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The Presence of the Past

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I. The Art of the Historian

Ningún pasado es ideal. Pero sólo del pasado surgen ideales que no sean linfáticos, ideales con sangre en las venas.

No past is ideal. But only from the past do ideals arise that are not lymphatic, ideals with blood in their veins.

Sin talento literario el historiador falsifica inevitablemente la historia.

Without literary talent, the historian inevitably falsifies history.

-- Nicolás Gómez Dávila¹

Modern historical writing had its inception in the nineteenth century, reflecting the changes in mentality and understanding produced by the political and scientific revolutions of the era. These changes were especially marked in the evolution of historical writing in the United States. In the early 1800s, the field of American history was made up of a cadre of historians who focused mainly on document collections and what would now be considered local history. Prominent among these was Jared Sparks, who held the first professorship in history in the United States, endowed at Harvard University in 1839, and whose primary legacy was several painstakingly researched collections of documents. These early historians were almost universally historians by hobby, not by profession. From doctors and lawyers to farmers, the field of history was dominated by amateurs, sometimes in the best sense of the word, sometimes in its less admirable meaning. But as the century progressed, three historians emerged who made history their primary focus, and who succeeded so well that they were ranked among the best of their age. All three concerned themselves primarily with the history of the American continent, and they each (by coincidence) focused on one of the three European major powers who dominated the Americas. Francis Parkman served as the historian of the American forests and the war for Canada, considering France in the New World. William Hickling Prescott concerned himself with the history of Spain, in both the New and the Old Worlds. Finally, George Bancroft, whose life work was a monumental history of America, studied the role of England in America from the foundation of the first colonies to the emergence of the nation.²

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, these three historians were among the most prominent in the United States, and their work was popular among academics and lay readers alike. Their unusual ability to recreate the past and render it palatable and even engrossing made them popular with the reading public of their time, while their extensive knowledge, painstaking research and

¹ Nicolás Gómez Dávila, *Escolios a un Texto Implícito: Selección* (Bogotá, Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 373, 431.

² Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (1984): 912; George H. Callcott, "Historians in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *The New England Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1959): 501-502, 507, 514-515; Herbert B. Adams, *The study of history in American colleges and universities*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 17; Callcott, 502, 499.

skilled handling of sources made them essential references for historians, both contemporary and modern.³ Yet, by 1970, barely a century after their peak, they had essentially disappeared from the historical canon, ignored by academics and forgotten by the reading public. From 2004 to 2015, no work on any of these three men, either separate or collective, had been published in a prominent American historical journal.⁴ Book length biographical treatments are scarce. For instance, the most recent biography of Prescott, by Charles Harvey Gardiner, was published in 1969, and, according to Gardiner, the most recent “full account” prior to his own had been published over sixty years earlier. Bancroft and Parkman are discussed in Peter Hoffer’s 2004 work *Past Imperfect*, but Hoffer uses them as examples of inaccuracy and bigotry in early American history. They were the purveyors of a type of history which Hoffer describes as “a self-congratulatory tale, told by a white, Protestant elite,” a mindset which “proved that members of this elite were entitled to their paramount political and economic position” and which “labored to exclude people of color, women, servants, and slaves.”⁵ Hoffer’s description reflects the mindset which led to the gradual dismissal of these historians. They were seen as elitist due to their elevated social class, their membership in the Brahmin cadre; the financial independence which made it possible for the three of them to be primarily historians is now considered a strike against them. They were products of their time, white males who believed implicitly in America exceptionalism and who manifested the viewpoints of their time. By today’s standards, they are undeniably racist and sexist. Parkman was noted for his opposition of women’s suffrage and Bancroft largely avoided the question of slavery. Hoffer asserts that “Parkman favored the facts that proved the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon peoples” and says that Parkman’s view of the Native Americans was molded by his theory of Anglo-Saxon superiority. In sum, the modern reader is given to conclude that it is as well that these historians are forgotten, for their biases far outweigh any positive contributions they might have made.⁶

It is not my purpose to dispute whether these charges are ill-founded or accurate. Even Wilbur Jacobs, one of Parkman’s greatest modern proponents, describes him as being “accused, with justification.” Nor do I intend to argue that we should return, as a society, to the mindsets and beliefs of the mid-nineteenth

³ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Parkman Reader* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), ix-x.

⁴ Author survey of articles published in the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, the *American Historical Review*, the *Journal of American History*, and *American Nineteenth Century History* between 2004 and Fall 2015 (when the survey was performed). Compare to the wealth of articles written on William Dean Howells between 2006 and 2010 (<https://howellsociety.wordpress.com/new-books-and-articles/2006-2010/>). Yet Prescott was a best seller when he was first published, and for some years afterwards. Update: *The American Interest* published an article on Francis Parkman in 2011, arguing for his reconsideration. Joel Schwartz, “Retroview: Francis Parkman’s Indian Problem,” *The American Interest* 7, no. 3 (2011), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2011/12/09/retroview-francis-parkmans-indian-problem/>.

⁵ Charles Harvey Gardiner, *William Prescott: A Biography* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1969), x; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 13.

⁶ Francis Parkman, *Letters of Francis Parkman Vol. II*, ed. Wilbur R. Jacobs (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 42; Russel Nye, *George Bancroft, Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 82; Hoffer, 28.

century. Consider the worst-case scenario, if you will – grant that these men were all that their detractors assert them to be. My argument is that, even under these circumstances, there is much that we could learn from them, and many ways in which they can be of continuing interest and value to the modern historian. They are, of course, a part of the historical past, and as such are important. As Wilbur Jacobs says, “Parkman’s ideas on other subjects, such as . . . religion and women in politics . . . often reveal impolite truths” but they are, “in many respects, a projection of Parkman’s views about the American society of his own day, particularly his reaction to the sordid era of the Grant administration.” The historians’ conceptions of history and historiography, their views on their country and on the nature of government and human progress, are important sources for contemporary historians.⁷

Richard Vitzthum’s 1974 study, *The American Compromise*, is a literary analysis of the works of Bancroft and Parkman, as well as Henry Adams (Prescott was omitted because his work was not on a North American subject). Vitzthum’s thesis is that Bancroft, Parkman and Adams shared an interpretation of American history as an ongoing compromise between the two extremes of anarchy and tyranny. This is a view that is still relevant today, as historians continue to struggle with the difficulties of learning from the past, and are still vitally interested in the ways in which American history has molded the modern world. The lessons that a nation learns from its history are vital to making real and significant progress, and no nation can afford to discard or dismiss any portion of its history.⁸

Bancroft, Parkman and Prescott all adhered, to a greater or lesser degree, to the idea of history as a continually expanding narrative, in which all human history, from the dawn of time into the farthest reaches of the future, tends ultimately and inevitably, towards progress. Russel Nye describes Bancroft’s historical theory as being the offspring of both the Rationalistic and Romantic schools of thought. The Rationalist school presented the idea of “social evolution as a progressively upward development from the lower stages of civilization,” which leads the scholar to a broader, more scientific view of history. The Romantic school, in contrast, set its emphasis on nationalism, studying the past of single nations or peoples, rather than viewing human history as a unified whole, with a single destination. The key to both schools was their use of a developed, engaging narrative to persuade the reader. Bancroft’s own historical narrative derived from both schools, marked, in Nye’s words, by

an attitude of objectivity toward the facts of the past, asking impartiality and freedom from preconception; a belief in progress, buttressed by transcendental idealism and reinforced by the Rationalist faith in an upward social tendency; a demand for the recognition of a controlling plan or scheme behind the shifting facts of history . . . [and] an emphasis upon

⁷ Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Francis Parkman, Historian as Hero: The Formative Years* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991), 124; Parkman, *Letters Vol. I*, li.

⁸ Richard C. Vitzthum, *The American Compromise: Theme and Method in the Histories of Bancroft, Parkman and Adams* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 4-5.

the ‘national genius’ of a people as the creative force motivating their historical development.⁹

This narrative holds that there is some manner of direction or motivation behind the course of history, be it divine or through some other agency. The idea of an overarching narrative, especially one which presents the United States as the ideal of progress, has almost entirely gone out of fashion. But understanding the concept is critical to understanding the nineteenth century, especially in America, and especially with regard to the development of a national consciousness. The works of Parkman, Prescott and Bancroft demonstrate the assumption that the United States was the culmination of virtue and liberty in the New World and in the world overall, and this mindset was responsible for much that occurred in the following decades.¹⁰

Bancroft, Parkman and Prescott provide an excellent look into the worldview of the American academic elite during the nineteenth century, but they are far more than curiosities of a bygone period. They struggled with an approach to history that we still struggle with today -- the question of how to write history effectively, how to most successfully convey the images and ideas that it is the historian's task to portray. It is here that the biographies of these men become important, for their lives and methods of working can be taken as examples of the habits of a successful historian. The precision and accuracy, devotion to their muse, diligence and sheer hard work that their lives exemplify are habits which any historian would do well to emulate. And they had more to hold them back than the average academic historian; Parkman and Prescott fought crippling disease for most of their productive years, while Bancroft spent his prime years actively engaged in politics, at home and abroad. It is true, that, unlike most modern professional historians, they were not dependent on their work for financial support, nor were they dependent on a regular profession for their living; their art was an avocation, not a trade. This made it possible to them to work at a comfortable pace, taking as much time as necessary to collect and analyze a vast array of sources. Even more importantly, it gave them the time and leisure to develop their own particular narrative style, which lies at the core of their historical theory.¹¹

Vitzthum describes Bancroft and Parkman’s work as the “finest historical narrative yet written in America.” Modern historical writing, in most cases, falls into two camps – popular writing, the type of histories that become best sellers, and academic histories. Most popular works are biographies or historical overviews. Long, multi-volume histories almost always fall into the academic camp, and tend to be written with the intention of being sold to institutions, such as libraries and universities, rather than to individuals. These academic works, while well-researched and comprehensive, have a tendency to be almost impenetrable to the lay reader, written with great attention to detail but little concern for the narrative potential of the subject. Bancroft, Parkman and Prescott thought it as important to write for the layman as for the academic, and their

⁹ Nye, 94-96.

¹⁰ Vitzthum, 4-8.

¹¹ Vitzthum, 208.

works, though as monumental and deeply researched as any modern academic work, demonstrate a narrative style that engages even an offhand reader. They conceived of accurate, well-written history as a means of uplifting the nonprofessional. Writing history for the public was a type of civil service; it would “educate, uplift and entertain the masses.” For the leisured aristocrat or moneyed patrician, who had no necessity to work at any calling, history was a means of “contributing his mite to the service of the community.” Part of that service was ensuring that the history was not only available to the layman but also intellectually accessible, and to achieve this, the writer had to ensure that his style was such as would engross the reader, without detracting from the accuracy and depth of his work.¹²

Bancroft, Parkman and Prescott became masters of this delicate balance. Samuel Eliot Morison says that Parkman’s industry in seeking out new material and skilled interpretation make him the equal of any of the “professionally trained historians of a later generation.” Even more importantly, “he had what most of them lacked – a sense of style.” Morison lists the three characteristics of “good historical literature” as “research, evaluation and literary presentation,” and says that the combination of these three is what has made Parkman enduring. This style, often referred to as literary history, was adopted by Bancroft and Prescott as well.¹³

Literary history is sometimes seen as a popularization or even adulteration of the true craft of history, a quasi-fictionalization of the reality of the facts, which decreases the merit of the historical work itself. But history written literarily need not be any less accurate than a more pedantic work. In the Bibliographical Note to *The Civil War: A Narrative*, Shelby Foote refers to the long-standing prejudice against novelists as historians. A critic he only names as “one of the best of the latter day authorities” warned that Lew Wallace’s recollections of certain occurrences during the Civil War were unreliable, because “recollections of events long past are always to be suspected . . . especially when set down by a writer of fiction.” Foote rebuts this assertion by pointing out that the novelist and the historian have the same basic goal, to “tell us *how it was*” – to recreate a past, whether real or imaginary, in such a way that they “make it live again in the world around them.” R. G. Collingwood remarks that “both the novel and the history are self-explanatory, self-justifying, the product of an autonomous or self-authorizing activity . . . the *a priori* imagination.” The historian has as great a responsibility to be imaginative and creative as the novelist; perhaps even a greater responsibility. As Collingwood says,

the web of imaginative construction is something far more solid and powerful than we have hitherto realized. So far from relying for its validity upon the support of given facts, it actually serves as the touchstone by which we decide whether alleged facts are genuine . . . The resemblance between the historian and the novelist . . . here reaches its culmination. Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations,

¹² Vitzthum, 3; Callcott, 516-517.

¹³ Morison, *Parkman Reader*, x.

exhibition of motives, analysis of characters. Each aims at making his picture a coherent whole, where every character and every situation is so bound up with the rest that this character in this situation cannot but act in this way, and we cannot imagine him as acting otherwise.¹⁴

This idea of the historian as an imaginative, literary craftsman, not a mere purveyor of the dusty past, is what sets Parkman, Prescott and Bancroft aside from their predecessors. As an example, consider a randomly selected passage from Jared Sparks' *Life of Benjamin Franklin*. Sparks, writing about the conflicts between the Native Americans and the colonists in Massachusetts, says

much sophistry was used to extenuate, or rather to defend, the conduct of those, who, driven to desperation, had determined to make an indiscriminate slaughter of the Indians. It was alleged, that the friendship of these Indians was only a pretence; that they harboured traitors among them, which sent intelligence to the war parties and abetted their atrocities; that retaliation was justifiable, the war being against the Indians as a nation, of which every tribe and individual constituted a part.¹⁵

This was written in the eighteen fifties; Parkman, Prescott and Bancroft were all active at this time. Parkman was very ill, but working on his novel, *Vassall Morton*, and had already solidified his artistic style. Compare a passage from *Count Frontenac and New France* with the passage from Sparks' biography. This passage refers to the 1704 Indian raid of Deerfield, Massachusetts. Parkman writes

the French and Indians marched that afternoon only four or five miles, – to Greenfield meadows, – where they stopped to encamp, dug away the snow, laid spruce-boughs on the ground for beds, and bound fast such of the prisoners as seemed able to escape. The Indians then held a carousal on some liquor they had found in the village, and in their drunken rage murdered a negro man belonging to Williams. In spite of their precautions, Joseph Alexander, one of the prisoners, escaped during the night, at which they were greatly incensed.¹⁶

Sparks' writing provides the facts of the case, but so dryly that the paragraph has to be read several times for the reader to begin to understand the details of the action. Parkman's passage, in contrast, provides a instantaneously vivid and gripping series of images. The reader can almost see the herd of terrified prisoners huddled together as their grim captors cut branches from the trees and prepare beds in the snow. The groans of the unfortunate prisoners as they are tied fast are almost audible, as is the incoherent rage of the Indians as they murder their unfortunate captive, or their exclamations of wrath in the morning when they find

¹⁴ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Fort Sumter to Perryville* (New York: Random House, 1958), 815. The "latter day authority" is named in Robert Phillips' biography of Shelby Foote as Kenneth P. Williams, the author of *Lincoln Finds a General* (Robert L. Phillips, *Shelby Foote: Novelist and Historian* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1992), 30); R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 248, 244-245.

