James C. Malin, Optimist: The Basis of His Philosophy of History

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HISTORIANS who wrote about James Claude Malin both before and after his death on January 26, 1979, generally agreed that he was a profound student of history whose writings were largely unknown to a majority of his contemporaries. Whether they attributed this lack of awareness to Malin’s writing style, which some have considered laborious and difficult to follow; to his decision to publish his own books, thus forfeiting a publisher’s advertising; or to his unorthodox mannerisms and ideas, which made him seem anachronistic and at times antagonistic, all believed his work was worthy of being known and considered by a much wider audience. Moreover, they assessed him as one of the outstanding historical minds of our time.¹

Like other, more popular, and better-known students of the American West, such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb, Malin was a native son of the region he analyzed. Born in Edgeley, North Dakota, on February 8, 1893, he lived more than seventy-five years in Kansas, having been educated in that state’s private and public schools. He was graduated with the Ph.D. in history from the University of Kansas in 1921 and stayed on to teach history there until his retirement in 1963. During this period and until his death he published sixteen books, ninety-three articles, and scores of book reviews.² One posthumous volume, Power and Change in Society, with Special Reference to Kansas, 1880-1890, has been published (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1981).

The corpus of Malin’s work gave him a reputation as a historian of a region, the grasslands area of the United States. It caused Professor Thomas Le Duc, who was impressed by Malin’s historical methodology, to describe him in 1950 as an ecologist, perhaps the first historian to write as an ecologist.³ But James Malin was more than a regionalist or a human ecologist. As a scholar he reached beyond region, beyond plant-animal-environmental relationships; he reached for universal truth, and in so doing he moved widely across time and space in search of comparative examples and explanations to illustrate his views. He wrote not in the grand style of Arnold J. Toynbee discussing the whole of the past, but in an equally edifying manner of considering the past as a whole. In this way he concentrated on single events or brief phases in history and explored them in depth, unlike Toynbee, who surveyed thousands of years. But, in Malin’s published research, he was often a philosopher or a philosopher of history much like Toynbee. In many respects his philosophical expressions were his most important contributions as a historian; certainly they represent the part of his writing that may withstand the changes of time.

This essay is concerned with Malin as a philosopher of history. It is not a discussion of the totality of his philosophical position; it is, rather, a discussion of one aspect of his phi-

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² Williams, “James C. Malin—In Memoriam,” p. 65.

James C. Malin (1893-1979), a professor of history at the University of Kansas (1921-1963), has been assessed as one of the outstanding historical minds of our time.
losophy: his optimism. It tries to show that Malin's optimism was predicated on his view of the individual in history and as such can be seen as a centralizing force in his thought. Naturally this belief in an intense individualism which views man as a competent being conditioned much of what he published. Of course, James C. Malin would have cringed at being labeled an optimist, since this would imply an emotional rather than an intellectual position. In fact, during an oral history interview in 1972, when Gould P. Coleman of Cornell University asked him if he was an optimist, he answered by saying that most people seemed to consider him a pessimist.  

To be sure, whatever his views, the optimism he expressed was neither that of a Condorcet nor an Émile Coué. Although Malin discussed the concept of the "perfectibility of man" on several occasions, he did not subscribe to what the philosophers meant by that phrase. Nor did he embrace the notion of the 1920s, that "every day in every way things are getting better and better." Basically an optimist, he was assuredly not Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss.  

TO HAVE SEEN James Malin as he moved slowly along the corridors of Strong Hall at the University of Kansas in the 1950s, his brow furrowed, his shoulders slumped, his mood pensive and seemingly troubled, one would never have believed that someone would describe him as an optimist. To have heard him berate contemporaries in scholarship for their misconceptions and publishers for their faddish editorial demands, to have listened as he complained about the cliquish behavior of the historical profession and the narrow practices followed in selecting officers of historical associations, one could not have concluded that these were the comments of an optimist.  

But to read his works, to understand his historiography, and to know his views can only lead one to the conclusion that few serious thinkers have had as optimistic an understanding of man as he. Stated simply, James Malin was an optimist because he believed that above all else man, and man only, was the primary force controlling human destiny.  

