishers.

While only about 20% of our nearly 300 million population has direct ties to British ancestry the British influence in America is profound-indeed formative in the formation of American society as it exists today with all its strengths and weaknesses.

This book is essential reading if one wants to understand many aspects of American history and life.

Hackett-Fisher is an esteemed historian and with this work is legacy is assured in American historiography for generations to come.

Excellent!

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3 of 3 people found the following review helpful:

Reviewer: Leonard J. Wilson (VA United States)

Albion's Seed by Brandeis University History Professor David Hackett Fischer is the history of the four main regional migrations from Britain to North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Professor Fischer examines each of these four migrations in great detail, describing the origin, motivations, religion, timing, and numerous cultural attitudes or folkways for dealing with everyday life, including birth, child rearing, marriage, age, death, order, speech, architecture, dress, food, wealth, and time, to cite only a few. He devotes special attention to the different concepts of liberty and freedom held by each of these four British cultural groups.

The first major wave consisted predominantly of the Puritans from East Anglia who settled in New England between 1629 and 1640, the years immediately preceding the English Civil War in which Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan army defeated and beheaded King Charles I.

The second wave consisted of defeated (or soon to be defeated) supporters of the king and the Established (Anglican) Church of England, primarily from the south and west of England, who settled in the Chesapeake Bay regions of Virginia and Maryland between 1642 and 1675.

The third wave was the migration of Quakers from the English midlands (and their religious kin from various German sects) who settled in the Delaware Valley (southeast Pennsylvania, west New Jersey, north Delaware) between 1675 and 1615.

Finally, the "Scotch-Irish", referring collectively to immigrants from the north of England, lowland Scotland, and Ulster, settled the Appalachian

backcountry from Pennsylvania southwest through Virginia, the Carolinas, and into Tennessee and Kentucky from 1717 to 1775. Less homogenous in religion than the prior waves, the Scotch-Irish were a mixture of Presbyterians, the dominant group, and Anglicans, a significant minority.

Each of these four folk established an amazingly enduring culture in their region, a culture that successfully incorporated later immigrants from other origins who shared little or none of the dominant folkway that had become established in their new home. Their contrasting concepts of liberty are among the most visible today. The Puritan concept of liberty, "ordered liberty" in Fischer's terminology, focused on the "freedom" to conform to the policies of the Puritan Church and local government. The Virginia concept of liberty, "hegemonic liberty", was hierarchical in nature, ranging from the great freedom of those in positions of power and wealth down to the total lack of freedom accorded to slaves. The Quaker concept of liberty, "reciprocal liberty", focused on the aspects of freedom that were held equally by all people as opposed to the unequal and asymmetric freedoms of the Puritans and Virginians. Finally, the Scotch-Irish concept of liberty, "natural liberty", focused on the natural rights of the individual and his freedom from government coercion.

Albion's Seed was a delight to read, filled with quaint, instructive, and amusing anecdotes that reflect folkways that endure today. It should be equally appealing to those interested in defining and contrasting the cultural histories of different groups, the process and cultural impact of human migrations, the foundations of the Anglo-American world, and the different roots of the concept of liberty.

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6 of 6 people found the following review helpful:  
Reviewer: Harold Y. Grooms (Prattville, AL USA)

In, *Albion's Seed*, author David Hackett Fischer traces the origins of four major immigrations to America and shows how cultural norms were transplanted from various parts of England to America. He theorizes the folkways they brought with them explain how and why different regions in America developed as they did. He believes they are still having an impact today.

The first migration was the Puritans. They emanated from Southeast England from 1629 until 1641 and settled in the Massachusetts area. Strict, pious, and extremely frugal, they fled religious persecution in England only to deny religious liberty to all but their own in New England.

The second were the, "Distressed Cavaliers and Indentured Servants," who left Southwest England between 1642 and 1675 settling principally in Virginia. The ruling elite, primarily the second sons of noblemen, brought with them the sense of pride and honor of which so many Southern legends are told.

Third were the, "Friends," commonly called, "Quakers," who settled in Pennsylvania from 1675-1725. Emanating from the northern midlands, they were tolerant, hard working men and women who eschewed violence as they followed the, "inner light," they believed indwelled all mankind.