¹⁵ Jared Sparks, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin: A Continuation to B. Franklin's Autobiography* (Leipzig: Wolfgang Gerhard, 1859), 17.

¹⁶ Francis Parkman, *France and England in North America, Vol. II*, ed. David Levin (New York: Library of America, 1983), 383.

that one of their prisoners has escaped. Sparks' writing is of interest only to the academic historian; Parkman's carries a fire and attraction that could draw in even the most blasé general reader. Parkman's description readily fits Collingwood's categories of narrative, description, exhibition and analysis, recreating the past in a way that brings it immediately before the reader's eyes, almost as though he were witnessing the scene himself.

Prescott's close friend Ticknor describes the peculiar charm of Prescott's work as lying in the fact that he "put not a little of his personal character into it." As a result, a reader can garner something of Prescott himself from his works, as though he or she were actually in conversation with him. This is what makes a historian lasting, the ability of the reader to empathize and be drawn into the work, not only through the interest of the subject, but through a quasi-personal relationship with the author; a relationship that remains valid no matter how many decades or centuries lie between the author and the reader. This is the key to these historians' artistry, but it also provides an explanation for why they have been so summarily dismissed. As Collingwood says, the historian is "always selecting, simplifying, schematizing, leaving out what he thinks is unimportant and putting in what he regards as essential. It is the artist, and not nature, that is responsible for what goes into the picture." As a result, all history is by definition biased by the views of the historian. And a well written history draws the reader in in such a way that the historian's bias, though not invisible, becomes, if you will, transparent, acceptable for the moment. This is why the Brahmins have been discarded – we don't want to be able to imagine the world from their outmoded perspective. But here, the modern historian makes a grave error. No historian can write a history without rethinking it in his own mind, putting it into his own frame of reference. And the frame of reference is continually changing – Collingwood says that "not the least of the errors contained in the science of human nature is its claim to establish a framework to which all future history must conform." We, the historians of the present, will at some point be outmoded as well. The past cannot be expected to conform to the future's standards; the fact that the past possesses the features of the past is not a valid reason to discard it.¹⁷

As a part of arguing for a reevaluation of these historians' relevance to the modern world, it will be helpful to understand the circumstances of their formation as historians and their view of history in light of that formation. History is not made up of events – it is made up of the actions of individuals, which lead to memorable events. Because of this, the history of great men – i.e., biography – is as important as the history of events, because we can only learn the reasoning behind an event by investigating the mindset of the orchestrator. Even if the event is the publication of a multi-volume of history rather than a great battle or a dramatic political coup, it is still important, and it is as crucial to understand the historian's mindset as it is to understand that of a general on the eve of battle. Jacobs presents this as one of Parkman's greatest achievements, saying that "Parkman's heroes were representative men in that they portrayed the character of their society . . . he seized upon a biography that seemed to him a mirror of the

¹⁷ Ticknor, 227-228; Collingwood, 236, 213-215, 248, 220.

times and masterfully employed the life of the great individual to describe the period.”¹⁸

In the case of Bancroft, Parkman, and Prescott, there appear to be close correlations between the culture and manner in which they grew up and their choices of profession and topic. All three were members of the social class that Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., christened the “Brahmin caste of New England.” He describes the Brahmins as

the harmless, inoffensive, untitled aristocracy . . . There are races of scholars among us, in which aptitude for learning, and all these marks of it I have spoken of, are congenital and hereditary. Their names are always on some college catalogue or other. They break out every generation or two in some learned labor which calls them up after they seem to have died out.¹⁹

Parkman and Prescott were born into this caste, descendants of several old Boston families; Bancroft, the outlier, son of a farmer, was not technically a Brahmin, but worked his way into the upper echelons by the time he graduated from Harvard. But he was never entirely accepted into the caste in the way that Parkman and Prescott unquestionably were. His unorthodox German attitudes, after he returned from being educated on the continent, and his involvement in politics, caused Bancroft to be considered, as Russel Nye titles him, a “Brahmin Rebel.” But in education and breeding Bancroft shared almost an identical background with Parkman and Prescott. All three were educated at small but select schools and then went on to obtain a degree from Harvard. All three spent several formative years in Europe directly after they completed their work at Harvard. Bancroft and Parkman were historians by design, deciding to pursue the study of history very early in their careers. Prescott became a historian more from necessity – his health problems would not allow him to pursue another occupation. But all three were deeply devoted to their craft, and sacrificed their comfort for their work on a regular basis. Parkman and Prescott both suffered from debilitating illnesses, which rendered them essentially blind for many of their active years; Bancroft, a career politician, devoted almost all of his scant free time to his work. It was this diligence and perseverance which makes the study of their lives as well as of their writings of interest to the historian.

II. Woodsman Historian

Francis Parkman was the youngest of this trio of historians, but he has been described by Samuel Eliot Morison as the most influential, and perhaps even the greatest American historian. Parkman showed “superlative skill” in his work, which is remarkably accurate (he is the only one of the three who never had to retract a statement) and demonstrates outstanding literary ability.²⁰ Parkman has been considered a romantic historian of the woods, and can be associated with the Romantic perspective of nature. But his writing itself contains a romance that

¹⁸ Parkman, *Letters Vol. I, l.*

¹⁹ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., *Elsie Venner* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1891), 4.

²⁰ Morison, *Parkman Reader*, x.

makes the bare facts of his narrative as vivid and engaging as any novel. For instance, consider Parkman's description of Frontenac, in the second volume of *France and England in North America*.

. . . Had nature disposed him to melancholy, there was much in his position to awaken it. A man of courts and camps, born and bred in the focus of a most gorgeous civilization, he was banished to the ends of the earth, among savage hordes and half-reclaimed forests, to exchange the splendors of St. Germain and the dawning glories of Versailles for a stern grey rock, haunted by sombre priests, rugged merchants and traders, blanketed Indians, and wild bush-rangers. But Frontenac was a man of action. He wasted no time in vain regrets.²¹

The prose is exciting and engaging; even textually, the fragmentation of the longer sentence demonstrates the division between the Old World and the New. The intensity of the prose makes the reader anxious to read further, to find out how Frontenac will act in this new world. But, like Bancroft and Prescott, Parkman's histories are not just important because they are accessible and have literary merit. His works reveal his personal and literary creeds, demonstrating his view of history and his concept of the historian's responsibilities. The story of France in the New World, which is central to most of Parkman's works, depicts the failure of an authoritarian political and religious system to promote liberty; as he says of the Jesuits in New France,

the contest on this continent between Liberty and Absolutism was never doubtful; but the triumph of the one would have been dearly bought, and the downfall of the other incomplete. Populations formed in the ideas and habits of a feudal monarchy, and controlled by a hierarchy profoundly hostile to freedom of thought, would have remained a hindrance and a stumbling block in the way of that majestic experiment of which America is the field.

In Parkman's mind, the natural world formed an excellent proxy for the human condition. His study of the wilderness and its denizens allowed him to make judgments concerning the difficulties of maintaining a secure civilization. When he was too ill to undertake more active sports, he turned to gardening, at which he excelled. He served as Professor of Horticulture at Harvard for a short time, and had a lily cultivar named after him, though his primary focus was breeding roses. His interest in gardening was more than horticultural, for he saw the process of cultivating and breeding plants as directly analogous to the growth of a civilization. While his *Book of Roses* is not by any means intended as a polemical or political document, Parkman slips in a paragraph or a page here and there which shed a useful light on his views of politics and human nature. For instance, his description of the hybridization of the wild rose in *The Book of Roses* could be read as a subtle statement of his philosophical creed of human development as well.

The various wild roses differ greatly in their capacity of improvement and development . . . It requires, even with the best, good culture and selection

²¹ Parkman, *France and England Vol. II*, 22.

through several generations before the highest result appears. In horticulture, an element of stability is essential to progress.²² In both cases – the evolution of mankind and the cultivation of roses – a good but wild thing is taken and transformed into a higher form, losing the detrimental aspects of the wilderness (be they barbarism or a painfully thorny stem), but requiring constant care to prevent reversion over succeeding generations. The quality of the cultivated descendant was very important for Parkman, who warned against the “perverted civilization” of “the culture that refines without invigorating.” The garden is a symbol of mankind, the gardener the law, and the wild rose mankind itself. This view of progress and the difficulties attendant on it were at the heart of Parkman’s philosophy of history, and had their root in his background and upbringing.²³

Francis Parkman was born in Boston in 1823, scion of two aristocratic Boston families. He was descended from a long line of Unitarian ministers, and was “a Brahmin of the Brahmins by inheritance.” He was stubborn and forthright, demonstrating his characteristic passion and perseverance even as a child. When he was six or seven, his family moved to a different house and young Frank insisted on moving his personal possessions all by himself on a little hand sled, and managed to do so without aid.²⁴

Despite Parkman’s sturdy character, he was physically somewhat weak and sickly as a child, so his parents sent him to live with his grandfather in Middlesex Fells, as it was thought that the country air would strengthen the boy. Parkman lived with his grandfather from the age of six until he was ten. The Middlesex Fells school, which young Parkman attended, was at best mediocre, and did not offer the benefits of a Boston education. But his grandfather’s farm was out in the wilderness, and the young boy was given free reign to wander the woods as he chose. It was at this point that the future historian began to awake, and his enduring fascination with and love for the forest was born. This fascination would shape his entire life. In fact, the woods had such a hold on him that his last words are reported to be that he had just dreamed of shooting a bear. But this idyllic country boyhood did not last long, as Parkman’s father became concerned that his son was growing too wild and uncultured, evincing a marked and deliberate contempt for city life during visits to his family. So the young boy was dragged, protesting, back to a more orthodox life in Boston proper, where he attended the Chauncy Hall School, a prestigious private school, and remained there until he went to Harvard. Frank initially solaced himself for his forced exile from his beloved forests with chemistry experiments, but soon made friends and became popular among the youth of Boston. He and his companions founded a theatre, where he played the female roles and was described as a “leading spirit.” His choice of acting as a pastime indicates that he was beginning to develop the sensibility to understand a role that was not his own. This sensibility would later allow him to write history with the force and vigor of an eyewitness. He maintained his enthusiasm for nature, writing essays on the subject in school and

²² Francis Parkman, *The Book of Roses* (Boston: J. E. Tilton and Company, 1871), 97.

²³ Parkman, *Book of Roses*, 98.

²⁴ Wade, 3-5.

rambling in the Common and forests around Boston in his free time, pretending to be a *coureur de bois* or an Indian. He was obsessed with the forest life and with hardening and preparing himself to succeed in it. Less deliberately, while he was preparing himself physically for the trials and hardships of a life in the outdoors, Parkman was preparing himself mentally to write the history of his beloved forests.²⁵

Having completed his secondary education, Parkman was admitted to Harvard late in his sixteenth year, in 1839. His first year at Harvard was a success. During the vacation, he took his first trip through wilderness Massachusetts and New York with a friend, and seemed to rejoice in testing the limits of his endurance. They eventually had to return to Boston, compelled by difficulties in finding conveyance further into the wilderness. It was during this trip that the intellectual attributes which would characterize the historian became prominent, especially his habit of writing detailed, literary accounts in his journals, many of which would later be used as the basis for one of his works – this is especially true of his Oregon Trail journals. Parkman made another journey the following year, going even further into the wilderness, traveling up past Lake George into Quebec and the White Mountains, and then returning through the wilds of Maine. By the end of his sophomore year, Parkman had decided on his future profession as a historian, and, as he told a friend in a letter written in 1856, his “various schemes had crystallized into a plan.” He intended to write the history of the war for the conquest of Canada, drawn to the subject because he found there “the forest drama more stirring and the forest stage more thronged with appropriate actors than in any other passage of our history.” Putting aside poetry, which had been his original muse, he decided at this early age to “confine his homage to the Muse of History,” reasoning that she was least likely to “requite his devotion with a mortifying rebuff.”²⁶

Though he was considered the “strongman” of his class, Parkman suffered a physical breakdown shortly after the beginning of his senior year. Parkman’s illness should be seen as a driving factor in his method of working, but not the most important facet of his life. He was an invalid for much of his life, and this greatly affected his ability to work (consider the oft-quoted anecdote that he wrote seven lines a day for seven years). But he should not be seen as having produced his works in spite of his ailments. Rather, his works took the form they did in part because of the nature of his illness. Like a blind man with extremely sharp hearing, or a lame man with immense upper body strength, Parkman’s illness did not affect him only negatively. It forced him to develop strengths which would otherwise never have been discovered. Eyestrain prevented him from being able to read more than five minutes at a time. This meant that repetitious analysis of sources was out of the question. As a result, Parkman became a master at gathering the important pieces of information from a source at first reading. Even

²⁵ Wade, 7-8; Wilbur L. Schramm, *Francis Parkman* (New York: American Book Company, 1938), xxxii; Wade, 8-10, 12, 17.

²⁶ Wade, 13, 23-44; Francis Parkman, *The Journals of Francis Parkman Vol. I*, ed. Mason Wade (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 88-198; Parkman, *France and England in North America*, 10; Wade, 16.

more remarkably, he was adept at storing information and sources in his mind. Since he often could not work in a normal, lighted environment, Parkman had to resort to being read aloud to and composing by dictation much of the time. Again, he could pick out the salient facts as they were read to him. The necessity of composing through dictation meant that he developed the habit of composing and editing entire chapters in his head. This produced a lucidity and polish in his first drafts which can be argued to have no competition from any other historian. It also meant that his work was clear and concise. He did not have room for unnecessary speculations, extremely floral language, or similar embellishments employed by more free but less disciplined authors of the time.²⁷

Parkman's illness affected his work in other ways as well, more indirectly. It was the reason for his taking up his other great love, horticulture, an outdoor hobby that did not require much physical exertion. More importantly, his chronic ill health made it impossible for him to enlist in the Union army during the Civil War. If Parkman had been as sound in body as he was in mind, he would have joined the army in a heartbeat – in fact, he often fretted that he could not go and fight. One can only imagine the possible outcomes of such an action. Perhaps, like many another rising scholar or scientist, he might have been killed, and his works died with him. If he had survived, it would surely have affected his work in other ways, such as the topics he chose to focus on or even his interest in continuing working at all. Perhaps most importantly, those years of labor would have been lost, and losing his momentum would probably have been even more disastrous than the loss of the time itself.²⁸

Parkman was quite reticent about his disease. Several of his letters give ample descriptions of his illnesses, but in every case these are directed as sympathy to friends suffering from similar troubles (as a side note, it is astonishing how many of Parkman's close friends and colleagues suffered from debilitating ocular ailments; Prescott, Squier, Casgrain, and others, over the course of time). Even more useful than the descriptions of his "complaint" are his letters to his doctors. In one letter, he describes his daily regimen fully and in detail, not even omitting a startlingly casual (to the modern eye, at least) reference to his dropping the treatment with arsenic because he felt it was no longer necessary. In a letter to his doctor, he describes his ailment in more detail than in his letters to his friends. But Parkman was not, by any stretch of the word, a hypochondriac. Though his illness was likely psychosomatic to some extent, it was not invented. He made every attempt to downplay, rather than exaggerate, his symptoms. He hunted buffalo on the Oregon Trail while suffering from symptoms that would send a modern man to the hospital. His response to illness was to browbeat his way through it, and it is possible that this bullheaded persistence was responsible for exacerbating his symptoms.²⁹

Though Parkman was sickly as a child, his youth had been as normal as most boys of the era, and Parkman's collapse in his senior year alarmed his family. In hope that a change of climate would assist his recovery, Parkman's parents

²⁷ Jacobs, 16, 22.