Anyone familiar with the historical debate in the 1940s regarding objective and subjective history knows that Malin was probably the most persistent and combative of the so-called "historical objectivists." He was an "objective relativist." 5 Unlike those whom he described as "subjective relativists," Malin believed that history could and should be written in a way that presents and analyzes the past as it actually happened, or, to be precise, as nearly as the historian could ascertain it had happened. He did not believe that an inevitable presentism, bias, or series of psychological quirks kept man from realizing this goal. His belief that objectivity was possible was predicated on his view of the individual, or, rather, on his belief that history indicated man was an active being with a recognizable essence.  

A brief synthesis cannot, of course, do justice to all of Malin's views, but one can say with certainty that he believed objective history could be written because man's innate rationality provided the means necessary for accurate and critical observation of the past. Malin was certain of this epistemological position because his study of the past had proven to him that "beyond a reasonable doubt" man was a rational, empirical being. Thus, Malin arrived at his philosophical position through a somewhat circular logic. He believed that history taught that man could be objective, therefore some men could, and did, write objective history. As one of those men, Malin was certain that his knowledge of history proved he was correct, that he possessed some truth concerning man's ability to write objectively about the past. 6  

This belief was aided by what he saw as philosophical inconsistencies and weak logic in the views expressed by the subjective rela-

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5. "Objective relativist" is the best phrase to describe Malin's position. Although Malin believed accuracy was clearly possible when the historian dealt with detail, he thought that at some point when stating broad generalizations a historian's ability to know cosmic reality did not function. He likened his view to the opposite of the physicist Werner Heisenberg's position on uncertainty. Heisenberg argued that in large generalities concerning the natural world certainty was realized, but in the minutiae of subatomic structure it was not. A religious man, Malin was not a dogmatist, as is noted later in this paper.  
6. Malin stated this position as an "objectivist" in many of his writings, but his most comprehensive discussion is found in Malin, On the Nature of History: Essays about History and Disgust (Lawrence: By the author, 1954), pp. 1-40.
activists. For example, Carl Becker had asserted that order did not exist in the universe. Malin often quoted Becker's statement that man was nothing more than a chance deposit, "a foundling in the cosmos." Malin joined Becker's statement to ideas in the writings of John Dewey and Charles A. Beard. This trio, he asserted, had supplied the intellectual underpinnings of the Social Science Research Council's bulletins numbers 54 and 64, papers he took to be the ultimate current statements of subjective relativism.

On the basis of these sources Malin contended that while the subjective relativists viewed the universe as unordered or chaotic, they also argued that man imposed order in time and space. Order was what the historian created or imposed on the past. Malin pointed to the fallacy of subjective relativism concerning the presence of order in history by asking whether the mind, since it was obviously part of the universe, was of the same quality as the universe. If it was, Malin wondered how an unordered entity such as the mind could exist and function, supply a criterion for judging reality, and order all other unordered entities in the universe as it did when historians created the past. If the mind was not unordered, from whence and how did it acquire its property of order? Reality could not be considered chaos and still be composed in part, as it was in the view of the subjective relativist, of a mind that created order. Whence came the very knowledge that order as imposed by the mind was order? With little discussion, Malin posited that order in the natural or social world resulted from the act of the "Great Creator." This was true whether it was the "objective order" Malin claimed or the subjective order imposed by the subjective relativist. "No man," he wrote, "can escape from God." Admitting that neither reason nor science could prove or disprove God's existence, he claimed that both could be used to determine ideas about God—the idea, for example, that God as the source of order gave man the means to find order in the world, past and present.

That subjective relativism was part of the twentieth-century trend of agnosticism did not seem to bother Malin greatly; what did trouble him were the pessimistic and unreal views he felt it promoted. Rather than appealing to man's intelligence, subjective relativism as an explanation of the nature of knowledge appealed to the psychological dimension of man, the psychological understanding which Sigmund Freud, his counterparts, and their defenders had popularized. In a thumbnail description of the tenets of subjective relativism, Malin claimed that its proponents held that all understanding depended on the observer's state of mind, that history was thought, and that thought was only in the mind of the observer. Thus, in a real sense, the true subjective relativist believed that not only could he create written history but that in the process he could recreate the literal past, much as Carl Degler claimed he could do in his presidential address in 1980 to the Organization of American Historians.

