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Young Francis Parkman claimed that he turned to the western wilderness to escape the "invincible commonplace," the pallid and "emasculate" life of the East.[1] Yet a study of *The Oregon Trail* reveals that his escape was never real; it was merely physical, never intellectual or emotional, so that the young Parkman provides a near perfect example of a cultural prisoner. The book becomes, contrary to the author's intention, not a serious study of the West but rather a drama of cultural confrontation in which little is learned, no real insights gained. Since much of the present conception of the American frontier and Indian culture has derived from such seemingly objective descriptions as *The Oregon Trail,* an understanding of what in fact this book really is is relevant today. A close look at this popular, highly regarded, and influential work shows that deep-seated cultural prejudices inform every observation that Parkman made, so that his book unintentionally reveals his own culture while it falsifies the other cultures he tried to study.

Yet *The Oregon Trail,* despite these shortcomings, has several distinctions. It is, first, good escape and adventure literature, exotic, exciting and fast-paced enough to be tremendously popular ever since its publication. More importantly, it provides the best first hand surface description of the Ogallala Sioux while their culture was still intact.

[1]Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Parkman Reader* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1955), p. 13.

But the real value of the book as literature lies in its evocation of a sense of discovery, of newness, wonder, and excitement as the traveller responds to the unique landscape, its flora, fauna, and Indian life, the same quality found in the writings of early American explorers and naturalists — Catesby, Wilson, Audubon, and Bartram. Parkman begins ". . . give me the rocky hillside, the shaggy cedar and shrub-oak — the wide reach of uncultivated landscape. All is new, all is rough. . . . Fierce savages have roamed like beasts amid its rugged scenery. . . ."[2] One of his major assumptions apparent in his later histories also gives impetus to his vivid natural descriptions. The landscape was always to him an integral part of historic action. This organic view of the natural setting, with the wilderness pervading every action, already is apparent in *The Oregon Trail.*

Yet the value of *The Oregon Trail* both as literature and natural observation is severely limited precisely because Parkman, despite his efforts, could not escape his culture, class, and economic position. Francis Parkman was born to wealth, social position, and background in Boston. His heritage was patrician and puritan. His education was the typical Brahmin, classical one at Harvard, complete with the traditional European tour, after which he concluded his formal education at Harvard Law School. In college as in later life his heritage sat easily upon him, for smugness, a sense of superiority, and snobbery are apparent in his letters to his friends.[3] He prided himself on being at Harvard, which he saw as the center of the intellectual aristocracy. Throughout his distinguished career he never fully escaped such smug provincialism.

Perhaps his basic handicap as an objective observer of the West and the forces at work there was the inherited wealth that made his excursion possible. He was playing at a journey that thousands were making in deadly earnest. It was for him an outdoor adventure given a sanction of scholarship required by his Puritanism. Similarly, by economic position and heritage he was cut off from sympathy with Jacksonian democracy and equalitarianism. Meeting the Indians, emigrants, and frontiersmen on his trip west only validated his Brahmin sense of superiority. His inherited Federalism and Calvinism are apparent

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[2]Mason Wade, *Francis Parkman, Heroic Historian* (New York: Viking Press, 1942), p. 178.

[3]"Although he tried, it was very difficult for him to throw off a cloak of superiority." Wilbur R. Jacobs, *The Letters of Francis Parkman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), p. XXXVIII.

in all his works in his emphasis on force and strict control of the masses with some indulgence for the aristocratic elect. He either criticizes the lower classes or treats them satirically. He writes in his notebook: "Is it not true that the lower you descend in education and the social scale the more vicious men become?"[4]

Even on the trail Parkman never shed his proper Bostonian reticence and reserve. The easy friendliness and familiarity of the frontier did not break down his aristocratic aloofness. Consequently, he could not freely communicate with settlers, Indians, or Mormons, the very people he had come to study. Again and again he confesses that he dreaded the wrong people would become familiar with him, that he would be forced into the unwelcome company of his inferiors. Such fears outweighed the physical dangers of the wilderness and of hostile Indians. He could only be truly sociable, apparently, amid the trappings of his civilization — wine, brandy, books — and with those whose culture he shared. Significantly, he carried his calling cards with him into the wilderness.