²⁸ Schramm, *xiv*; Wade, 297.

²⁹ *Letters*, Vol. II, 6, 24, 141, 181-182; Wade, 52, 291.

proposed to send him on the Grand Tour, and promptly packed him off to Europe. As with his wilderness expeditions, Parkman's journal entries during his time in Europe are exhaustive and very revealing. The people he met in Europe and the places he visited were very important for his development. Parkman, like his fellow townsman Bancroft, had many of his attitudes fundamentally changed by his stay in Europe, especially in Italy.³⁰

One of the most important results of his European tour for his later life and work was its effect on his view of Roman Catholicism. Though the descendant of several ministers, Parkman early demonstrated an agnosticism in his religious convictions, which he would later in life set forth in various letters. In addition, his Puritan heritage and upbringing had instilled a natural distrust of the Roman Catholic Church in him, a bias that would eventually become the focus of most contemporary controversy surrounding his works. But his sojourn in Italy served to soften some of these prejudices. Parkman himself notes in his journal that the churches of the Benedictines "have impressed me with new ideas of the Catholic religion." He says that he had "reverenced it before as the religion of generations of brave and great men – but now I honor it for itself." He had decided that the ceremonies of the church were no longer to be sneered at as "a mere mechanical farce," but respected for their "powerful and salutary effect on the mind." Though his changing views of the church itself did not affect his distaste for priests and clergymen, whom he abominated, the young traveler was so impressed by the customs of the church that Wade at one point notes that, after only two months' exposure to Catholicism, "the Puritan had become more Roman than the Romans."³¹

Nonetheless, Parkman's religious convictions were fundamentally unmoved by his encounters with the Catholics. He met many Jesuits in Rome, particularly a Virginian convert named St. Ives, who had been instrumental in converting Parkman's cousin Shaw to Catholicism, and attempted to convert Parkman as well. While he was willing to entertain the idea, he says that "the conversion made no progress," despite maintaining a correspondence with several English Jesuits, reading the books they suggested and listening to their logic. Eventually, Parkman's proto-convert stage was brought to an end when Shaw gave him a book he claimed was "sovereign against heresy." Parkman says that he "studied it from title-page to finis," was entirely unimpressed, and continued from thenceforth "in solid disbelief as to the doctrines of Rome."³²

Parkman's inclination to a purely literary life was strengthened by the example of the monasteries he visited, which combined an atmosphere of dedication to a task with "the phenomena of religious enthusiasm," which he says had an attraction for him. He was also anxious "to get for a while out of the nineteenth century," into the medieval era. This combination led him to enter a convent for a brief time. In his biographical account, written forty-six years later, Parkman said that he was led by the same motives that would cause him, two years later, to become domesticated among the Sioux in the Rockies, though he

³⁰ Morison, *Parkman Reader*, 11-12.

³¹ Parkman, in Wade, *Heroic Historian*, 103; Wade, *Heroic Historian*, 104, 116.

³² Wade, *Heroic Historian*, 129-131.

says that in the end, he “preferred the company of the savages to that of the monks.”³³

Parkman did not remain long in the convent, but soon continued his travels, and after a lengthy tour through the rest of Europe and England, he returned home, restored more or less to good health, just in time to celebrate Independence Day 1844 in Concord and complete his final examinations. He graduated in the upper third of his class, and delivered the commencement address, “Romance in America,” which demonstrates the effect which Europe had had on the young man and his choice of profession. Europe fascinated Parkman, not in its own right, but as a background to the American experience. Parkman’s journal entries from this time begin to show a change in his attitude towards the people around him, especially concerning his “dislike of people not of his own class,” which had come through in his writings during his earlier excursions. In contrast to the peasantry of Europe, Parkman was impressed and encouraged by the behavior and manners of the New England lower class, and wrote that the absence of the European type of peasant was “a fair offset” for America’s lack of a polished upper circle. Parkman would never be a democrat, but his sojourn in Europe had done much to increase his confidence in American superiority.³⁴

During the summer and fall he made a summer tour of New England and the Berkshires, being entertained by minor dignitaries and simple farmers alike. During this tour, he began collecting bits of historical evidence, mostly in the form of stories from older members of the community. Though he had not yet begun writing history, he was already demonstrating the habits and practices of the skilled historian. Eventually he returned home, to his parents’ relief, for though they were pleased by their son’s return to health, they were concerned by his attachment to the forests. In keeping with their wishes, Parkman entered Harvard Law School in the fall of 1844. While in law school, Parkman began research for *Pontiac*, took a tour of the Great Lakes, also in preparation for writing *Pontiac*, and broke horses, which prepared him for riding with the Sioux when he went on the Oregon Trail. He achieved his first published work, a set of tales in the 1845 Knickerbocker Magazine.³⁵

At the time that he obtained his law degree in 1846, there was the first appearance of the strained eyes which would plague him for the rest of his life, but, as would become typical, Parkman did not allow this to affect his movements. He planned a hunting trip out West with his good friend Quincy Shaw, and in the spring and summer of 1846, the two young men set out on the Oregon Trail. On the trip, he roughed it like any frontiersman and lived with the Indians for a period of months. The journey was formative in many ways. It gave him firsthand experience of the forests and peoples that he would be writing about for the rest of his life, and it shattered his health and his eyesight, dramatically affecting his day to day life and his career. It was hoped that his trip West, away from the fatigues of books and study, would rest his eyes, but he plunged into the trip with such perseverance that he returned with his eyes weakened yet further

³³ Wade, *Heroic Historian*, 132.

³⁴ Morison, *Parkman Reader*, 13; Jacobs, “Romance in America”; Wade, 50, 54, 176-179.

³⁵ Morison, *Parkman Reader*, 13.

from exposure to the glare and alkali dust of the plains, and suffering from the impaired digestion, insomnia, and arthritis which would plague him for the rest of his life.³⁶

When he set out on his journey, Parkman's sophomore intention of writing the history of the war for Canada had enlarged to include a history of the American forest and the American Indians. Parkman felt that to write this history accurately, it was essential for him to gain an intimate knowledge of the American Indians, and he felt that the best place to do this was among the Western Indians on the plains and in the Rockies. In the mid-1840's, the Indians had not yet been forced onto reservations, and still lived as they always had, with only casual contact with mountain men and traders. This was before the systematic crowding out that was begun during the Civil War, and the Plains Indians, especially the Sioux, remained well-disposed to those whites who came their way.³⁷

On May 9, 1846, Parkman and his companion departed from Independence, along with a guide, Henry Chatillon, who was going to become an invaluable friend and comrade during the journey. The young men travelled with a party of Britishers for the next few months, Parkman chafing at the slow progress compelled by their heavy laden companions. The journey across the plains was without much adventure, besides an occasional encounter with other emigrating parties and the expected difficulties inherent in fording rivers. Finally, at the end of June, they reached Fort Laramie, where their real adventures were to begin.³⁸

Parkman spent his time at Fort Laramie hunting, observing the habits of the resident Indians and mountain men, and anxiously waiting for an opportunity to head further into his beloved wilderness. Learning that a party of Sioux were expected at the Fort shortly, and that they proposed to make an expedition from thence into the Rockies against the Crows, Parkman planned to accompany them. As he had to wait for the party to arrive, Parkman was very irritated by the "most weary series of delays, arising from the utter uncertainty of the Indians' movements." When the party finally did materialize, they were undecided whether to make their proposed expedition or simply hunt near the Black Hills, adding to Parkman's restlessness. Nevertheless, he took full advantage of the opportunity to study his subjects, jotting down observations of "manners and morals . . . customs, legends, and such." Eventually, he was forced to come to the "bitter conclusion" that there would be no notable muster of Indians at the fort, due to a paucity of buffalo, and, finding that Shaw was less than eager to make the journey into the hills with the Indians, he resolved to go by himself, with only Chatillon for a companion and leaving Shaw at the fort. Though he was sick with dysentery as well as the other ailments he had come west to cure, he had no sooner made this decision than he acted on it, setting out the following day, July 11. On July 15, the travelers arrived at the Indian lodges and were quartered with one of the tribesmen, Big Crow.³⁹

³⁶ Morison, *Parkman Reader*, 14-15; Wade, 219, 222-223.

³⁷ Wade, 226.

³⁸ Wade, 242, 243-259.

³⁹ Wade, 261, 264-265, 267, 269-270.

Parkman spent about two weeks hunting, living and traveling with the Indians, recording their habits and mode of life. At the end of July, he and Chatillon returned to Fort Laramie, where Shaw was anxiously awaiting them. Parkman took only an afternoon to rest, and then, on July 31, the entire party set out again, this time heading for Bent's Fort. They did not stop long at the fort, which they reached on August 25, but continued along the Santa Fé trail, hunting buffalo as they went. They turned towards home a few weeks later, and reached Kansas at the end of September. There, on October 1, they boarded a steamboat for St. Louis. Parkman's Western sojourn was done for the time, and he had paid too highly for the experience, returning to Boston a broken and sick man. Though he had acquired a wealth of knowledge, the ailments he had acquired at the same time came near to canceling out the benefit, and his relation of his trip in *The Oregon Trail* was never as complete and polished as it would have been had he had the health to do it justice.⁴⁰

Wade calls this oblivious destruction of health Parkman's "fatal error," one which came close to ruining his career. His sight, already weakened before his journey, grew rapidly worse afterwards, and he became almost an invalid; a state which Parkman had always "particularly scorned." His family was for some time unaware of the severity of his malady, for it was mainly nervous and readily concealed. But as time passed, it became apparent that he was if anything growing worse, and though his physician, Dr. Elliott, held out hope for a cure, he said it would take an indefinite amount of time. Meanwhile, Parkman continued to write the *Oregon Trail* by dictation, and the work was published in regular installments in *The Knickerbocker*, first appearing in February 1847. The serialization continued for a full two years, attracting many subscribers and gaining Parkman a following. Parkman was anxious not to lose his readers, but at the conclusion of the work, he was prescribed complete repose, without even the mental strain of composition. Unlike his colleague Prescott, who was cheerful under all the vicissitudes of illness, Parkman fell into "a period of bitterness and despair," which was only broken when he finally decided that inaction was worse than any possible consequences. In defiance of his doctor's orders, he set himself once more to composition, this time working on the *Conspiracy of Pontiac*, which he had already collected the materials for. His physical and mental state was such that he was only able to work under extremely difficult circumstances. He could only write with his eyes closed; his attention span was "occasional and brief"; and "exhaustion and total derangement of the nervous system" produced "a mood of mind most unfavorable to effort." The first half year in which he worked this way he produced an average of six lines a day, most of which had to be rewritten at a later time. Yet, though he had been told that this exertion was "poison for one in his condition," he found that his assumption that "nothing could be more deadly . . . than the entire absence of a purpose" had in fact been correct. Within a year, he had improved so far as to be able to put in two or more hours of work a day. He had successfully fought his first pitched battle against the foe he would later refer to as "The Enemy," and which was to harass him to the end of his days.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Wade, 275-286.

⁴¹ Wade, 291, 293-295; Letters, autobiographical letter, Wade, 297.

During his years of struggle, Parkman was encouraged to continue working by the very favorable reception of *The Oregon Trail*. Though the work, written as it was in sickness and in installments, did not have the polish and artistry of Parkman's later work, the "colorful picture" of the West that it presented was eagerly devoured by Eastern eyes, and it was unusually popular throughout New England and the East Coast. It even convinced Parkman's father of the legitimacy of his son's career choice. Though Parkman's popularity did not spread to Europe, where it received very little attention, what attention he did receive was more than enough to encourage him to continue his Herculean labors. By the end of 1848, Parkman's eyes had improved enough that he was told they were out of danger if he continued to be careful. He concentrated the entirety of his "slender store of working ability" on *Pontiac*, chronologically the last of his planned series.⁴²

Parkman chose the topic of the conspiracy of Pontiac because of the opportunity it provided him for "portraying forest life and the Indian character." Wade says that Parkman's treatment of the conspiracy of Pontiac was "revolutionary." He was the first to note the effect of the English conquest of Canada on the "political aspect of the continent," as it freed the interior of the continent from military despotism and laid the foundations for ordered democracy. Parkman was also the first to point out that the conspiracy was the final desperate fight of the Indians against extermination, which they realized was inevitable under English rule. Under "the easy-going French rule," the Indians might have existed in peace indefinitely. The conquest by the English prevented this, and the conspiracy, planned under a "great and daring leader," was the last attempt made by the Indians to avoid annihilation. Parkman did an excellent job of bringing out the urgency of the conflict, in a "remarkable performance" for one so young and untried. Wade calls it "one of the great books in American historical literature," and the best summary work in pre-Revolutionary American history. In addition, the account is more firsthand than Parkman's later works, relying more on oral accounts from the sons and grandsons of the protagonists, and on his own personal descriptions, from experience, of the scenery. For this work, Parkman's task was to record what he knew at first or second hand, not what he had learned from documents. That would come later, in future works. But Parkman would retain the vibrant narrative style that he developed, and employ it in later works, even after *Pontiac* had long been sent to the presses.⁴³

The work was finally completed and published in September 1851, owing much of its completion to the assistance of Parkman's bride, Catherine Bigelow, whom he had married in the spring of 1850. It met with interest and approval from Parkman's fellow historians, but, unlike Prescott's works, was not at all popular with the general public, selling less than two hundred copies a year. It would be many years before any work of his brought him revenue enough to make up for the cost of writing it, but thankfully he was financially independent and had no need to concern himself with money. All that he needed to continue was assurance that the work he did was worthwhile, and his colleagues were generous in supplying this necessary encouragement. Immediately following the

⁴² Wade, 299-304.