MALIN VIEWED the subjective relativists' assertions that they could literally remake the past as intellectually absurd and politically dangerous in a democracy—absurd because they denied common sense, dangerous because they formed the basis for history and social studies that Malin viewed as the tools of propagandists. He compared subjective history in its methodology to the history written in the Soviet Union or in Hitlerian Germany. Malin thought that subjective relativists in America were converting history into a mere policymaking activity, rather than upholding it as an intellectual discipline. Their real interest lay not in discovering past reality, which they denied, but in wielding power. He believed that history as policy making defined and attained truth only in a pragmatic sense—"that which works is truth, truth is that which works." Thus, the subjec-

10. Ibid., p. 17; Essays on Historiography, pp. 109-110.
tive relativists sought a usable past—a past rooted in a meaningless tautology.\textsuperscript{13}

When subjective relativists asserted that the mind determined historical thought and that history was nothing more than individual thought, Malin claimed they were stating in effect that a historian \textit{literally} remade the past. As a policy matter the past became important to the subjective relativist because it conditioned and to a great extent justified programs for the present. Of course, any historian would agree that the past to some degree conditions the present, but for most historians it is a past that developed in the past, not the present, and in that manner influences the present. Malin concluded that what was really meant by the subjective relativists was that the past should be described in a way that would promote a policy decided upon by groups hoping to direct current and future affairs. Malin believed history should have no such immediate purpose. History was not teleological in a secular, ideological sense. He argued that in the final analysis there could be no use for historical scholarship beyond intellectual enterprise.\textsuperscript{14} His assertion that history was "useless" shocked and disappointed many historians.

Of course, Malin's history was useful to him. It was the bedrock of his humanistic optimism. Despite what often seemed discouraging data in the books he wrote about John Brown, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, or public policy in the United States during the 1920s, Malin persisted in retaining and developing his optimistic philosophy of history with man as its

\textsuperscript{13} On the Nature of History, p. 251; Essays on Historiography, pp. 110-124.

\textsuperscript{14} On the Nature of History, p. 77.
hinge. But his persistence in this respect was not mere obstinacy. What might seem discouraging at first glance fits nicely with Malin’s rationalistic epistemology. That man is a rational animal does not necessarily exclude a rationality that is occasionally flawed. Men make mistakes, but are also reasonable. This or that set of events could indicate men going astray, while events taken as a whole, in the long run, could and did indicate a general reasonableness and creativity.

In developing his complete view of the nature of man, Malin drew not only on historical research but also on a variety of thinkers ranging from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to a technologist, Henry Carey, and a pioneer soil scientist, E. W. Hilgard. One of Malin’s most descriptive and moving expressions regarding man and man’s capacity was presented in an essay entitled “The Historian and the Individual.” He wrote:

The human individual . . . possesses a contriving brain; insatiable intellectual curiosity, regardless of utility; a memory, the power to reason; the capacity to order facts for a long-range utilization; purpose; the will to make decisions and a capacity to execute them in subtle ways. All of these qualities are possessed by man at an order of magnitude which differentiates him absolutely from other animals.

Although Malin described mankind in general terms in many of his publications, it was the individual in all of his unique actions and capacities whom he emphasized, each person differing from every other one. This uniqueness provided a dignity for the individual which no other species of plant or animal possessed. It justified and required that every man be free to exercise his abilities to their utmost, since each was sui generis. This belief in the uniqueness of the individual made Malin an adamant opponent of whatever limited human liberty. He opposed discrimination whether it was religious, racial, political, or manifest in any other fashion. There was to him no yardstick by which to measure unique human beings; there was no master race that could claim superiority, no elite among unique beings, and no equality either. “Uniqueness,” he wrote, “cannot be compared. It is not superior, equal, or inferior to anything.”

He believed that the proper study of history demonstrated the singular character of each person and justified human liberty because no one individual could possibly supply in exactly the same way the same thing to humankind. Each person made available achievements that were necessarily unlike those of any other. Thus, all should be free to contribute to the collective pool of human accomplishment.