Last were the Scotch-Irish who settled what was called, "the back country." Coming from the northern borderlands of England, these people brought a fierce pride and a warrior ethic that translated into many blood feuds in what is now Appalachia.

Fischer theorizes this pattern of regionalism persists to this day. He cites as evidence the fact that political candidates must seek to appeal to more than one region if they hope to be elected nationally. George Bush's and Jimmy Carter's elections are two examples.

This work first came to my attention when it was used as a reference in upper level history classes. While it is long, (898 pages plus the index with numerous footnotes), it is a valuable asset to anyone seriously studying how and why things have developed as they have in this nation. I strongly recommend it to any serious student of the history or sociology of this nation. Five Stars!!

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4 of 7 people found the following review helpful:

Brilliant with one inexplicable flaw, March 9, 2005  
Reviewer: Historian (Arlington Heights, IL)

Turning the "Turner thesis" somewhat on its ear this work is every bit as groundbreaking as it is hyped to be. I have seached and struggled for years to explain regional differences with no satisfaction until now. Four separate and distinct sections of the east were settled at different times by four very distinct British "tribes" which adapted uniquely to their new environments. The meddling materialist yankee, the bland egalitarian Quaker, the dignified cavalier and the untamed rebel are dissected and evaluated from every significant social angle. This is social history at its best.

And why not. Fischer even has the stones to write a book entitled "Historians' Fallacies" which I am presently reading. In it he sets out to set other historians straight on the various wrong routes they have taken. Perhaps it will explain the gaping hole in his *Albion's Seed*. I specifically refer to the total and complete absence of New England's role in the slave trade, and how it was developed and harnessed as the capital engine for the regions' industrial revolution. I continue to be astounded at the amnesia, blind eye or delusion that plagues even our "best" historians on the institution which, you guessed it, Fischer pretty much blamed on the Virginians.

OK, so nobody is perfect. Realize the book has this one enormous flaw and read it anyway.

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20 of 29 people found the following review helpful:

Five stars are not enough, February 7, 2005

Reviewer: A curious reader

A Rosetta stone: fits the definition of genius, in that it makes the obscure obvious. Writing *Albion's Seed* must have been a serious strain, which shows in a few places. Yet the book is a masterpiece. As someone else wrote, it's like reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* or Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. It's gratifying to see so many positive reviews of *Albion's Seed* on Amazon, because it is a non-PC history that some people might take offense at. The book deftly steers around the shrill excess of multicultural history. It also represents a serious and largely successful attack on the 20th-century revisionist-materialist theories of history that have done so much damage to American historiography and the teaching of history. On a theoretical level, these are Fischer's real target, and he takes them down beautifully. His explanation of the rise of slavery in the tidewater Chesapeake should be drilled into every history graduate student, since there's so much nonsense that's been written on the subject. (The tidewater South was the Royalist-cavalier utopia of the disinherited younger sons. The South created slavery, not vice-versa, and its creation was a conscious, deliberate act, not a result of imaginary "blind economic forces.") Although Fischer is not a conservative, the book's message is the essential conservative truth about society: culture is (usually) more important than politics.

Unless you understand Fischer's larger point about pluralism and competing notions of freedom and the public good, you won't understand

America. If you think it's irrelevant today, just overlay a national map of the "four culture" derivatives with the "red-blue" electoral maps the media incessantly chatters about, with zero understanding. Fischer's gift for making vividly concrete what would otherwise be deadly abstractions serves the reader especially well here. The Puritan conception (the origin of modern liberalism) is ordered freedom, with everyone smothered in lots of rules. (After the twisting of the Puritan legacy by the likes of Mencken and Arthur Miller, Fischer's corrective presentation of what they were about is alone worth the price of the book.) The Quaker conception is reciprocal, mutual forbearance - libertarian. And so on.

Another sign of genius: the implications of the book, which could easily serve as a basis for decades to come of graduate theses. Many Fischer does not mention or only mentions in passing. One is the role of non-Anglo minorities operating within the four-cultures template, the most important being black Americans. Mixed Anglo and African by ancestry, they are nonetheless completely American in culture and religion. Forced by slavery and racism to operate at the margins of society, they absorbed and re-created for themselves the two Southern cultures of tidewater and upland. Liberated from slavery by the two middle class Northern cultures of Puritan and Quaker, they nevertheless remain culturally more like white Southerners than anyone else. Read Kevin Phillips' very interesting *The Cousins' Wars: The Triumph of Anglo-America* for more about this.

