Although he had not yet seen the Ohio territory, the Rev. Manasseh Cutler declared that in addition to unsurpassed natural resources and natural beauty, the region had a unique advantage: “no inveterate systems to overturn.”

In December 1787, the first pioneers, a group of 48 men, many of them Revolutionary War veterans, set out on a journey of more than 700 miles, to Ohio on the Muskingum.


Ever since he saw Thornton Wilder’s play “Our Town,” McCullough tells us, he wanted to write about accomplished people who are unknown to most Americans.

“In The Pioneers” features five men. Gen. Rufus Putnam, McCullough reveals, drew up the plan for the settlement of (what became) Marietta, Ohio, lobbied Congress to provide land bounties as compensation for military services, led the westward trek, and served in the state legislature. Manasseh Cutler and Ephraim, his son, fought to exclude slavery from Ohio and establish public schools and colleges in the state.

Joseph Barker designed and constructed many of Marietta’s finest buildings. Samuel Hildreth, the country doctor, often traveled 20 or 30 miles on horseback to make house calls to rescue a member of a distressed family “from the grasp of death.”

A rather old-fashioned work of American history dedicated to the march of progress and filled with digressions (about the menu at a presidential banquet, bad spelling, and foreign visitors’ perceptions of Ohio), “The Pioneers” is a Valentine to settlers who, as Gen. Putnam put it, exhibited “spunk to the backbone” whenever they were faced with adversity.

The citizens of Marietta, McCullough indicates, for example, were unfailingly hospitable to travelers, friends and family. And he endorses Dr. Hildreth’s paean to Marietta, where, in a short span of half a century, “the gloom and silence of the wilderness has given way to civilization, which the arts of agriculture and commerce follow in its train.”

McCullough understands, of course, that the settlement of Ohio involved the displacement of Indians. His account of the Indian wars, however, is presented from the point of view of his heroes. Gen. Putnam, McCullough declares, “always wanted to be fair in his dealings with the native tribes.”

He once directed an order to deliver to the wife of a murdered Delaware Indian “such goods as she shall choose to wipe away her tears to the amount of five dollars.”

The battle known as “St. Clair’s Defeat,” McCullough writes (without explaining the origins of the conflict), was worse than any suffered by the Colonists during the American Revolution. Vastly outnumbered, “the only hope” of American soldiers “was that the savages would be so taken up with the plunder of the camp as not to follow after.”
Too severely wounded to be moved, one officer was propped against a tree, and then “tomahawked, scalped and reportedly his heart cut out and divided into pieces to be distributed among the different tribes that fought in the battle.” McCullough seems to dwell on the dead bodies of American soldiers, “mutilated, mangled and butchered with the most savage barbarity.”

Although he emphasizes the pivotal role played by the Cutlers in maintaining the prohibition against slavery in Ohio, McCullough does not address the attitudes of his protagonists toward race. Indeed, “The Pioneers” leaves us wondering whether any blacks lived in Marietta in the years between its founding and the Civil War.

McCullough leaves us wondering as well about the life experiences of the other “original” immigrants to Ohio. And about changes in the ethnic composition and social structure of Marietta.

“The Pioneers” leaves us little reason to doubt (as an obituary writer for Ephraim put it) that the Cutlers, Rufus Putnam, Samuel Hildreth and Joseph Barker “belonged to that class of strictly upright, honest and true men, of whom the pioneers of this state afford so many examples.” As they coped with floods, fires, infectious diseases and hostiles, McCullough’s settlers did bring “the American ideal west.” But in Ohio, as elsewhere, that ideal was imperfect, not applied to everyone, and, at times, honored in the breach.

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