⁴³ Wade, 304-305.

publication of the work, Parkman began to gather materials for the earlier volumes in the series, but was suddenly attacked by his old nemesis. It returned with such force that in 1853, a physician informed Parkman that he had less than six months to live. Parkman took this news with a “smile of incredulity,” according to his own autobiographical sketch, knowing that “its mission was not death, but only torment.” Nevertheless, Parkman was rendered almost incapable of working for the greater part of the next decade.⁴⁴

Parkman’s illness peaked twice, once in 1853, as mentioned above, and next in 1858. This breakdown was triggered by the deaths of his young son, Francis Jr., in 1857, and his beloved wife shortly thereafter. His family despaired of him, sure he was going to lose his sanity, and expected him to die while he was in Paris, where he had gone for more specialized medical advice. It was the circumstances of his trip to Paris that saved him, for he found more than enough work while he was there in gathering and arranging materials for his next historical study. Despite his illness, Parkman was not unproductive during the dark years from 1851 to 1859. He gathered material when he could, and also poured his efforts into his only fictional work, *Vassall Morton*, which was heavily influenced by his favorite authors, Byron, Scott and Cooper. The work was published in 1856 in Boston, and was well though not ecstatically received. The work is valuable, for the title character is obviously autobiographical, and demonstrates Parkman’s ideals of manhood and the standards to which he held himself. His ideal was “unflinching . . . strong in generous thought and high purpose . . . knowing no fear but the fear of God; wise, prudent, calm . . . not delayed by reverses,” and, notably, possessing “the unlaureled heroism of endurance.”⁴⁵

Parkman would need every ounce of heroism he could muster to bear him up for the trial to come, for it would be six more years before he regained sufficient health to return to his work. The winter he spent in Paris, from 1858 to 1859, did nothing to renew his health, and he returned to Boston in as bad health as he had left it, being so weak that he could not even sign his name. He recognized that he had pushed himself too far, and set about trying to regain his shattered health by spending as much time as possible outdoors, working in his garden. His gardening distracted him from the irritations of his ill-health, which not only prevented him from working on his historical plans, but was holding him back from the civil war which had begun to rage. But he did not spend this time in idleness; though he was unable to work with pen and paper, he was yet able through his horticulture to gather and mentally arrange the material for his *Book of Roses*, which he published soon after he recovered. Around 1862, Parkman regained his ability to work in a small measure, after almost seven full years of inactivity. The work he set his hands to first was the first volume in the series, the *Pioneers of Old France*. His health had recovered markedly, and it only took him two years to finish the volume, writing parts of other volumes as well as he accumulated material.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Wade, 305, 308, 316-317, 315, 321-322.

⁴⁵ Wade, 327-328, 331-332.

⁴⁶ Wade, 336, 349, 352-353, 368,

It is at the beginning of *Pioneers of Old France* that Parkman sets forth his view of the conflict which it covered, a conflict which in his mind was based on “a struggle between liberty and absolutism.” New England, the “offspring of a triumphant government,” was the scion of Liberty, while New France, the scion of Absolutism, was the offspring of “an oppressed and fugitive people.” Each, as Parkman says, “followed its natural laws of growth, and each came to its natural result.” The spirit of independence was what made New England successful and New France fail, because it was through independence that New England grew, the “result of the aggregate efforts of a busy multitude each in his narrow circle toiling for himself.” New France, on the other hand, was the “achievement of a gigantic ambition striving to grasp a continent,” and eventually was destroyed by corruption from within.⁴⁷

Pioneers of Old France was completed and published at the beginning of 1865, and received a decently favorable though not overwhelming reaction from his critics and the general public. But though the book was not an immediate bestseller, the common response, as with *Pontiac*, was that Parkman had managed to step thoroughly into “the spirit of the time,” and to present the history “with the vivacity of an eyewitness.” The book was excellently researched, as were all of Parkman’s works, though it possessed a strong Protestant bias and traces of the anticlericalism which would lead to Parkman’s greatest controversies in the future. To celebrate the work’s publication, Parkman made a trip to Washington and Richmond in summer 1865 to obtain material for the next work in his series. It was on this trip that Parkman made what would be his most important, lasting contribution to the Athenaeum. With funds from the Athenaeum, Parkman spent his time in Richmond buying up original documents relating to the late war and the Confederacy. The collection he made, which is still at the Athenaeum, would end up being the most complete of any ever gathered together, in both the North and the South.⁴⁸

By late 1864, Parkman was able to conclude that he had, at least for the time being, won his battle with “The Enemy.” He was so much recovered that he was able to set himself vigorously to work on his “great task,” which he was accomplishing at a great rate. As he wrote in a letter to George Ellis, he had almost all the material for the entire series in his grasp, and had three volumes simultaneously in preparation. Though “The Enemy” would return for a few brief intervals, Parkman was past the darkest years of his illness, and entering into a sunlit middle age of steady and effective composition.⁴⁹

Over the course of the next twelve years, 1865 to 1877, Parkman published four more volumes in his series, bringing the total to six, while traveling extensively in Europe and Canada and making an exhaustive tour of the upper Mississippi Valley to obtain materials. During this time, he also published the *Book of Roses* and a mass of horticultural papers, which were considered excellent enough to procure him a professorship in the Bussey Institute at Harvard in 1871. In addition, he maintained a voluminous correspondence with colleagues

⁴⁷ Wade, 370-371.

⁴⁸ Wade, 372-374.

⁴⁹ Wade, 375-376.

in Canada, Europe and the United States. As he continued publishing, the public began to take note of his works, and he soon began to attract attentions and honors from the general public as well as other scholars. It was during this time that he explicitly laid forth his views concerning the duties of the historian. Concerned by the American addiction to popular histories which were, in large proportion, ill researched and worse written, Parkman remarked that “thorough and tolerably exact” research was an inviolable requirement for the serious historian, and that an abundance of appropriate investigation on the part of the historian was the only real basis for an “accurate and trustworthy history.”⁵⁰

After the publication of *Count Frontenac and New France* in 1877, Parkman skipped ahead to the final volume in the series, *Montcalm and Wolfe*, leaving the chronologically preceding volume, *A Half-Century of Conflict*, untouched for the time being. This volume, who bore the names of the two greatest generals of the war for Canada, contained the history that Parkman had longed to write since he was eighteen years old. He had spent almost four decades writing the preliminary volumes to this work. Now, finally, he was able to set himself to the study of his first love. He published the work, which appeared in two volumes, in autumn 1884. As Wade says, these two were “the crown of his work, and a worthy one.” It had been a long and painful journey to arrive at this conclusion, but he must have been satisfied with this realization of his adolescent dream. The work received the attention it merited, as can be seen in Henry Adams letter to Parkman, where he praises the work for its “thorough and impartial study and clear statement . . . style and narrative . . . dignified by proportions and completeness which can hardly be paralleled.” Adams’ advice to Parkman, in conclusion, was succinct and memorable, telling him to “file and burnish” all of his works to their “ripe best, and then swing the whole at the head of the public as a single work. Nothing but mass tells.”⁵¹ Bancroft, then eighty-four, sent his younger colleague a letter full of praise for the volumes and encouragement, telling Parkman that he had

. . . just everything, which goes to make an historian: persistency in gathering materials, indefatigable industry in using them, swift discernment of the truth, integrity & intrepidity in giving utterance to the truth, a kindly humanity which is essential to the true historian . . . and a clear & graceful & glowing manner of narration.⁵²

Strengthened and heartened by the support and encouragement of these friends, Parkman managed, before his death, to revise four of the eight total books in his series. Most of these he revised in the mid to late 1880s, while he was writing *A Half-Century of Conflict*. His illness began to creep back on him around this time, manifesting in fits of insomnia, headache, and palpitations. But it was never as severe as it had been during his darkest period, and he was able to keep up with his work in spite of his illness. Finally, in March 1892, the weary historian

⁵⁰ Wade, 379-380, 398-399,

⁵¹ Wade, 425, 428-429.

⁵² Wade, 430.

published *A Half-Century of Conflict*, bringing his series and his years of labor to a close at once.⁵³

This final volume was the weakest, demonstrating Parkman's waning powers. The research and facts are as accurate and carefully performed as always, but the vibrancy of his early works is missing, and the work shows the marks that years of bitter controversy had left on him. But he was never to return to polish it or any of his other works, as his health dropped sharply after its publication. He spent the last summer of his life, the summer of 1893, in lazy reverie at his summer mansion, and celebrated his seventieth birthday with friends and family at Jamaica Plains, his most beloved residence, in the autumn. In early November, he became ill after an afternoon rowing on his pond. Peritonitis set in and he died peacefully a few days later, on November 8, 1893. In his final days, he read *Childe Harold* one last time, and with his last words, described a dream he had had, in which he killed a bear. The man whose childhood was formed by the wilderness died dreaming of the wilderness.⁵⁴

IV. Brahmin Rebel

Francis Parkman's greatest accomplishments as a historian were his accuracy and his ability to bring his narrative to life. His biographer, Wilbur Jacobs, credits much of his inspiration for his work as coming from the preeminent historian of the American founding, whose volumes were in Parkman's father's library. Young Parkman read these volumes voraciously, especially poring over the descriptions of the conquest of New France. Parkman's penciled notations are still visible in the margins of the work, indicating the extent to which Parkman absorbed the author's arguments. The author was George Bancroft, the work his first volumes on the founding of America. Jacobs says that, in this work, Bancroft essentially "furnished a miniature framework for Parkman's later use."⁵⁵

George Bancroft, at first glance, seems an unlikely candidate to be ranked as one of the elite Boston intellectuals. One of the youngest of a large family, Bancroft's background was very unlike that of his wealthy colleagues. He was not born to the purple, but rather grew up in a poor and rather strained household, subsisting on the father's meagre salary as a minister and the produce of a small farm on the outskirts of Worcester, which his parents worked themselves. He was educated by dint of sacrifices on the part of his family and ceaseless hard work on his end, which earned him scholarships and matriculation at Harvard at the tender age of twelve.⁵⁶ He was not a historian from childhood, like Parkman, nor was he pushed into the field by disability, like Prescott. Before he became a historian, he was a brilliant student, a failed minister, a failed Harvard tutor, founder of a school, and the foremost American authority on German thought. By the end of his career, he had combined political success and failures with the publication of his histories, and had become, as Russel Nye says, "nearly synonymous with

⁵³ Wade, 430-431,

⁵⁴ Wade, 440.

⁵⁵ Parkman, *Letters Vol. I*, xxxvi.

⁵⁶ Nye, 9-26.

American history.” There were many great historians active in mid-century America, from Parkman, Prescott and Motley to historians of smaller scope but excellent merit. But Bancroft was the most popular of them all, the “dean of American historiography,” and as widely read at the end of his career as at the beginning.⁵⁷

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts on October 3, 1800, George was the eighth child of Aaron and Lucretia Bancroft. Bancroft’s family heritage was a long line of farmers and Calvinists. His father, Aaron Bancroft, was determined to obtain an education, despite the scanty time for schooling allowed by farm work. Aaron was the first in his family to abandon the farm and spent the war years studying for the ministry at Harvard. After completing his degree, Aaron became a substitute minister in Worcester, but failed to be appointed to a permanent position because his opinions were too liberal. With the aid of some of the more liberal church members, who left the Worcester church, Aaron Bancroft founded a new church, one with a liberal, innovative creed. At this time, churches were, by law, supported by the town in which they were located. This caused trouble for Bancroft, since the town was unable to comfortably support two churches. As a result, Bancroft caused the law to be changed, and was thus one of the first to maintain and act on the new idea of the necessity of a separation of Church and State.⁵⁸

In 1786, Aaron Bancroft married Lucretia Chandler, daughter of an old but Tory New England family, who had lost almost all their goods in the Revolution. They had thirteen children in all, which did not aid their strained financial state. Growing up in his father’s household, Bancroft and his siblings were encouraged to read widely and well, and especially to study and understand both sides of any debated point. Nye says that “the distinctive traits of George Bancroft’s mature personality may be traced to the influence of his home and parents as they were in the decade from 1800 to 1810.” Aaron Bancroft was himself a historian of no little talent, publishing a *Life of Washington* in 1807. He wrote specifically “for the unlettered portion of the community,” but with real scholarship, unlike Parson Weems’ popular anecdotes. Thus, George grew up in a home where intellectual and especially literary pursuits were very much encouraged, and this must have profoundly influenced his later career. His early education was supplied by reading at home in his father’s library and, to a lesser degree, by the “halfway decent” school at the other end of the village which he attended from age eight to eleven. At six years old, the boy was so well read that his father asked him to settle a point of Roman history which was being disputed.⁵⁹

In 1811, Bancroft was sent to John Phillips’ Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire, a prestigious preparatory school with a liberal and democratic atmosphere which prepared its students specifically for Harvard. The family was almost unable to handle the tuition fees, but Bancroft was naturally serious and studious, and rapidly became one of the Academy’s best students. He carried off the Greek and Latin prize in his second year, even though he was one of the

⁵⁷ Nye, 187.

⁵⁸ Nye, 3, 12, 5-8.

⁵⁹ Nye, 9-15.

youngest students, and became a beneficiary of a scholarship fund established by the headmaster, established for just such serious but impecunious students. Bancroft took his entrance examinations after two years at Exeter, and entered Harvard with the freshman class of 1813, just before he reached his teens.⁶⁰

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, Harvard was already becoming known as a college attended by the sons of rich and influential families throughout the country. But during Bancroft's matriculation, the student body was still primarily farm lads like Bancroft himself. The school was very small, with only a few hundred students, and Bancroft's closest acquaintances during his time there were some of the younger faculty members. As at Exeter, Bancroft was assisted with tuition costs by the school, so he was able to pursue his studies without putting his family under extreme stress. Bancroft devoted himself to his studies, taking little part in the social life and amusements of his colleagues, shocked by their lighthearted attitude towards their studies and lamenting their tendency to sports and fiction rather than to "good moral" books. Bancroft graduated in 1817 with high honors, second in his class, but remained at Harvard for another year as a graduate student, preparing himself for the ministry.⁶¹

When Bancroft entered, Harvard was drifting towards liberalism, so much so that the more conservative New Englanders were beginning to send their sons elsewhere. The president, Kirkland, began incorporating European thought and methods into the school, appointing faculty, such as Edward Everett and George Ticknor, who had pursued graduate studies in Germany. Bancroft showed such great promise as a student that the Harvard faculty and the president recommended that he be sent to Göttingen in Germany for a few years to perfect his studies. Bancroft was delighted with the idea, though his parents were less enthusiastic, fearful that their son would be adversely affected by what was considered the looseness and immorality of Germany culture. But they could not negate a proposal made by the president of Harvard himself, even though John Adams, when asked his opinion, was firm in the belief that the boy should continue his studies in his home country. In May 1818, Bancroft received a scholarship from Harvard to study in Germany, and sailed for Europe at the end of June.⁶²

On August 14, 1818, Bancroft arrived in Göttingen, seat of Germany's most renowned university, full of plans for making the best possible use of this opportunity. In late September, after a month of gaining connections in the new city and polishing his German, Bancroft formally matriculated at the University. By late September, he had settled into a routine of study that would have broken the health of many less determined students, studying from 5 a.m. until midnight, with only an hour break for dinner and a walk, though occasionally he would allow himself the luxury of a social call on a professor or, more rarely, a visit to a beer hall with the other students.⁶³

⁶⁰ Nye, 16-18.

⁶¹ Nye, 19-26.

⁶² Nye, 20, 29-32.