Malin was not impressed by some of his contemporaries’ views of freedom, especially the concept of freedom popularized by Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt in his four freedoms address. Malin found Roosevelt’s four freedoms based on middleheaded thinking and capable of keeping man from truly exercising his liberty. He cited a cartoonist who had pictured the four freedoms (freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear) being enjoyed by animals locked in cages at a zoo. Malin’s idea of freedom was that of the priests of Delphi in the year 200 B.C. To realize his potential the individual had to be protected in the four ancient Greek freedoms, which Malin described as (1) a protected legal status in society, (2) personal inviolability—freedom from seizure or arrest, (3) freedom of economic activity, and (4) the right of unrestricted movement in space.

Given these freedoms to realize his potential, the individual possessed the capacity to achieve impressive results. “The historian,” Malin wrote, “. . . must acquire a high respect for the intelligence that is represented in the structure of human culture.” That man could not know a priori the extent of his capacity to achieve results was a limitation of human knowledge. He could understand his potential only after he had performed a creative act that carried him to a further level of accomplishment. Malin rejected the concept

17. Ibid., pp. 146-162. Much of what Malin says here is repeated throughout his other works, but this essay is an excellent brief statement of his views on the individual. See, also, On the Nature of History, p. 64.
of perfectibility, stating that the individual "is endowed with a potentiality limited only by act on his part, and act is conditioned only by his own potentiality." During the last years of his life, reacting perhaps to various grandiose theories regarding man, Malin cautioned that man as a "link in the chain of existence" should not "get glorified ideas of his own importance."

Despite this caveat, Malin's views of the individual and of the nature of man caused him to become involved in another controversy, this one with that group of historians commonly known as Turnerians—those who adhered to Frederick Jackson Turner's ideas as expressed in his frontier interpretation of American history. Malin objected to what he described as their philosophy of geographical determinism. Given Malin's commitment to the singularity of the individual, he was understandably opposed to all determinism. He believed that any theme of single causation in history was wrong, especially a theory that depended on one impersonal force which was allegedly capable of marshaling men to action without individual choice. He inveighed not only against Turnerian determinists but also against Halford J. Mackinder, Alfred T. Mahan, Josiah Strong, and others.

That Malin linked Turnerian writings with subjective relativism seems a bit incredible on the surface. The latter stressed the uncertainty of knowledge, the former stressed the absolute determinist quality of truth. The common ground which Malin found for these ideas was their instrumentalist union in twentieth-century collectivist liberalism and in its specific American manifestation, Roosevelt's New Deal.

Malin saw collectivist liberalism and the New Deal as rejections of individualism, as a denigration of the ability of the common man to deal with his problems intelligently and competently. New Dealers had become convinced that the nation's problems could only be solved by collectivist action. The state, guided by an intellectual elite, a "brain trust," would do for ordinary Americans what hitherto they had done for themselves. Subjective relativism and Turner's frontier thesis in part supplied the intellectual structure for this collectivism and the New Deal.

Subjective relativism had destroyed for many their faith in the capacity of the individual, now considered incapable of knowing truth and unable to make rational decisions—a biased, prejudiced foundling abandoned by the physical forces that created him, a foundling of the cosmos. The frontier thesis denied that the individual had ever counted for much. If the Turnerians were right, and if Malin was correct regarding Turnerian opinion, the frontier had made possible the moments of opportunity and achievement Americans had experienced. But Turner claimed the frontier had ended, and, with its closing, opportunity had begun to disappear. Turner had suggested that government action could replace the frontier, but some of his followers, Malin stated, went further and argued that a planned society was the only alternative to the crisis of a closed frontier.

Malin needed only to explain one other historical development in order to link subjective relativism and the frontier thesis as common supports for key collectivist ideas. Both subjective relativism and the closed frontier thesis negated individualism, a belief in the ability of the common man. Modern collectivists likewise held that elitism, government by skilled bureaucrats, was the only way twentieth-century problems could be solved. Malin argued that during the nineteenth century informally trained amateurs had governed. The impact of the machine, however, had thrust cultural leadership into the hands of formally trained scientists and technologists, men allegedly skilled in the mastery of modern social forces. When amateurs constituted America's leadership, a largely democratically selected cadre drawn from the pool of common men existed. But modern technocrats were formally trained, a method of selection that necessarily

24. When questioned by Coleman about whether he was an opponent of "planning," Malin replied that he was opposed to erroneous, misguided planning. Coleman interview, p. 109. Those who took Malin's Trans-Mississippi West course at the University of Kansas will remember that he was especially kind in his comments concerning the Mormons' activity in the Southwest and that he lauded their cooperative planning.
winned the leadership group to a smaller body of experts.