Parkman shared the attitudes of his society toward property, an attitude that put a high valuation on property. Thus the free and careless ways of the Indians and mountain men disgusted him, and Indian begging seemed reprehensible. Seeing commerce as an almost spiritual endeavor, Parkman's class was dedicated to preserving the old Federalist-Whig order against Jacksonian democracy. Such an attitude did not prepare him for an appreciation of cultures that did not highly value work, energy, and enterprise.

As a product of conservative society he had little sympathy with the radical spiritual and intellectual currents of the day. At home he scorned transcendentalism and the experiment at Brook Farm; later he wrote a pamphlet against women's suffrage, and he never approved of either the abolitionists or Lincoln. Not surprisingly, on the frontier he could not regard Indian religion and social organization simply as valid manifestations of a different culture nor could he regard the Mormons as any better than wild fanatics.

The racial attitudes of Parkman's class and time mark *The Oregon Trail* as well as his later histories. In his notes for his trip west he says of Negroes: "They seem never to have known a care. Nothing is on their faces but careless, thoughtless enjoyment. Is it not safe to conclude

[4]Mason Wade, ed., *The Journals of Francis Parkman* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), Volume II, p. 406.

them to be an inferior race?"[5] "The human race in this part of the world," he concludes, "is separated into three divisions arranged in the order of their merits: white men, Indians, and Mexicans, to the latter of whom the honorable title of 'whites' is by no means conceded."[6] With such racial attitudes Parkman was doomed to failure in his search for the noble savage among the Indians.

Parkman never escaped this cultural configuration. No culture shock occurred on his journey; he never questioned the assumptions and values of his own society, as Melville did in *Typee*. He remained secure and certain. Just as he never questioned the ideas of his class, he never relinquished its trappings. Although he decorated his rooms with Indian artifacts and chose a northern exposure looking towards the Canadian woods, he remained a convivial member of the Saturday Club, built a home in Jamaica Plains, noted for its elaborate artificiality, presented his daughters to society in the proper Bostonian tradition, and turned from the wilderness to the culture of the civilized and amenable rose.

The way Parkman saw the Indians, the emigrants, and nature on the Oregon trail provides striking evidence that explorers often find what they expect to find. Columbus found Indians in the new world, travelers in Florida found tigers, and Count Buffon and Marc Catesby found most of the European birds in America, merely changed a bit from living in a degenerate region.

Parkman rarely got beyond his disgust with the Indian's appearance; he usually regarded them as merely ugly. How, he wondered, could such creatures be regarded as belonging to the same human race as the beautiful girls of Boston? Indians invariably have "black, snaky eyes." The "mean-looking" chief of the Arapahoes and his tribe repel the fastidious young men. "I looked in vain among this throng of faces to discover one manly or generous expression; all were wolfish, sinister, and malignant, and their complexions as well as their features were exceedingly bad" (p. 244). On several occasions, however, perhaps influenced by his reading of the Romantic poets, he partially overcomes his distaste, as when he recognizes the grandeur of Mahto-Tonka, the best of his Indian friends. "He never arrayed himself in gaudy blankets and glittering necklaces, but left his statue-like form, limbed like an

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[5]*Journals,* Volume II, p. 483.

[6]Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (New York: Signet, 1950), p. 232. All references are to this edition.

Apollo of bronze, to win its way to favor" (p. 120). Yet he concludes this favorable description by stating "Yet after all he was but an Indian." (p. 120)

Parkman's racism, intellectual snobbishness, his distrust of the lower classes, the non-diligent, and the dirty, his belief in work, duty, and reliability, his Puritan moral codes, his belief in the sacredness of property are clearly evident in his description of Indian character, society, customs, and manners. He failed to recognize a code of honor different from his own, and this failure is all the more remarkable since he states "I had come into the country chiefly with a view of observing the Indian character. To accomplish my purpose it was necessary to live in the midst of them and become, as it were, one of them" (p. 94). These prejudices show in his preference for the Shawanees over the Kanzas because the former had made greater progress in agriculture and looked more civilized and prosperous. Indian intelligence, by his definition, was deficient. As a Harvard man Parkman measured intelligence by the ability to reason abstractly, perhaps a quality of little use to an Indian in the wilderness.