⁶³ Nye, 33-37.

Bancroft had been sent to Göttingen to finish his preparations for the ministry, but by the time a year had passed, he began to be less certain of his choice of a profession, and of his own beliefs. In addition, he was fully aware that the notoriously liberal nature of German theology might render it difficult or impossible to return to New England and become a cleric, even if he so desired. He decided that he needed to think seriously about changing his intended profession. By late 1819, Bancroft had become bored with studying, and was disgusted with the personal appearance and manners of his fellow students and with their attitude, especially towards theology and the Bible. On September 9, 1820, George Bancroft publicly defended his nine theses and received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with the congratulations of the faculty for his unusually excellent scholarship and “prodigious learning.” Deciding that he wanted to spend more time studying in Germany, Bancroft decided to attend the University at Berlin. He took courses with many prominent German scholars, and was notably unimpressed by Hegel, who he felt to be half unintelligible and entirely uninspiring. Bancroft studied less exclusively and began to develop more of a social life in Berlin, becoming so comfortable that on New Year’s 1821, he had to write himself a set of resolutions to rise earlier, exert himself more, and master French and Italian. A month later, he received word that he had been offered a scholarship by Harvard to fund a year of travel in France and Italy.⁶⁴

Bancroft was disappointed to leave Berlin, but made quite a tour through Germany and France, attending lectures and visiting intellectual luminaries as he went, finally ending up in Paris, where he became a protege of Washington Irving, who introduced into Paris’s best social circles. In September 1821 Bancroft bade farewell to Paris and began a walking tour through Italy, fetching up at Rome six weeks later. By October 22, he had reached Milan, and was still debating whether he should become a minister or a teacher, developing a plan for a new school in the German fashion. Bancroft spent the rest of the year traveling through Rome and being entertained, as in Paris, by the best circles in Rome. But the relative dissipation did not keep him from his studies, which he pursued in books in the evenings and physically, among the wonders of Italy, in the day time. Nor did it keep him from thinking about his future plans. On January 1, 1822, after great meditation, he decided that he still strongly desired to enter the ministry, and set himself to that purpose.⁶⁵

Having made his decision, his mood lightened, and he spent a merry few months sightseeing, at one point being thrown in jail for a few nights in Amalfi because he was unable to show the proper passports. He received word that he was expected to return home in June, and began the journey from Rome to Marseilles to catch the American packet home. This journey was one of the most pleasant parts of his sojourn in Europe, and included a visit with Lord Byron, during which Byron gave Bancroft an autographed copy of *Don Juan*. On June 12, Bancroft boarded the ship which was to take him home.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Nye, 39-48.

⁶⁵ Nye, 49-54.

⁶⁶ Nye, 55-57.

Bancroft returned home with his mind set on settling down and entering the ministry. But his reception at home was less than warm. Even his closest friend, Andrews Norton, who had been instrumental in securing him funds to go to Germany, was so horrified at the transformation in his friend, from the serious farm lad to a “popinjay,” that he requested that Bancroft drop their friendship. Only Edward Everett, who had himself studied in Germany, was understanding.⁶⁷

Bancroft realized that he needed to amend the way he presented himself, and set about doing so, while actively seeking a pastorate. Meanwhile, he tutored Harvard students, with less than stellar results. His fondness for and implementation of the German system led his students to develop an “instant dislike” for him, and it was not long before his Greek classes openly rebelled, mocking him and singing rude songs under his window at night. Nevertheless, the students were making much better progress than any class in the history of Harvard. But lack of support from the administration and most of the faculty caused Bancroft to again turn his thoughts to his plan for a novel secondary school. In collaboration with a friend, Joseph Cogswell, Bancroft made plans for what Nye calls one of the most important experiments of the nineteenth century.⁶⁸

While planning this new school, Bancroft was still attempting to obtain a position as a clergyman, but his sermons were too unusual and foreign for the New Englanders. In the spring of 1823, he decided to drop the idea of the clergy for good, and devote himself to teaching. Bancroft’s clerical career was not the only one that ended inauspiciously in 1823. He had written a number of poems during his time in Europe, and after revising and polishing them, he had them published, dedicated to President Kirkland. Unfortunately, the verses are unremarkable and rather sentimental, and the reaction of the public was not very generous. In later years, he gathered up and destroyed as many of the copies of his poems as he could get his hands on, so that he would not be remembered by them. He had failed as a tutor, a minister, and a poet, and his last hope lay in his new school.⁶⁹

Because of the growing number of Southerners coming North to be educated, Bancroft and Cogswell initially considered opening their school further south, near Baltimore. But they eventually decided to remain in New England. In June 1823, they completed their Harvard duties and began to actively search for a suitable location. They soon found a beautiful site near Northampton, consisting of two stone houses on fifty acres of land, at a reasonable rent. They named their venture the Round Hill School, and opened on October 1, 1823. The school was immediately extremely successful, and provided the most extensive and thorough preparatory curriculum in the U.S. from 1823 to 1831. The school was quite select, admitting only ten to twenty students, between the ages of nine and twelve, who had not attended a rival school in the past. With the exception of two three week vacations, one at Christmas and the other in June, the school term lasted the entire year. In the German fashion, sports and gymnastics were added to the

⁶⁷ Nye, 57-59.

⁶⁸ Nye, 60-62.

⁶⁹ Nye, 64-66.

already extensive curriculum. The boys were required to dress in uniform, and pocket money was forbidden, lest “economic democracy [be] destroyed.”⁷⁰

Besides Cogswell and Bancroft, there was only one other teacher, a young man from the University of Paris, who had been hired to teach French. Cogswell took on most of the administrative duties, leaving Bancroft with the bulk of the teaching. This worked well for some time, and the school began to receive favorable notices. The workload was much higher than that of similar institutions, but presented in a more approachable format, making it “pleasant and diverting” in comparison to usual practices. The students were taken on day trips to places of interest in the area, visiting Prescott at his home and John Adams at Nahant. The reputation of the school grew, and with it enrollment. Students came from all over the United States, from Canada, the West Indies, Mexico and Brazil. The future diplomat and historian John Lothrop Motley entered as a student during its second year, and the school was visited by distinguished personages from all over the world, among them Lafayette and Winfield Scott.⁷¹

For the first two or three years, Bancroft was happy with his position, doing little besides work with his boys and content in the knowledge that he was “well on the way to revolutionizing native educational theory.” But eventually he began to feel that he was not really suited to the role of a schoolmaster. He was often ridiculed and ill-treated by his students for his habits and mannerisms, and found it increasingly difficult to simultaneously teach and pursue his own work, translations of German works and textbooks for American use.⁷²

Starting in 1823, Bancroft regularly published pieces in the *North American Review*, usually reviews of German works. The editor was Jared Sparks, a well respected man of letters, the first professor of history in the United States and an associate of Prescott’s. Jared Sparks appreciated Bancroft’s pieces, but sometimes found it necessary to adjust the style of the pieces, as Bancroft’s writing was somewhat too full of “effulgences” for his readers’ taste. Bancroft and Sparks had several heated arguments on this topic. Though Bancroft never really appreciated Sparks’ interference, the two men remained friends, and their clashes were actually of use to Bancroft, instilling “a sense of independence and self-direction” and making him aware of some of his major stylistic faults.⁷³

Bancroft’s articles on German literature soon gained him a reputation as “one of the most promising young literary critics in America.” In 1827, just after his marriage to Sarah Dwight, he wrote an article on Mrs. Hemans’ poetry which contains the most complete statement of his concept of “moral excellence” in art, which was central to his literary creed. According to Bancroft, the duty of the artist is to discern and bring out the “nobility of human nature and its connection with God,” because so-called art which does not contain an element of morality “can be neither beautiful nor true,” and cannot endure, “for vice is transient.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Nye, 66-68.

⁷¹ Nye, 68-72.

⁷² Nye, 73-74.

⁷³ Nye, 74-80.

⁷⁴ Nye, 76, 80.

Bancroft applied this theory to a series of articles on German literature which he was writing during the summer of 1827. In the form of a review of three books by German authors, the series of articles formed the first complete and comprehensive review of German thought to appear in an American periodical, and immediately gained Bancroft status as a critic. Nye says that Bancroft reached his peak here – his “critical powers were never again at so high a point.” This series was the last of his “distinguished” contributions to the journals – he wrote only a few more minor reviews in 1828 and 1829. Notably, he made his first public reference to the “slavery question” in 1831, in a review of the German Boeckh’s *Economy of Athens*. The reference, though clear, was oblique and did not mention the United States by name, and though, as demonstrated by letters to his wife, he was both interested in the problem of slavery and unsympathetic to it, he was “unwilling to make an issue of it.”⁷⁵

By 1831, the young schoolmaster was wearying both of controversy and the Round Hill School. The school, having started out perhaps too strong, was beginning to fail – its curriculum covered as much as the first two years of college, and the “shrewd New England Yankees” saw no reason to pay twice to educate their sons. The life of a scholar and critic seemed more and more appealing, and Bancroft’s marriage into the prestigious Dwight family provided him with a satisfactory means of escape from teaching, in the form of an apprenticeship in the family mercantile business. In this position, he could support himself and his wife until he managed to make enough money as a scholar to maintain them independently. In March 1830, he turned over his share of the school to Cogswell, and ceased to be a schoolmaster.⁷⁶

In January 1832, while on business for the Dwights, Bancroft wrote his wife that he had been reading a biased but insightful history of the American Colonies, written by the Tory Chalmers. Perhaps he decided to write a definitive history of the American colonies while reading this work, or perhaps it was simply the example of his father and Jared Sparks, who had both written successful historical works. Whatever the propelling force, by 1832 or 1833 Bancroft had decided to take on the task of exposing the “truths of universal importance” that lay in American history. By the time Bancroft had decided to become a historian, historical thinking had become something of a derivative of both the Romantic and Rationalistic schools of thought, characterized by objectivity and most especially a concept of what would eventually be termed the Grand Narrative. This held that there was a controlling force behind human events, and that all history moved in the direction of social progress. Each nation was considered to possess a “national genius” which motivated their historical development. Formulated by men with whom Bancroft had studied or whose works he had reviewed, it was only natural that Bancroft’s own histories should fall into this pattern. He was the first to apply these theories to the history of the United States, but on larger scale, his work was a culmination of a “century of historiographical tradition and theory.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Nye, 80-81.

⁷⁶ Nye, 81-83.

⁷⁷ Nye, 94-97.

Bancroft's mode of composition demonstrated the same painstaking and methodical habits as his earlier endeavors. He composed on eight by six inch paper, writing only four lines per page and then filling in the space around them with additions and revisions. He would rewrite each sentence six or eight times, and revise each page as many as ten times. He woke at five and worked twelve or fourteen hours, usually beginning the day by reading a section of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to prepare his mind for his own writing.⁷⁸

After two years of intensive preparation and work, Bancroft published the first volume of his history of the United States in September 1834. The work was very well received, praised especially by Prescott as "as enduring, impartial, readable history – such as we greatly need." Within a year, it had found its way into over a third of New England households, and Bancroft was becoming a household word. In his preface to the last edition of the work, many decades later, Bancroft explains that he saw the formation of the new country, politically independent but based in European custom and principles, as the "most pregnant event of the seventeenth century." Note that he says the seventeenth century, not the eighteenth – for him, the foundations of the new nation lay not in the revolutionary actions of the colonists in the late eighteenth century, but in the early days of the colonies. He then specifies this statement, making it clear that he does not see the settlement of the colonies themselves as the critical moment, instead placing the starting point of the American epoch in the British revolution of 1688. In summary, then, the American Revolution was not an incidental, colonial uprising, but the continuation and fruit of the Glorious Revolution, and has a "claim to a world-wide character." Bancroft even goes so far as to say that "every effort, every contention, every war" at this time, regardless of its location, "pointed to the rivalry of the powers of Europe in North America." He completes his preface by saying that there is no dispute that "the paramount interest in the history of the world rests on the colonies held by Britain in North America."⁷⁹

The preface briefly laid out Bancroft's opinion concerning the background for the American experience; the introduction, written half a century earlier, reveals Bancroft's attitude towards America itself in the eighteen thirties. It is essentially a two page list of the benefits of the American cultural and political systems. Perhaps most striking to the modern day student are two of the benefits he mentions – "there is no national debt," and "an immense concourse of emigrants . . . is perpetually crowding to our shores, and the principles of liberty, uniting all interests . . . blend the discordant elements into harmonious union." One wonders what Bancroft would think of this nation now, when national debt has reached an obscene level, and racial and ethnic differences are used to encourage discord instead of harmony.⁸⁰

In the final paragraph of the introduction, Bancroft explicitly credits the "present happiness and glory" of America not to "blind destiny," but to "a favoring Providence," which was directly responsible for "calling our institutions

⁷⁸ Nye, 98.

⁷⁹ Nye, 98, 102; Bancroft, Vol. I, *iii-iv*.

⁸⁰ Bancroft, Vol I, 1-3.

into being.” This was in keeping with his view of history, and hence his theory of historical writing, which he explicated in an unpublished essay written most likely around 1834. Bancroft believed that “the world is in a constant state of advancement,” and that America was at the forefront of that advancement. It was the duty of the historian to “write the changes in humanity.” Since the world is always advancing, this means simply discerning and setting forth past evidence of human progress. In his essay, Bancroft considered the pattern of development of historical writing, from the ancient world to the present. The oldest historians followed the great man style of writing, seeking “the causes of events in the personal genius . . . of individuals.” Later historians, including Bancroft’s contemporaries, had largely discarded this style in favor of considering events “in their connections with one another.” But these historians, while closer to Bancroft’s style, fail in that they observe connections between events but not the overall pattern of advancement. For Bancroft, the “true historians” are those consider the place of events in the larger pattern of human history, in addition to their immediate setting, and who “apply the inductive methods to the pursuits of history.” Bancroft claims that this type of study will demonstrate “that humanity is steadily advancing, that the advance of liberty and justice is certain.”⁸¹

Bancroft’s belief in the continual advancement of mankind and in man’s “inherent natural goodness” was the theoretical basis for his political ideology. Since virtuous reason was a quality all men possessed, it followed that the common people made up the “highest earthly tribunal” when it came to government, religion and the arts. Throughout his political career, Bancroft would hold to this ideal, maintaining a philosophical background for his support of Jacksonian democracy. This came through so strongly in the *History of the United States* that his less democratic readers were highly critical of the tone of the volume. One critic said that Bancroft wrote the history of America “as if it were the history of the Kingdom of Heaven.” Another complained that it “voted for Jackson.” But though he irritated some readers, more were impressed by his work, and it went far to assist his political career.⁸²

In the 1834 election, Bancroft obtained the Anti-Masonic nomination as a candidate for the General Court. The Democratic party was anxious to form a coalition with the Anti-Masons, and Bancroft used the nomination to complete a “series of maneuvers” designed to demonstrate that he would be a valuable Democratic recruit. Though a Jacksonian, his history had found him favor and support among the Boston elite and even among some of the Whigs, and Bancroft used this advantage to vigorously aid the Democratic campaign against the Whig candidate for governor. In the end, he lost his own election, but by only a small margin, and in addition, he beat the Democratic nominee by four hundred votes. The Democrats were unable to ignore this success, and Bancroft soon became an important figure in Democratic party councils.⁸³

Over the next few years, Bancroft divided his time between campaigning and preparing the second volume of his history, covering the period from 1660 to

⁸¹ Bancroft, Vol. I, 3; Nye, 99-100.