This seemingly necessary elitism was heralded in the early twentieth century by some of the nation's most prominent writers, intellectuals such as Walter Lippmann and Thorstein Veblen and political writers such as Herbert Croly. Small wonder that the public increasingly accepted leadership by a trained few. That subjective relativists and closed-frontier theorists should generally agree with this collectivist view was to Malin an obvious antinomy. That irrational man could have his society planned for him in a rational way by an elite who through formal training transcended the human predicament of irrationality was to Malin a contradiction. Moreover, equality, generated by the frontier experience, was to be preserved now by the application of the skills of an elite, a brain trust. This, too, he viewed as a paradox.26

Malin was recognized as a leading critic of the frontier thesis, and a great deal that he wrote in studies such as The Grasslands of North America, Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas, and The Contriving Brain and the Skillful Hand do help disprove that seminal interpretation. Yet Malin published very little that was a direct, point-by-point refutation of Turner's thesis. He endorsed the works of other historians such as Fred Shannon, Fulmer Mood, and Lee Benson who took Turner's generalizations and evidence and directed them against the Turner thesis. Malin

claimed that his contribution to anti-Turnerian literature was the recognition that the Turner thesis was part of the closed-space philosophy which emerged in the writings of several scholars at the end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{27}

In stressing the frontier's influence in directing history and in stating that the close of the frontier in the 1890s meant that an epoch of America's past had ended, Malin argued that Turner was preparing the way for the acceptance of a closed-space view of history. What was to replace the frontier as the determinant of a unique American past? Obviously America's history and the national character would change fundamentally as a result of the ending of a frontier of free land. But neither Turner nor, more especially, his students wanted a fundamental change from the egalitarian democracy they claimed the frontier had made. Thus, they posited that the state, through planning, could replace the fading frontier as the agent of egalitarian democracy. This notion itself was an abandonment of the determinism upon which Turner rested his ideas.

Malin pointed out the illogic and the inconsistency of such a view. Assuming that this impersonal force and not men had been the major factor in creating American society, how was it that men through government could suddenly overwhelm the influence of a closed frontier? Malin stated that if man could determine his destiny in the twentieth century despite a closed frontier, then he could determine it, and had, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries during the open frontier. If he could not, then all man might do after the close of the frontier would come to nothing.\textsuperscript{28}

Of course, Malin was certain that man, not an impersonal force, should be viewed as the pivot of history. He was not oblivious to the fact that open space was of importance in historical change. He recognized that the frontier, which he defined and used more precisely than Turner as an area of "unoccupied space," had to be viewed as one factor in the nation's past, but not as the single, overriding factor and certainly not as both place and process as Turner had done. The frontier, or open space, had helped to shape what men did, but it was not the main determinant of human action.\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{MAN HAD INTERACTED} with space throughout history in ways that led Malin to endorse some of the ideas of economist Henry Carey regarding what Carey called "latency" in the earth's properties. Malin's research had proven Carey's concept, the view that the earth possessed all the materials man needed for continued existence.\textsuperscript{30} This belief conditioned Malin's opinion regarding conservation. He conceived of the problem of conservation not as one of a shortage of raw materials, but as one of a possible failure of man's ability to create natural resources out of raw materials. Malin defined a natural resource as material found in nature which man through his creative science and technology had made useful. Of themselves, raw materials were of little or no value, but man using his creativity devised technologies to make natural resources out of them. For example, uranium, a raw material, was of no use to the Navajo, but to modern atomic physicists it was of great value as a natural resource.\textsuperscript{31}

Malin did recognize the possibility of technological lag, a time period during which a specific resource might be depleted before a technology was developed to provide a substitute resource. But as long as man was free to choose and to create, he would ultimately bend nature to his use. There would be some ecological blunders, but normally folk creativity had provided and would provide for