> They will not trouble themselves to inquire into what they cannot comprehend, but are quite contented to place their hands over their mouths in token of wonder and exclaim that it is 'great medicine. . . .' He [the Indian] never launches into speculation and conjecture. . . . (p. 85)

Parkman's blindness is often comic. Observing an affectionate, honeymooning Indian couple, he observes: "I could not discover that much conversation passed between them. Probably they had nothing to say; for an Indian's supply of topics for conversation is far from being copious" (p. 114).

The Oregon Trail is shot through with unconscious irony brought about by Parkman's inability to understand the Indians in terms of the survival value of their behavior. Indian customs were to him mere manifestations of ignorance and savagery, because he failed to note the practical values they served. Indian horsemanship was not what he was used to back home; it seemed undisciplined and crude. Indian dress was to Parkman ugly, crude, and indecent, yet the longer he stayed in the wilderness the more closely his own dress approximated that of the Indians. After describing his own difficulty in using firearms on a buffalo hunt, he notes in passing: "The bows and arrows which the

Indians use in running buffalo have many advantages over firearms, and even white men occasionally employ them" (p. 249).

Ironic also is his labelling the Ogallala, the Brule, the Dahcotah, and Sioux as "thorough savages" (p. 91) for failing to learn European language when he himself made no attempt to learn their languages. Indeed he conversed with them only a few times and then through an interpreter. Similarly, to him Indian medicine men were superstitious impostors. He ridicules their treatment of disease by thumping the chest, beating drums, and shaking rattles. Yet the civilized doctors he consulted for his dysentery merely prescribed calomel which worsened the condition.

Most ironic of all, however, is his constant description of the Indian as inherently cruel, capable of monstrous inhumanity, although he did appreciate their hospitality (p. 128). Parkman listened eagerly but with distaste to one Indian who "told of the bloody deeds of his own people with eyes that glittered with a fierce lustre." Kangra-Tonga told Parkman of many atrocities, such as scalping a member of the Snake tribe, cutting his tendons, and burning him to death. He sums up the Indian character as consisting of "strange, unbridled impulses" and "ferocious instincts" (p. 200-1). On the other hand, he casually dismissed the white man's cruelty. He merely notes in passing, with no judgment, the young Kentuckian who came west to kill an Indian and soon achieved his purpose.

Faced with Indian savagery, the white man must, Parkman believed, protect himself. The Pawnees, he says, are "a treacherous, cowardly banditti, who, by a thousand acts of pillage and murder, have deserved chastisement at the hand of government" (p. 54). The white man's only safety lies in inspiring fear and respect in the Indians, an attitude not dissimilar to the way in which the business leaders of Parkman's society related to their workers. In a remarkable passage, Parkman tells how he treated the Indian children who dared penetrate his Bostonian aloofness. While he was staying in an Indian teepee the children of his host nestled against him in disagreeable proximity: "I immediately repelled these advances by punching the heads of these miniature savages with a short stick which I always kept by me for the purpose . . ." (p. 177).

Furthermore, Parkman's attitude toward the Indian tribal wars reveals a strong trait of cruelty in himself — a trait observable throughout

his histories in his seeming emphasis on gory atrocities. His works on the violent exploits of the sixteenth and seventeenth century explorers of the American wilderness often read like a catalog of cruelties. He apparently condoned such behavior in the service of the military virtues that accompanied the spread of civilization. In a typical passage in *Pioneers,* for example, he tells how Champlain captured a suspected plotter. The man's body immediately "swinging from a gibbet, gave wholesome warning to those he had seduced; and his head was displayed on a pike, from the highest roof of the buildings, food for birds and a lesson to sedition."[7] On the Oregon trail his desire for knowledge of Indians — or rather his adolescent desire for an exciting spectacle — overrides any humanitarian concern for people and their suffering. He wished to see an Indian battle — not, of course, against whites. When the skirmish did not come off as the Indians had promised, Parkman says that he inveighed against "the fickleness and inconstancy of Indians. . . ." (p. 100). Later he confesses: "My philanthropy was no match for my curiosity, and I was vexed at the possibility that after all I might lose the rare opportunity of seeing the ceremonies of war" (p. 105).