⁸² Nye, 100, 103, 106.

⁸³ Nye, 108.

1689, and as well written and accurate as the first. When it was published in 1837, it was quite well received. Prescott wrote Bancroft to commend him for not getting careless, and also to ask why he flirted with the “troublesome termagant” politics, when the “glorious Muse of History” was so receptive to him. The Scottish author James Grahame, who had also written a history of the United States, openly confessed that he thought that Bancroft’s work was “far superior” to his own. Even Carlyle praised the history, though he gently criticized its “ardently democratic” tone, reminding Bancroft that “all things have light *and* shadow.”⁸⁴

At the time the second volume was published, Bancroft was personally experiencing the truth of this statement. The light of his successes was overshadowed by the death of his dearly beloved wife, Sarah, a month before the appearance of volume II and immediately following the birth of their third child, George Jr. Her loss grieved Bancroft deeply, but also cut his ties with her family, the Dwights, who strongly disapproved of his political aspirations. Bancroft sent his three young children to live with his sister, and set himself to pursue his political ambitions unchecked.⁸⁵

The campaign of 1837 ended up being a disaster for the Democratic party, due to the political stress of the economic downturn. This led the party to reconsider its leadership. David Henshaw, Collector of the Port of Boston, who had led the party for many years, was deposed in late 1837, and the position was offered to Bancroft. Bancroft was unsure whether he should take the position, seeing as he would then become avowedly a politician rather than a scholar, but after considering the position carefully, he decided that he would accept it. In 1838, George Bancroft was formally presented as the new Collector of the Port of Boston and leader of the Massachusetts Democratic party. It had taken less than five years for the bookish scholar to be transformed into a major political figure.⁸⁶

Bancroft’s rise to power did not weaken his calling as a historian. He continued work on the third volume of his history as he settled into his new position. It was not always easy for him to adjust to the change in his status, especially as his official Democratic political standing lowered his social status in the eyes of the Boston elite. The Brahmins considered politics to be sordid, outside of the scope of a true gentleman, and many of them dropped Bancroft’s acquaintance in consequence. His remarriage on August 16, 1838, to his brother-in-law’s sister, Elizabeth Bliss, helped him regain some of his standing, as she was a widow of one of Daniel Webster’s junior partners. But even so, the historian’s plunge into politics had essentially permanently distanced him from Brahmin culture.⁸⁷

Despite Prescott’s earlier warning, Bancroft found no difficulty in combining his two callings, “ruling Massachusetts politics” while continuing his historical studies. In 1839, the third volume, covering the years from 1689 to 1748, was published. Despite the author’s increasingly distracted life, the new volume was

⁸⁴ Nye, 111-113.

⁸⁵ Nye, 113.

⁸⁶ Nye, 116.

⁸⁷ Nye, 118-120.

fully on par with the quality of the previous two. Prescott hailed it warmly, describing Bancroft in the *North American Review* as one of the “great historical writers of the age.” But, in what almost seems a pattern, the success of the new volume coincided with failure in Bancroft’s political life. The Democratic party fought tooth and nail for the election of Van Buren, but the victory went to Harrison, putting the Whigs in power again in Massachusetts. This meant that Bancroft’s position as Collector of the Port of Boston would have to be forfeited, as it was a political appointment and would be turned over to a Whig. As expected, shortly after Harrison came to office, he cleaned out the Democratic appointments, including Bancroft’s, and replaced them with Whigs.⁸⁸

Bancroft did not allow the loss of his job to influence his productivity. He worked tirelessly with his colleagues to rebuild the Democratic party, even though no appointments were to be had at the time. Nor did he let his scholarship flag, working now on his fourth volume. He had agents in Paris and London digging up source material, and he himself sent out a stream of letters all over America and Europe, asking for copies of archives and records, obtaining information on Indians and the madness of George III. He would get up at dawn and work intensely until breakfast, then spend the rest of the day on political matters. His reputation as a scholar continued to grow. He was one of the speakers at a dinner given for Dickens on his tour through America, and Dickens thought highly of him, though he learned quickly not to speak of the obnoxious Democrat in more elite circles. Harvard offered Bancroft an honorary degree, and in 1843 he was appointed to the Harvard Board of Overseers, which position he promptly used to rate the college for its sectarianism and decadence.⁸⁹

It was in 1843, during the presidential election, that the next major change in Bancroft’s career came about. Still at the head of the Democratic party in Massachusetts, Bancroft was influential in James Polk’s nomination as Democratic candidate for president. Shortly afterwards, the current gubernatorial candidate, Marcus Morton, decided to drop his campaign, handing it over to Bancroft. Even though Bancroft now had the dual responsibility of supporting Polk’s campaign and running his own, he continued his historical work, sometimes spending as much as twelve hours a day examining documents. It was well that Bancroft was able to devote some of his election term to his scholarship, because the gubernatorial election itself ended up being a resounding disaster. Bancroft was a skilled politician, but too honest and forthright to be able to survive and fight back in the midst of a smear campaign. The petty rumors, such as those that he had plagiarized some of his works, were easy to ignore, but he was less able to combat Whig accusations that he supported governmental force and possessed “revolutionary ideas” about government. When the elections were completed, Bancroft had been soundly defeated, the worst Democratic loss in a decade.⁹⁰

Though Bancroft had lost the governorship, he was delighted that Polk had won the presidency. State politics were beginning to drag on him, and his

⁸⁸ Nye, 122-125.

⁸⁹ Nye, 126-129.

⁹⁰ Nye, 132-134.

endorsement of Polk meant that he could reasonably hope for a position in Washington. He was offered a cabinet seat, but he did not really want it, as it would only mean more politics and a still unfinished history. Instead, he asked Polk if perhaps his familiarity with German and French could be put to use, as ambassador to Prussia. Despite his request, Polk appointed him as Secretary of the Navy, privately promising him a diplomatic mission in the future if he would accept the cabinet position. Bancroft accepted and moved his family to Washington. Though he had never been associated with the sea, Bancroft brought about a number of necessary reforms in the Navy, including outlawing the “casual flogging” of seamen. Recognizing the critical need for trained officers in the Navy, Bancroft employed his educational expertise in the establishment of the Naval Academy in 1845. In less than nine months after his appointment, Bancroft’s various reforms had “completely changed the course of the American Navy.”⁹¹

The pressure of his political responsibilities was greater than ever before, but even so Bancroft did not desert the Muse of History. He worked tirelessly, gathering material and preparing the next volume, in addition to maintaining a running argument with President Quincy of Harvard over a statement Bancroft had made in Volume II about an assertion in James Grahame’s history. Nonetheless, the fourth volume was of necessity much longer in preparation than the previous ones, and had still not been completed in 1846, when Polk made good his promise to Bancroft and offered him a mission to London, to treat for a relaxation of the duties on tobacco and the trade restrictions between America and the British West Indies. Bancroft went to London willingly, but “with a chip on his shoulder.” A staunch democrat, he had very little love for the English aristocratic system, and his first letters home were passionately nationalistic. But by the end of his three years there, he had been softened by contact with the despised nation, and even admitted when he left London that he had been greatly improved by the experience.⁹²

Naturally, Bancroft took full advantage of his stay in Europe to advance his work, using personal influence to obtain private family documents, and amassing huge quantities of material. During his three years in residence, he managed to accumulate the “most complete collection of original source materials that any American historian of his time possessed,” which would become the basis for the final volumes of his history. His wife jokingly accused him of flirting with all the ladies he met in hopes that they would have some papers “in the garret” that he could use.⁹³ Meanwhile, the revolutions of 1848 were beginning to flare up, to Bancroft’s delight, as he watched the “the Old World . . . shaking off its chains and emancipating and enthroning the masses.” In his professional capacity, he exhorted the American State Department to support and maintain the revolutionary movements in Europe.⁹⁴ But his sojourn as minister was not to endure much longer, for 1848 was an election year in America and Bancroft’s

⁹¹ Nye, 134, 135, 142, 144-145.

⁹² Nye, 159-161.

⁹³ Nye, 168.

⁹⁴ Nye, 171-172.

position was as precarious as that of the European aristocrats. With the election of the Whig Zachary Taylor, Bancroft knew that his time was limited. This was just as well, for two years as minister, combined with his tireless efforts on the part of his historical work, had begun to take a toll on his energy. Though he was in perfect health, he was nearly fifty, and he no longer recovered from the stress and long hours as easily as when he was younger.⁹⁵

Bancroft had planned to resign his position and return home even before Taylor's election. But he was busy with the project that had absorbed most of his time in London, negotiating loosened trade restrictions which would give the British free trade across the entire coast of America. He was acting on written orders from the previous Secretary of State, his superior, Buchanan, but the Whigs, in particular Daniel Webster, seized on this opportunity to announce that he had been acting on his own whim and without authority. Bancroft knew there was no point in trying to defend himself publicly against these false allegations, but he was crushed and mortified when Taylor appointed another man to fill his position and allowed Bancroft to hear of it through a public dismissal. The customary and tactful political method was to privately inform the officeholder of his replacement, and allow him to resign, maintaining a show of autonomy. Bereft of even the appearance of retiring in success, Bancroft was forced to return home "a superseded and suspected failure."⁹⁶

The Bancroft family landed in America in November 1849, and immediately moved to New York. Bancroft's politics made him not warmly welcome in Boston, and he liked the buzz and bustle of the growing city, though, in true New England fashion, he was wont to complain that New York was "a city of social climbers and money-grubbers, with not a real scholar in the lot." Bancroft had no duties or positions to fill in the city or in politics; it was the first time since the publication of his first volumes that he had had the ability to devote himself entirely to his work, without interruption or the press of other responsibilities. He immediately set himself to the task of completing his history, with an aim to carrying it up to "the present time." His sojourn in Europe had been very useful in this regard; he told a colleague that he was "practically independent of external historical aid" because of the extent to which he had ransacked Europe and America over the past few years. His library was so vast that it occupied the entire third floor of the house, including the hallways. He followed a regular pattern in his days, beginning work at dawn, writing until early afternoon, and then going for a horseback ride through New York's parks. He maintained this habit of afternoon rides for the rest of his life. The evenings he allowed himself for relaxation, social events, and the like.⁹⁷

The next two installments of Bancroft's work, Volumes IV and V, took him only two years after his return from Europe to complete. Published simultaneously in 1852, they were meant as a set, covering the years from 1748 to 1766. These volumes also received great praise, though Prescott mildly chided it for being "showy" and a few felt that the "historian seems to give way to the

⁹⁵ Nye, 175-176.

⁹⁶ Nye, 179-181.

⁹⁷ Nye, 184-185.

eulogist.” But they were overall considered as brilliantly successful as the preceding volumes, and Bancroft was encouraged to continue his work. The sixth volume was published in 1854, covering the period to May 1774 and including Bancroft’s analysis of the causes of the Revolution. The year 1852 was an election year, and Prescott inquired if his old friend intended to drop history again for politics. But Bancroft was delighted with the rapid and successful progress of his history, and was emphatic in his refusal to be drawn back into the political maelstrom.⁹⁸

Bancroft’s speed in writing begs an inquiry as to the accuracy of his work, and in fact Prescott had at one point complained that Bancroft did not use sufficient primary sources. But Bancroft published a bibliography at the beginning of Volume VI, which showed that he was drawing on evidence as diverse and primary as any historian could wish. He did have a tendency to eschew references or citations, leaving the truth of his words to the reader’s trust, but this practice was due to his desire to write quickly and well, and a check of his work shows that the lack of references does not reflect a lack of scholarly accuracy. Random checks of chapters demonstrate that he used a wealth of primary and secondary sources, and used them accurately and thoroughly.⁹⁹

Though engrossed in the preparation of Volume VII, Bancroft took the time in 1855 to prepare and publish a volume of his essays and orations. The volume includes some of his weakest writing, but also a few of his best and most remarkable pieces. Chief among these are two essays on the philosophy of history, which alone, Nye says, “justified the publication of the volume.” Out of all his works, they contain the fullest and clearest statement of his historical philosophy, affirming his belief in man’s ability for intuitive reason and progress, and declaring history the record of man’s progress. History, for Bancroft, was not a mere chronicle of past events; it was “God’s plan for the advancement of mankind translated into action,” a deep and innate democracy unrelated to any political affiliation. Bancroft, in these essays, perfectly explicates the “great New England intellectual tradition” of transcendentalist thought and history, a tradition that was dying even as he spoke.¹⁰⁰

It took Bancroft a bit longer to prepare Volume VII, due to the mass of documents concerning the Revolution that had to be sifted through and analyzed. But the volume finally appeared in 1858, closely followed by Volume VIII in 1860. These two covered the period from May 1774 to June 1776, and were the best work he had produced to date, based almost entirely on colonial correspondence and records, and the most complete account of the crucial months leading to the Revolution yet. Bancroft took great care to treat England and the English with as “scrupulously fair” consideration as the Americans, in an attempt to “bring to his pursuit the freedom of an unbiassed [*sic*] mind.” In Bancroft’s view, prejudice and bias, beyond what is inescapable, is criminal in the historian, “at once falsifying nature and denying providence.” As they deserved, both volumes garnered an excellent reception, being described by Irving as “spicy and

⁹⁸ Nye, 189-191.

⁹⁹ Nye, 191-192.