\textsuperscript{27} Along with many others among Malin's publications, one can consult \textit{On the Nature of History}, pp. 99-100, and \textit{Essays on Historiography}, pp. 11-13. Despite his advocacy of an "open system" world view, in 1972 Malin said that he did not have the same confidence in this position that he had once held. He noted that perhaps biological change was not open-ended, but still he held change to be open-ended in the realm of technology. Malin believed change created what he called various "magnitudes of history," which were similar to what others have called historical epochs, although Malin saw no discernible direction (or progress) in his "magnitudes." Coleman interview, pp. 16-17. In the introduction to his posthumous volume \textit{Power and Change in Society}, pp. 7-25, Malin provides an excellent brief insight into his philosophy of history and the historical process as he uncovered it.

\textsuperscript{28} Essays on Historiography, pp. 39-40.

\textsuperscript{29} Malin, "Mobility and History: Reflections on the Agricultural Policies of the United States in Relation to a Mechanized World," \textit{Agricultural History}, v. 17, no. 4 (October, 1943), pp. 177-178. The frontier as a conditioning factor among many factors is mentioned in a variety of Malin's studies not cited here. For an excellent bibliography of Malin's publications, see Burton J. Williams, ed., \textit{Essays in American History in Honor of James C. Malin} (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1973), pp. 230-250.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{The Contriving Brain}, pp. 291-293. Malin's entire discussion of Carey reveals that he used Carey's ideas extensively in formulating his own thought, see pp. 258-290.

\textsuperscript{31} On the Nature of History, pp. 108-111.
needed adaptation. Malin glorified folk wisdom; he believed that all great inventions had resulted from experimentation and adaptation by common men over extended periods of time. He most often cited the agricultural technologies devised by ordinary Kansas farmers as evidence of his position's validity. 32

Because of the ability of the common man to shape his environment, Malin viewed modern conservationists—as opposed to naturalists whose preservationist program he sometimes favored—as being too pessimistic. "There can be no such thing," he wrote, "as the exhaustion of the natural resources of any area of the earth unless positive proof can be adduced that no possible technological 'discovery' can ever bring to the horizon of utilization any remaining property of the area." 33 Such positive proof, of course, could never be presented regarding future development. Only the loss of creativity could cause resource depletion, and, according to Malin, "historical experience points to an undetermined release to man of . . . 'new resources' as he becomes technologically capable of their utilization." 34 Malin did not anticipate any final catastrophe for man, but he recognized that the possibility for it existed. He was far less worried by the potential for destruction that lay in the atom than he was by the disaster inherent in a totalitarian society which inhibited or forbade free, human creativity. That he discussed possible dooms did not mean he awaited it. Malin believed a kind of equilibrium existed in nature that might negate a doomsday. Recognizing that change was continuous, he ruled out any pattern in change except that of "a tendency toward equilibrium or a 'steady state.'" "No process," he claimed, "seemed destined to run out to the bitter-end catastrophe." 35

This idea of equilibrium in history sounds very much like a law of history. Not so, said Malin. A search for laws in history in the sense of laws in science or jurisprudence was futile. Nonetheless, Malin had discovered four principles in history. They were not all the principles that might exist, but the four he had "discovered" were validated by his study. He explained these principles as elements which man had found useful in his continued adjustment to the world. They were (1) change and variation in time and space, (2) organization in all things, (3) continuity subject to partial interruption, and (4) individualism. 36 The first three principles supplied order and comprehensible pattern in human relationships to environment and society. The last principle, and by the far the one Malin was most interested in, underlay the process of succession in society and imparted "a practical meaning to freedom, opportunities, and fluidity of social structures." 37

Malin's view of the nature of man and of the individual no doubt changed during his lifetime. To trace such changes through the many decades that he lived, and across the thousands of words that he wrote, would be a formidable but a rewarding task. One thing, however, that never changed was his immense and impressive respect for man, not so much man the abstract being, but man the unique individual. Malin claimed that historians could not predict the future, but what he said of man, of the individual, of his creativity and adaptability, indicated he feared not for man's future. To James Malin, man was the pivot of history, and quite naturally the pivot of James Malin's optimistic philosophy of history was man!


35. The Contriving Brain, pp. 413, 430; Grassland of North America, pp. 331-335.


37. Ibid., p. 191.