In truth, Parkman can fully appreciate the Indian only when he is at war. Only then does the Indian manifest the civilized virtues of energy, purpose, and discipline that Parkman so admires.

> This fierce spirit awakens their most eager aspirations, and calls forth their greatest energies. It is chiefly this that saves them from lethargy and utter debasement. Without its powerful stimulus they would be like the un-warlike tribes beyond the mountains, scattered among the caves and rocks like beasts and living on roots and reptiles. These latter have little of humanity except the form; but the proud and heroic Dahcotah warriors can sometimes boast heroic virtues. (p. 116)

But for the most part Parkman finds Indian manners and morals during peacetime wholly deficient. Observing "the raillery and equivocal jokes" of Indians he piously observes that this "ill becomes the dignity of warriors" (112). He is morally shocked that Mahto-Tonka had thirty sons besides a number of daughters, but he decided that this number "need not stagger the credulity of those acquainted with Indian usages and practices" (p. 119).

Much of the middle section of *The Oregon Trail* deals with

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[7]Francis Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1903), Volume II, p. 158.

Parkman's description of the structure of Indian society and its customs, the deficiencies of which were, he felt, related to deficiencies in Indian character. The indecisiveness and confusion — traits he abhorred — of the councils he attributes to the fact that "Indians cannot act in large bodies" (p. 121); they are temperamentally unable to unite. This democratic spirit led in Parkman's view to chaos and confusion. The seeming disorder accompanying the breaking up of the hunting camps invariably irritated him. Yet in each case the job got done by the designated time of sunrise.

Parkman faulted Indian methods of child rearing as encouraging innate characteristics of wild liberty and lawlessness. Parents, too fond of their children in his opinion, indulged them excessively. The only form of punishment, a dousing with cold water, and then only in severe cases, was much too mild for the unruly young savages. "Their offspring," he notes with disapproval, "become sufficiently undutiful and disobedient under this system, which tends not a little to foster that wild idea of liberty and utter intolerance of restraint which lie at the foundation of the Indian character" (p. 178). Hence he praised the Indian "soldiers," "men of courage and repute" (p. 190), whose function was to maintain order and punish offenders.

Predictably Parkman regarded Indian religious beliefs and practices as manifestations of mere superstition. The Indian character is not highly developed enough for real religion. "His soul is dormant; and no exertion of the missionaries . . . have as yet availed to arouse it" (p. 85). What is obviously at work here is his inability to classify any religion but that of his own culture as truly religion. He dismisses the visions which Indians "fancied" as mere physiological manifestations of "the weakened and excited state" produced by fasting and exposure (p. 117). Yet at least once Parkman seems genuinely moved by Indian religion, and the tension between his spontaneous feelings and his usual disapproval gives his description a depth and humility usually missing from his work. He comes upon an old Indian at prayer.

> Looking for a while at the old man, I was satisfied that he was engaged in an act of worship, or prayer, or communion of some kind with a super-natural being. I longed to penetrate his thoughts,, but I could do nothing more than conjecture and speculate. (p. 201)

Parkman believed that the religion of the Indians derived from their

child-like nature, their limited intellectual and spiritual faculties.

> I knew that though the intellect of an Indian can embrace the idea of an all-wise, all powerful Spirit . . . yet his mind will not always ascend into communion with a being that seems to him so vast, remote, and incomprehensible; and when danger threatens . . . he is prone to turn for relief to some inferior agency, less removed from the ordinary scope of his faculties. . . . To him all nature is instinct with mystic influence. Among those mountains not a wild beast was probing, a bird singing, or a leaf fluttering, that might not tend to direct his destiny . . . ; and he watches the world of nature around him as the astrologer watches the stars. So clearly is he linked with it, that his guardian spirit, no unsubstantial creation of his fancy, is usually embodied in the form of some living thing. . . ." (pp. 200-202).

This typical passage is a remarkable instance of Parkman's ability to describe without deep understanding and certainly without approval a religion which was, after all, remarkably in keeping with the culture of the believer.