¹⁰⁰ Nye, 195-197.

animating,” and complimented highly by Prescott, whose own work was at an end; he would be dead within a few months.¹⁰¹

The outbreak of the American Civil War put a pause to Bancroft’s historical work for nearly a decade after the publication of Volume VIII. The conflict and the uncertainty of the present state of the nation dulled Bancroft’s desire to write of its past, and though he did not hold a specific political office, he was often called on for advice as America’s foremost historian. Lincoln especially called on him when he needed legal precedent for a questionable move, and many other individuals, public and private, contacted Bancroft for information on a plethora of subjects. As a luminary, he also had to field requests for autographs and sponsorships, usually of other historians but once of a struggling young composer who begged the historian to endorse his never-performed symphony. Bancroft’s political affiliations during the war were complicated and did not fit into any specific stereotype. He was a Democrat who supported Lincoln’s policies, but for whom the war was about the restoration of the Union, not the abolition of slavery. However, he believed abolition to be the most efficient way to end the war, and thus supported abolition from a Unionist standpoint, while abhorring the use of abolition to gain political power (a Radical tactic) and being only remotely interested in abolition for its own sake. Though he had never supported slavery, at this point, Bancroft’s priority was on the survival of the Union.¹⁰²

Bancroft remained politically in the background during the war years, but with Lincoln’s assassination, he stepped back into active politics for the first time in over a decade. Detesting the Radical Republicans, who purposed to prevent a return to anything resembling the *status quo ante bellum*, Bancroft threw himself into the fray on the side of Andrew Johnson, striving for moderation towards the crushed Confederacy. Bancroft did not take on an official government position; instead, he stepped into a role that would today be unremarkable, but which at that time had to be kept absolutely secret. Johnson, a rough, hardly literate Tennessean, realized that his style of oratory, effective though it might be in the Tennessee backwaters, would be a liability in the political battle he was about to engage in. He also recognized that the experienced, polished New England aristocrat could produce arguments in the style and with the impact that he so desperately needed. He asked Bancroft to become his speechwriter, and the historian complied. His first speech, as relayed through the mouth of the Tennessee tailor, won praise across the nation. One journal pointed to its elegance and persuasiveness, from such a rough author, as a proof of the success of democracy. A few people who were most familiar with Johnson and who were skeptical of miracles suspected that the President had not written his speech himself. But neither Johnson nor Bancroft admitted to the device, and the secret remained hidden for nearly a half century.¹⁰³

As the American political pot continued to seethe into the Reconstruction years, Bancroft returned to his historical work, and Volume IX, dealing with the years of Revolution from 1776 to 1778, appeared in 1866. This time, his work had

¹⁰¹ Nye, 198-201.

¹⁰² Nye, 204, 219-222.

¹⁰³ Nye, 227-231.

the effect of stirring up a hornet's nest. Bancroft, in the interest of remaining unbiased, had not varnished over certain culpabilities and missteps on the part of several Revolutionary figures, effectively "knocking laurel wreaths from the heads of heroes." Unfortunately, these figures had many "living and vocal grandsons," who sprang to the defense of their maligned ancestors. Owing to Bancroft's suggestion that Joseph Reed had been friendly with a Hessian officer during the war, Reed's grandson began a vitriolic exchange of refutations and counter-refutations with the historian. In the course of the debate, Reed junior made some remarks about Benjamin Rush that brought Rush's grandson "charging into the fray," and at the same time, the grandsons of the other disgraced heroes came down on Bancroft. It was all too much for the harried historian, and it was a welcome distraction when Johnson set about determining a reward for his "anonymous collaborator." He initially offered Bancroft his old position as Collector of the Port of Boston, but Bancroft "emphatically declined," citing his unwillingness to move again and remembering the cold reception he had received by the upper-class Bostonians when he was first appointed. Instead, as usual, he asked for a diplomatic post as his reward, and was finally appointed to the post he had always longed for, the position of minister in Berlin with the title "Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of Prussia." He was sixty-seven years old.¹⁰⁴

Bancroft's sojourn in Berlin was as pleasant as he could have hoped. His diplomatic tasks were not extremely demanding, and over the course of the next seven years, he flourished in the European social and political atmosphere. The embassy and the minister's house saw many prestigious literary and political figures come and go, and eventually Bancroft became close friends with Bismarck himself. As the historian of the rise of democratic America, Bancroft watched the evolution of the German nation with great interest. But he failed to see the developments for what they really were – the "evolution of a leviathan state." He saw Germany rising as the American republic had done, and Bismarck as a new Washington. As Nye says, forty years of writing history "to prove the existence of a divine plan for eventual world unity and freedom" had led him to see proof of this plan in everything, even where it was not. Finally, in 1873, Bancroft felt that the time had come for him to retire from politics and return to America. He was seventy-three years old and his great historical work was still unfinished; that was to be his focus for the remaining years of his life. In June, he and his wife departed Berlin, to the regret of the inhabitants, with "none of the bitter taste" of the finale of his last diplomatic venture. Bancroft left Germany a beloved and respected diplomat, mourned by the friends who remained behind and by Germany as a whole, represented by a message signed by nearly a hundred scholars from across the country, which declared that his name had become "the intellectual possession of every one among us." The American historian had become an internationally beloved statesman.¹⁰⁵

Bancroft rapidly settled back into life in America, tending his roses and completing his history. It was in his rosebeds at his summer home in Newport,

¹⁰⁴ Nye, 235, 237-240.

¹⁰⁵ Nye, 244, 255-256, 247-248, 278-279.

Rhode Island that he discovered an unusual sport, a red-blossomed rose that blossomed all year. This was the “American Beauty” that is now familiar to every rose gardener. In 1874, four decades of labor came to an end with the publication of the tenth volume of Bancroft’s history, which brought the history up to the end of the Revolutionary War. The seven years and multitude of outside obligations that had come between this final volume and the ones preceding it had done nothing to dampen its quality. It was as carefully written and meticulously researched as its predecessors. But the historical climate had changed since the war; narrative history was falling out of fashion, and the new, “scientific” method of historical writing was on the rise, influenced not a little by the emergence of Darwinism. While the reaction of the public was as warm as always, the academic and scholarly reaction, while not cold, was cooler than it had been at Bancroft’s peak. His critics, too young to recall or understand the transcendental origins of Bancroft’s political theory, thought his style was overblown, even “obscure and turgid.” For the younger historians, including Henry Adams, who had been “brought up on Darwin and Comte and German seminars,” Bancroft’s “religio-philosophical” style of history no longer held any real meaning.¹⁰⁶

Undaunted by his drop in popularity, Bancroft did not cease working when he had completed his history. He set himself to a full-scale revision of his history, revising not only the content but also the style, in favor of “simplicity and clarity.” This resulted in a “ruthless pruning of the style” which condensed the ten volumes into six. In addition, he produced two more volumes of constitutional history, as well as a number of shorter pieces and a biography. The volumes of constitutional history, while not intended as part of the set, were written to complete Bancroft’s intention of recording the history of the American republic through the founding years. But out of all his works, Bancroft’s monumental history remained the “finest thing” that he had done. It was the first authoritative historical treatment of the American founding, and remained “unsurpassed in fundamental research for twenty years.” Most importantly, he transformed the history of the Colonies and the early republic, converting the knowledge held in “dry, faded documents in the dusty archives of two continents” into a living, vibrant, flesh-and-blood narrative. Bancroft had succeeded in making a masterful piece of historiography into a readable, artfully crafted piece of literature.¹⁰⁷

Bancroft’s final years were placid and happy, despite his lament that so many of those who had wished him well at the outset of his endeavors no longer remained to rejoice in their conclusion. He accepted that he was a “tired old man” and settled into a calm and restful twilight, rejoicing in the presence of his children and grandchildren, and maintaining correspondence with scholars and luminaries as widespread as Grover Cleveland and Robert Browning. He continued to work in a desultory fashion, for after a half century he could not forsake his muse altogether, and, in 1889, completed a biography of Martin Van Buren that had lain unfinished since 1844. With the completion of this work, he laid his pen to rest for good. He lived much in his memories, and his recognition of current events and identities began to fade, like a fire that has burned down to a

¹⁰⁶ Nye, 282-286.

¹⁰⁷ Nye, 286-287, 291, 297.

pile of glowing embers, flaming forth only rarely. At the end of 1890, he caught cold after going to Newport to inspect his beloved roses, and insisted on taking his daily walk despite his illness. The end came quickly after that, and on January 17, 1891, he died peacefully in his bed, with his son John beside him.¹⁰⁸

George Bancroft is an outstanding example to the historian who pursues another vocation as his main profession, and is only able to pursue the muse in his spare time. Bancroft's personal interest in history reflects his conviction that every individual should have some kind of inner life, and that the best way to achieve that was through connecting people to history and nature. His focus, from his graduation from Harvard and throughout his life, was to teach. First in Germany, then with his own school, and finally through his histories, pedagogy was always Bancroft's passion. He discussed the meaning and purpose of history with many correspondents. Not the least of these was his younger contemporary, William Hickling Prescott, whose family circumstances and reason for taking up history were very different from Bancroft's, but whose autodidactic qualities and fascination with his subject make them an interesting contrast.

IV. "Harmonious Hickling"

William Hickling Prescott's early education showed no promise of his becoming a great historian. A jovial young man, he abhorred unnecessary study, doing only the minimum of work necessary to get him through his classes. His decision to become a historian was somewhat forced by the development of severe rheumatoid arthritis, which prevented him from pursuing his intended occupation, that of a lawyer, or any of the other professions, such as trade, that were considered respectable for a young man of good family. The only door open to him was that of a literary life.¹⁰⁹

He was born in Salem on May 4, 1796, the only one of the three historians to be born in the eighteenth century. His father was a successful barrister, his mother "a woman of great energy, who seemed to have been born to do good." He was the second child, but the first died in infancy. His early education came from his mother, and her influence was key for his later development. He was sent to a dame school between the ages of four and seven, after which he attended school under Jacob Newman Knapp, who was hired as a private teacher by Mr. Prescott and a few of his close friends. Young Prescott was described as a "bright, merry boy, with an inquisitive mind, quick perceptions, and a ready, retentive memory." He was good with his lessons, but "loved play better than books," and was never one of Knapp's best pupils. He was described as large for his years, but he was not very vigorous and, in contrast to Parkman, did not enjoy athletic sports, preferring "light reading" and games that required little physical exertion. In adulthood, Prescott often mentioned that he had always loved books, but he did not enjoy schoolwork and was not a remarkable student.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Nye, 291, 297-298.

¹⁰⁹ Ticknor, 2-4, 17, 58.

¹¹⁰ Ticknor, 2-4.

In 1808, the Prescotts moved to Boston, where William was sent to what was considered the best classical school in New England, run by the Reverend Dr. Gardiner. Prescott *père* was insistent on his son receiving a classical education, and the instruction he received at the hands of Dr. Gardiner was undoubtedly crucial to his future success. Gardiner taught mostly orally, in a sort of conversational commentary, which may have influenced Prescott's writing style. Books were hard to obtain in Prescott's youth due to War of 1812, but the Ætheneum was just being developed. Children were officially not admitted, but William managed to get into the good graces of the proprietor and spent many of his free hours reading there. His choices were mostly adventure stories and romances – a young Don Quixote, he especially loved Amadis de Gaula and lamented the passing of the age of chivalry. He was very averse to actual study; though he would willingly learn those subjects required for admission to university, he would not learn anything beyond that save when compelled. This resulted in his being very well trained in the classics and essentially ignorant of those fields, such as mathematics and modern languages, that were not necessary for entrance. Two favorite amusements were important for his future – he loved roleplaying fighting scenes from romances and history, and competing with his best friend to make up elaborate tales of adventures. The effect of these pastimes is obvious in his skill at describing battles and relating adventures.¹¹¹

When he had completed the requisite course of preparatory studies, Prescott was admitted to Harvard as a sophomore at the age of fifteen. As in his younger days, he found scholarship less than captivating, and never applied himself more than he could help. He set himself a maximum amount of study time per day and never exceeded it, though he often did not achieve it. One day during his junior year, as he was leaving the dining hall, he was hit full in his open left eye with a hard crust of bread. He collapsed, displaying symptoms similar to those of a concussion, though he retained a perfect memory of the circumstances of the accident. The eye did not appear physically damaged, but he permanently lost sight. Nevertheless, after a few weeks of convalescence, he was able to return to college. But the results of the accident did not end there. During his convalescence, he decided, for the first time, to apply himself seriously to his work, and he returned to college insistent upon actually doing well and gaining the honors of a scholar. It was almost too late, but he did manage to raise his class standing considerably before his graduation. He struggled with mathematics and geometry to such an extent that he would merely memorize the examples, but his classical training, with his aptitude for Greek and Latin, allowed him to graduate with distinction, with the honor of reading a Latin poem of his own composition at Commencement. After graduation, he immediately became a student in his father's law office.¹¹²

A few months after he began legal studies, in January 1815, Prescott developed a minor inflammation in his good eye. Though initially not alarming, it increased rapidly overnight and he suffered severe pain and fever. The eye became opaque and he lost eyesight, rendering him completely blind. After a

¹¹¹ Ticknor, 7-14, 4, 8.

¹¹² Ticknor, 14-18, 19-22, 28.

week, the pain and fever subsided, and his sight in his good eye mostly returned, though the retina was damaged. Then, the afternoon that his fever broke, his knee began to swell. He was diagnosed with acute rheumatism, a verdict which was received with relief by the family, because it was very unlikely to render him permanently blind. He was unable to walk or function for fifteen weeks, and was forced to remain in a darkened room at all times, but he remained cheerful. Towards the end of this time, Prescott's family decided that he should travel to Europe, both for a change of scenery and to seek European medical advice.¹¹³

The voyage to Europe, which Prescott undertook in the autumn of 1816, was very unpleasant. He was severely ill and could barely eat for the entirety of the voyage, as the conditions of sea travel exacerbated his symptoms. After his arrival in the Azores, where his grandfather and family resided, he became so ill that he was confined to a darkened room for several weeks. When spring arrived, he left his relatives and traveled to London, where he consulted the best physicians, who concluded that not much could be done for him. He then made his way to Paris, and eventually to Rome and other tourist destinations in Italy. He was unable to travel extensively in the cities he resided in, or see much of the scenery, but he did manage to visit the Marquis de Lafayette. It was when while he was in Paris that he met George Ticknor, who would become his dear friend and eventual biographer. By pure chance, both Prescott and Ticknor had the same banker (who acted more like what might be called a travel agent nowadays, but also served as their host in the city), and thus they ended up being lodged in the same hotel. Prescott was one of the first people Ticknor encountered when he arrived from Germany, and as they were around the same age and moved in the same social circles, they soon found that they had much in common. That first day, they walked the streets of Paris together and then went to their banker's for dinner. But the exertion was too much for Prescott, and at the end of evening, he complained of feeling unwell. He remained bedridden for the next two weeks, and Ticknor stayed by him and nursed him until he was able to go out again. It was during these two weeks in the darkened sickroom that their mutual regard was formed, and Ticknor came to know him, as he says, better than any person outside his immediate family. Finally, Prescott was restored, if not to health, at least to equilibrium, and traveled to England, where he toured the areas around London and found, as he wrote to his friend Gardiner, the "sea-coal atmosphere" to be "extremely favorable" to his health. In midsummer of 1817, he embarked for home, and arrived there before the summer was over.¹¹⁴

After his arrival, Prescott was still in very poor health. He remained indoors as an invalid for a year after his return, staying in a darkened room with his only amusement being his sister and friends reading to him. During this time, he made his first literary attempt, submitting an article to the recently founded, but already prestigious *North American Review*. He kept this project a "deep secret," and sent it anonymously to the editors. It was refused, but Prescott was undiscouraged, though he told no one of his failure. He also took this dark period to begin to think of what career he should follow. The law was closed to him, by reason of his

¹¹³ Ticknor, 28-32.