Another is the existence of smaller "niche" cultures that Fischer barely mentions, the most important being the niche centered around New Amsterdam/New York. This area was already a polyglot standout in colonial times, dominated by a mix of Dutch Calvinists, French Huguenots, and Anglos. The later emergence of New York as a non-Anglo immigrant mecca cannot be understood apart from its earlier colonial history. Then there are the two colonial Catholic niches of Louisiana and Maryland, more relaxed versions of Southern tidewater culture.

I've lived all over the US, in all four culture zones, and what Fischer outlines is very real. I am descended on my father's side from the Anglo-Scottish borders. Here's an often misunderstood culture - carefully distinguish it from the culture of poor whites of the Southern lowlands. Fischer does a superb job of explaining it as a result of the insecurity and anarchy of northern Britain and Ireland in early modern times. (This culture includes, but is not limited to, the Scots-Irish Presbyterians, the fiercest border type. Other types include the Anglo-Scottish and Anglo-Irish.) In such cultures, a man's measure is not what he owns, but how well he can fight. A leader's measure is his charisma and the protection



he provides to his followers, both blood relatives and adoptees. Honor and shame are everything. See, e.g., Rob Roy. Since there was no effective government, each man, or more precisely, each clan, was its own law. Contrary to a common misconception, this has nothing to do with slavery - a silly idea, since few border people in America ever owned slaves. Their relations with the Indians are more interesting, since many Indian nations were themselves similar - warlike, insecure, taciturn, and stoic - women very subordinated and doing all the work, while the men did the fighting and lacked a strong work ethic. The type of leader produced by this culture - the classic examples are Andrew Jackson and James Polk - is populist, but only in the sense that his followers acclaim him, not vice versa.

The White House is currently inhabited by a cartoon version of this very culture. The dried-out, eldest son of wealthy Connecticut Yankees reinvents his sorry ass as a populist border chieftan - pathetic. If Andrew Jackson or Lyndon Johnson were alive today, they'd be spinning in their graves :) Another interesting study would be how the borders culture moved into conflict with the Southern tidewater culture in the 19th century, mainly because of slavery, but then into alliance in the 20th century, because of a common opposition to growing government, albeit for different reasons.

Fischer only touches on the later co-evolution and hybridization of these four seed cultures. He does discuss Lincoln at some length as a hybrid of Puritan and Quaker, and Reagan as a hybrid of border-Irish and English. He also touches briefly on the later branching of the borders culture into two streams, the rugged individualism of the Far West and the cattle-ranching culture of the Southwest, under Spanish influence. Finally, the culture of the upper Mid West and the Northwest is strongly influenced by seeding from New England and the Quakers. (There is a Scandinavian influence as well, but partly and surprisingly through the Quakers themselves - see Fischer.) The Left Coast would be horrified to discover the Puritans among its spiritual ancestors. But so it is.

To close: Fischer's admiration for the Quakers. After you absorb this culture and its Midlands English dialect, it will be obvious which of the four seed cultures dominates middle class America today: commerce, philanthropy, and forms of local government; attitudes towards literacy, education, and children; relations between the sexes; religious pluralism; and the standard "middle" (mid-Atlantic) American speech. Much that is wrongly attributed to the Puritans is really due to the Quakers. William Penn was a remarkable man, and it's not an accident that his 17th-

century Midlands prose is easy for a modern American to read. The Quakers' reciprocal liberty is just an application of the Golden Rule, yet it is sad that what many people want for themselves they often fail to extend to others. The Quaker culture is the one that a modern American could be transported back into with the least disorientation. And yet Penn and his Quakers are given too little attention in American history books, which tend to be consumed with Puritans and Virginians and their quarrel over slavery - Roundheads and Cavaliers again. That's a pity.

NOTE: Go to C-SPAN's BookTV Web site and find the Fischer interview. Worth your three hours.