Parkman was equally blind to the other human groups he encountered on his trip: the emigrants, the frontiersmen, and the Mormons. Because of his lack of familiarity and sympathy with the working classes, he was cut off from understanding the economic forces behind the westward movement. He speculates on why men went West:

> I have often perplexed myself to divine the various motives that give impetus to this migration; but whatever they may be, whether an insane hope of a better condition in life, or a desire of shaking off restraints of law and society, or mere restlessness, certain it is, that multitudes bitterly repent the journey, and, after they have reached the land of promise, are happy to escape from it. (p. 17)

In 1837 and 1839 commercial failures led to widespread unemployment as virtually all construction projects in the East stopped. During the panic of 1839 — seven years before Parkman's trip — only the western farmers remained relatively solvent. Then too a growing intolerance in the East drove religious pioneers out. Contributing also were the severe outbreaks of fever in the Illinois and Missouri bottomlands. Events in the West also lured the jobless and poor in the middle forties: California was annexed, Zachary Taylor advanced into Mexico, paving the way for Scott's conquest of the Spanish Southwest, the Oregon

boundary was settled, and Fremont's *Report* on the overland route to Oregon and California, over 10,000 copies of which were sold, was published. 1846 marks the high point of this movement. In 1840 there were only a hundred Americans in Oregon, fewer in California. By 1846 this population had increased forty times. Two to three thousand new settlers were making the trip at about the same time as Parkman.

But since Parkman saw these emigrants impelled only by insane hope, lawlessness, and restlessness, he understood the emigrants from a lower strata of his own society no better than he understood the Indians from a totally different culture. The emigrants' democratic notions, he believed, led to fear, indecisiveness, and dissension. Parkman had no curiosity about these people. Here is his description of one unwelcome visit: "Tall, awkward men, in brown homespun, women with cadaverous faces, and long, lank figures, came thronging in together, and . . . ransacked every nook and corner of the fort. Dismayed at this invasion, we withdrew in all speed to our chamber . . ." (p. 89). Only once did Parkman come close to sympathy with these desperate people. This occurs when he comes upon household goods they had abandoned.

> It is worth noticing that on the Platte one may sometimes see the shattered wrecks of ancient claw-footed tables, well waxed and rubbed, or massive bureaus of carved oak. . . . Brought, perhaps, originally from England; then with the declining fortunes of their owners, borne across the Alleghanies to the wilderness of Ohio or Kentucky; then to Illinois or Missouri; and now at last fondly stowed away in the family wagon for the interminable journey to Oregon. But the stern privations of the way are little anticipated. The cherished relic is soon flung out to scorch and crack upon the hot prairie. (p. 72)

From a discarded claw-footed table he was able to glean some idea of the power of the human drama he was in the midst of.

The frontiersmen fared somewhat better in his treatment. Their hard practicality and efficiency were traits Parkman's Yankee mind could appreciate. Only this group among all the people he encountered on the frontier produced a man Parkman could admire. His faithful guide Henry Chatillon is the only figure of heroic proportions in the book. Yet, his standard of comparison had not changed, for Henry had those qualities Parkman's culture allowed him to admire. Henry was powerful, athletic, graceful, and although illiterate "he had a natural refinement and delicacy of mind, such as is rare even in women. His manly face

was a mirror of uprightness, simplicity, and kindness of heart; he had, moreover, a keen perception of character, and a tact that would preserve him from flagrant error in any society." Honest, brave, unassuming, "He was a proof of what unaided nature will do" (p. 21). Yet some of Parkman's standards remain the aristocratic, commercial ones of the East. Henry was too easy going, lacking the drive of "Anglo-Americans," "and his chief fault arose from an excess of easy generosity, not conducive to thriving in the world" (p. 21).

In Henry, a man in whom the wilderness had produced most of the admirable qualities of the East, not in the Indians or emigrants, Parkman had found his noble savage. Henry becomes Parkman's vindication — which he did not find among the Indians — of his romantic ideas about the ultimate beneficence of nature and the value of living a simple life in the wilderness. Parkman's class and culture had taught him to admire certain values and traits and to despise others. On the other hand, his romantic ideas on nature and man — (he was steeped in Cooper and carried a copy of Byron with him into the wilderness) — contradicted some of these cultural beliefs. Henry Chatillon was necessary to vindicate both of these logically exclusive sets; so Parkman sees him as a *civilized* man of the wilderness. Thus the young historian is spared the painful necessity of deeply examining either the ideas derived from his culture or those derived from his reading of romantic literature.

On the Oregon trail Parkman not only encountered strange men, he came directly into intimate contact with manifestations of nature that were equally new to him. Despite his sense of wonder at the awesome, picturesque Western landscape which he communicates so well, he ultimately did not understand or appreciate Western nature any better than he did Western men. The same cultural prejudices are again to blame, for Parkman prefers the tamed, civilized, safe landscape of the East. The vast prairies were not the Eden he expected. To him they were "oppressive," and "detested" (p. 195). He was discomfited by the drenching rains, penetrating heat, and the profusion of snakes and insects. As he sets out he is so moved by the beauties of the Eastern spring that he experiences misgivings: "I was half inclined to regret leaving behind the land of gardens for the rude and stern scenes of the prairies and the mountains" (p. 19).

In his own mind he never really left the land of gardens, for he measures everything he sees by familiar Eastern standards just as he

measures Indians by the standards of his society. The rain out West came not gently but in torrents, and even "the thunder is not like the tame thunder of the Atlantic coast" (p. 47). "Our New England climate is mild and equable compared with that of the Platte" (p. 57). Snake imagery, suggesting both repulsion and fascination, recurs in his description of the plant life — "cacti were hanging like reptiles at the edges of every ravine" (p. 96) and prickly pears "seemed like clinging reptiles" (p. 129).

Parkman often found a Wordsworthian mystic impulse and joy in the nature he encountered, "There is a spirit of energy in mountains and they impart it to all who approach them" (p. 125). And mountains and streams could be "wonderfully cheering and exhilarating" (p. 141). However, such moods never come from the more formidable or typically Western aspects of nature. In every case the landscape that cheered and inspired him resembled that of New England. At the end of his travels he returns to mountains less threatening: "They seemed more like some vision of eastern romance than like a reality of that wilderness; all were melted together into a soft delicious blue, as voluptuous as the sky of Naples or the transparent sea that washes the sunny cliffs of Capri" (p. 229). This, and not the rugged landscape of the West, he believes is the nature that can inspire the poet and the novelist (p. 283).

Parkman even judged the animals he encountered by human, Eastern standards. Buffalo bulls, he tells us, "ungallantly" deserted their wounded cows when Parkman charged them, and the buffalo's failure to appreciate the danger from the hunters was due to their stupidity and infatuation. Since to him these animals were not magnificent or unique, he had no difficulty justifying their slaughter. " 'You are too ugly to live,' thought I, and aiming at the ugliest, I shot three of them in succession" (pp. 272-3). From his observations of the fierce animal life of the West (Parkman had no appreciation of the idea of the balance of nature already extant in his day) he drew one of the few philosophical generalizations of the book: " 'Soft-hearted philanthropists,' thought I, 'may sigh long for their peaceful millennium; for, from minnows to men, life is incessant war' " (p. 208).

The landscape and life out west inspired in him neither love nor appreciation. It may seem anachronistic to blame Parkman for being a despoiler rather than a conservationist, yet he clearly foresaw the doom of the buffalo and the wasting of the prairies. Other early travelers such

as Catesby, Wilson, and Audubon became ardent conservationists even amid the abundance of life in the new world. Parkman, however, did not rise above cultural attitudes that put low valuation on animals and which tended to see nature as something to be used and manipulated for sport and profit. Back home in later years, he wrote a paper entitled "Appeal for Preservation of White Mountain Forests." It was the gentle wilderness of the East, not the fiercer ones of the West, that he wished to preserve.

Loving the outdoors yet repelled by the untamed and threatening West, Parkman turned in later years, predictably enough, to horticulture. Here he could master, control, and manipulate nature on his estate where Cosgrain said "all is artificial," clipping, pruning, and breeding more exquisite varieties of the rose. No snaky cacti affronted him, and he wrote such articles as "Manure and the Flower Gardener," "The New Pyrethrums," and "What Shall I Plant?"

In *The Oregon Trail* there is no initiation, no change, no real growth. It is the drama of a young man who plunges into other cultures, into nature, and into history and who remains amazingly unchanged.