¹¹⁴ Ticknor, 33-48.

infirmities, and he became somewhat desponding over the other options open to him, especially the possibility of becoming a merchant, which was one of the few respectable professions that his disabilities might permit him to engage in. Once the year was over, Prescott determined that he had demonstrated that domestic seclusion had had no positive effect on his health. As a result, he decided that less caution was necessary, and began venturing abroad. He found that no harm followed, and soon became able to carry on a more or less normal social life. As a result of his going back into society, he met and fell in love with Susan Amory, with whom he had a long and very happy marriage. On May 4, 1820, on his twenty-fourth birthday, they were married, and the young couple went to live in the Prescott house on Bedford Street.¹¹⁵

Shortly before his marriage, Prescott formed a club with some of his close friends, “for purposes both social and literary.” More than half of the members of this club later made their mark as authors, among them the American archivist, Jared Sparks. They read papers of their own composition at their meetings, laying them open for criticism and discussion. Soon, they decided to start a periodical including these compositions, called “The Club Room.” It was of short duration, only issuing four numbers overall, and those over the course of six months. Prescott himself submitted three works of fiction, none of which were significant of the styles which would later distinguish their author. Nevertheless, the periodical served its purpose to accustom the young men to writing for the public.¹¹⁶

As a married man, Prescott found it necessary to settle for certain upon some occupation. After much cogitation and delay, he decided on a life of “literary occupation.” In order to succeed, he knew he must lay stable foundations for his new profession, and he did so by devoting a fixed portion of each day to classical studies. His deficiency in modern literature was very large, and he addressed himself resolutely to the difficult task of remedying this, even going back to the basics of the English language. In the course of his studies, rather than reading the whole of one author, he merely read sufficient to provide him with an understanding of each author’s “style and general characteristics.” He occasionally took notes on his opinion of the works he was reading. He continued in this way, considering all the major English writers, including preachers, but also taking care to devote one hour of every day to studying the principal Latin classics. Over the period from 1822 to 1823, Prescott was able to do much of this studying on his own, as his health had improved greatly.¹¹⁷

During this time, he had a large amount of miscellaneous history read to him simply for his amusement, and went through a more or less complete course of old English drama. Then he moved from English literature to French, though he did not have a high opinion of French literature, considering it unoriginal and weak. Tiring of French, he turned to Italian literature, in which he read very exhaustively. He wrote much more upon it than he had on the English or French, and clearly preferred it. He occasionally considered devoting his life to Italian

¹¹⁵ Ticknor, 50-52.

¹¹⁶ Ticknor, 55-57.

¹¹⁷ Ticknor, 58-60.

studies, and the two articles he wrote on Italian literature were more matured than anything excepting his works relating to Spanish history. Prescott then attempted to move on to learning German, but his eye trouble had returned, and made it essentially impossible for him to learn a non-Romance language as thoroughly as he would have liked.¹¹⁸

It was at this point that Ticknor, who had been lecturing on Spanish literature for several years, offered to read some of his lectures to Prescott as an amusement. Prescott was so taken with the subject that he determined to continue with the study of Spanish, rather than German as he had initially intended. Ticknor gave him a list of books to begin with, and, at the beginning of December 1824, Prescott began studying with a tutor, and started reading Ticknor's recommendations shortly thereafter. At the end of January, he wrote Ticknor, telling him that the new language was coming on apace, and that he had "uncourteously resisted all invitations" which might interrupt his studies. In the same letter, he asked Ticknor if he could provide him with a Spanish copy of *Amadis de Gaula*, claiming that since Cervantes had "spared it from the bonfire," he was convinced that Ticknor must have it in his library somewhere. The young lad's fascination for *Amadis* had finally come around full circle to the study of the original.¹¹⁹

Prescott continued reading in a desultory fashion for the rest of the summer, but in the autumn he grew dissatisfied with "this unsettled and irregular sort of life" and began to look for a historical subject he could devote himself to. He proceeded without haste, recording in mid-October that "it is well to determine [the subject] with caution and accurate inspection." He was at first drawn to American history, and thought that this was where his calling would lie. But as he considered the question, he "unexpectedly" found himself being drawn more and more towards Spanish literature. At Christmas 1825, he made the memorandum that he was divided between three potential subjects – a history of Spain from the Moorish invasion to the consolidation of the monarchy, the conversion of ancient Rome from a republic to a monarchy, or "a biographical sketch of eminent geniuses." He recorded that he would "probably select the first," as it was more difficult than the history of Rome and "more novel and entertaining" than the biographical work. Before he finalized his decision, he was briefly distracted by the thought of producing something along the lines of a history of Italian literature, but the germ of *Ferdinand and Isabella* was already present in his memoranda. The subject was attractive not only because it allowed for the introduction of "new and interesting topics," but also because its rigor would force him to exert his best self. He was aware that he could write an entirely acceptable work on another subject, with far less work, but the main attraction of the Spanish subject was its difficulty. He notes in a passage in his memoranda that he was especially interested in the "age of Ferdinand" because of its importance to the modern world, "containing the germs of the modern system of European politics." For Prescott, the legitimacy of a historical subject for the historian lay in its ability to task the historian's capabilities, relate to the modern world in some

¹¹⁸ Ticknor, 60-69.

¹¹⁹ Ticknor, 70-72.

fashion, and be interesting in and of itself to historian and reader alike. On January 19, 1826, Prescott formally set himself to “the History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella.”¹²⁰

Having made his decision, Prescott began to amass the sources he would need for his enterprise, drawing up a preliminary list of what he required and sending it to the Minister at Madrid, Alexander Everett. Everett suggested that he travel to Spain and accumulate his sources himself, to ensure he obtained all that he required, but Prescott was forced to reject this suggestion. His eyes, never strong, were in an inflamed state at this time, and he knew from bitter experience that traveling only made his condition worse. He dared not risk the damage to them which might result from a trip overseas. Forestalling the obvious question on Everett’s part as to how he expected to be able to pursue his work in this physical state, Prescott outlined his intentions to hire a reader skilled in Latin, French and Spanish, who would be able to read to him what his own eyes were unable to handle. He explained that the state of his health was such that he could not go out into society, so the only entertainment available to him was his work. He told Everett that he looked “to literary pursuits as the principal and permanent source of future enjoyment.”¹²¹

Unfortunately, the writing of this very letter thrust him into a physical state from which he never entirely recovered. Feeling that the composition of the letter required more care than he would usually have employed, Ticknor overexerted himself, and suffered a recurrence of “stiffness of the right eye,” which he later described as “a new disorder.” He was bedridden in the dark for over four months, and was not even able to send the letter which had occasioned him so much pain. Remarkably for one snatched so unceremoniously from the cusp of a new undertaking, Prescott retained his typical good humor, though he was naturally discouraged. When he was finally able to consider a return to his work, in June 1826, he sent off the letter to Everett and recorded his hopes that he would be able to continue with his plans. Rather than bowing to the weight of his circumstances, he made a plan for his work. If he could not work his assigned six hours a day, he was to force himself to work at least four. Even more importantly, his physical constraints, like those of Francis Parkman, would require him to hone and specify his work, without wasting time “going too deeply or widely” into the subject, and excluding anything which did not directly relate to it. He must have patience, for the work could only proceed slowly, and he must take care to make “memoranda accurate and brief” for every item that was read to him. In this way, he hoped that he would be able to reach his goal in “five or six years.”¹²²

For many months, his disability was such that he could not even open a book, but he remained steadfast in his determination. He had difficulty procuring a reader who was familiar with Spanish, and so for a time employed a reader who did not understand the language; an arrangement which must have been as disagreeable to Prescott as it certainly was to the reader. Eventually, he applied to Ticknor to find a reader in the Modern Language department at Harvard, and a

¹²⁰ Ticknor, 72-76.

¹²¹ Ticknor, 76-77.

¹²² Ticknor, 78-79.

more skilled reader was soon discovered. As Prescott began to bring together his sources, he warned himself in his memorandum that he could not hope to be exhaustive, or to include every possible authority. Instead, he decided to be content with producing a work that was based more on secondary than on primary sources, and which would at least be a “novelty” for the English reader. In the autumn of 1827, his materials having arrived from Madrid, Prescott set himself and his new secretary to the burdensome task.¹²³

The death of his beloved eldest daughter in early 1829 put a halt to his composition just as he was beginning it. In his distress, he determined to reexamine “the evidences of the Christian revelation,” and proceeded in as meticulous a fashion as he did everything else. With the aid of his father, a lawyer, he reconsidered all of the evidence, focusing on the four Gospels and especially the relations of the miracles, examining them with the same criticality that he would have used on evidence in a court of law. The conclusion that the two Prescotts reached was that the Gospels themselves were authentic, and that even if what they signified were not a divine revelation, no other system of morals was as likely to “fit him for happiness here and hereafter.” Notably, though, he found that many of the orthodox Christian doctrines were not supported by the Gospels, and these he immediately and fundamentally rejected.¹²⁴

Prescott returned to his studies after a few weeks spent in this investigation, and spent some months in preparation of some articles and other pieces of work. It was summer before he turned again to his history, still focusing on having sources read to him by his secretary. Finally, on October 6, 1829, three and a half years after he started work on the project, Prescott “broke ground” on the actual work itself. The work went well, so well that by the end of the third month, he was actually distressed by the amount of writing he had produced, for it was his purpose to only write two volumes, and at the rate he was going, it seemed he would require five at least.

It was at this stage that Prescott began to solidify his theory of historical writing, which was greatly influenced by the historian Mably. Following Mably’s example, Prescott felt that every piece of historical writing should be both interesting and useful, “letting events tend to some obvious point or moral . . . by paying such attention to the development of events as . . . as one would in the construction of a romance.” In other words, Prescott saw the historian as having a duty to present history in as engaging a form as good fiction, but without sacrificing meticulous accuracy. He applied this philosophy to his work, with great success. One needs only to open a volume at random to be drawn into the action.¹²⁵

As he continued forging onward, Prescott felt his work beginning to divide itself into two portions, each focused on one of the titular characters and their main role. The first, centered on Isabella, dealt with domestic policy, while the second, focused on Ferdinand, brought out their foreign policy. He always kept in

¹²³ Ticknor, 80-86.

¹²⁴ Ticknor, 90-91.

¹²⁵ Ticknor, 94-95; consider Prescott’s description of the destruction of the Aztecs. William Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico Vol II* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 243.

view the necessity of maintaining “a character of unity, and . . . some pervading moral purpose.” Only one thing disappointed him, and this was his realization that he would be unable to restrict his work to two volumes, and would have to expand it to three at the very least. By the summer of 1835, he had nearly completed the work, and had only to craft the final chapter, in which he intended to “review the whole of his subject, and point it with its appropriate moral.” As can be seen, the moral aspect of the historian’s work was of primary importance to Prescott; nothing, barring of course accuracy in the facts related, was as important to Prescott as the moral nature of history. Through his history, the historian was able to instill not only an understanding of the past, but a sense of moral purpose. It seems reasonable to suggest that, at least for Prescott, the purpose of the study of history lay in the moral lessons it instills, not in the knowledge of dusty events locked in the past. At long last, on June 25, 1836, ten and a half years after he began the project that was only supposed to take five, Prescott placed the last touches on the final note of the final chapter of *The History of Ferdinand and Isabella*.¹²⁶

Strangely, though he was more than happy with his work, and had already completed several full revisions, Prescott was uncertain as to whether he should publish it or not. But several friends, among them Jared Sparks and John Pickering, strongly recommended that he publish it, and when his father concurred with them, he made up his mind to submit it for publication. The entry in his memorandum at this time is a sort of self-encouragement, considering the extent to which he felt that the process had aided him and helped to develop his historical consciousness and cheerfully reminding himself that even should the work end up being “a dead failure,” it would still have been worthwhile, as it had encouraged “systematic habits of intellectual occupation” and shown him that his “greatest happiness” was to be found in this work. He immediately set about preparing the work for the publishers, and on April 11, 1837, it was announced in the shops. Prescott wrote of this to Ticknor, telling him that when he had seen his name “– harmonious ‘Hickling’ and all – blazoned in the North American,” he had been given “quite a turn,” and not an agreeable one. But he recovered himself with the assurance that the work had been done with complete fidelity to a wide range of sources.¹²⁷

Contrary to even the most sanguine expectations, the history sold out almost immediately, and sold more within a few months than the publishers had expected would be sold in five years. It was the most immediate success that had ever been seen in the Americas. As its popularity indicated, the volume was extremely well received, and was the subject of several very favorable reviews. Ticknor says that it “was read by great numbers who seldom looked into something so solid and serious,” and “was talked of by all who ever talked of books.” The reviews from overseas were just as favorable, especially a series of articles published in Geneva, written by Count Adolphe de Circourt, who was considered to be one of the most well-educated persons in the world. It was this set of reviews that gave

¹²⁶ Ticknor, 96-100.

¹²⁷ Ticknor, 101-106.

Prescott the most pleasure, out of all the unexpected responses to his maiden volumes.¹²⁸

As soon as he was assured of the favorable reception of *Ferdinand and Isabella*, Prescott turned his mind to his next project. Prior to publication, he had informed Ticknor of two potential future projects. One, which he intended to devote himself to if the history was coldly received, was a work on Molière, which would be less demanding and which he knew he could write to an acceptable standard. The other was a history of the conquest of Mexico, continuing with the themes that he had covered in his first work. He was so certain that *Ferdinand* would be badly received that he began amassing materials for the Molière, but as soon as he realized his success, he dropped his work on Molière and began to consider what he needed for a history of the conquest of Mexico. His only concern was that he had heard that Washington Irving had intended to write on the same subject, but had told his contact in Madrid that he was ceding the topic to Prescott. While this was true, Irving reassured Prescott that he did not feel that Prescott had stolen his topic, and that he was more than welcome to pursue it. Reassured, Prescott sent out requests for materials to all his friends and acquaintances who were able to assist him.¹²⁹

In May 1839, at the age of forty-three, Prescott began work on the new subject, in better health and spirits than he had been for nearly two years. The work was more difficult than *Ferdinand*, and Prescott was often discouraged by his slow progress, but he kept at it, with reasonable success. There were certain interruptions, especially when Prescott heard that an unapproved abridgment of *Ferdinand* was about to be published, so he had to sit down and abridge the set himself, to ensure that it was properly done. This task, both disagreeable and time consuming, “annoyed him not a little.” Eventually, towards the end of the summer, he finished the abridgment and was able to return to his history. He worked consistently, and Ticknor says “hard and successfully,” through the winter of 1841-1842, but complained often of his own “indolence and listlessness.” Nevertheless, the work came on with tolerable speed, and was completed on August 2, 1843. He turned it over to the publishers, and looked forward with delight to the reward he allowed himself – a “merry autumn” of “literary loafing,” taking his ease with friends and books for pleasure, not work. On December 6, 1843, the *Conquest of Mexico* was published. Prescott was unnecessarily nervous about its reception, as it was received very well. Ticknor describes it as being “greeted from one end of the United States to the other with a chorus of applause,” unlike any other work had ever received. Certainly, the copies sold out faster than the booksellers could keep them stocked. As before, the reviews from England and Europe were as favorable as the response in the United States. Prescott had become an international best seller.¹³⁰

The widespread popularity of Prescott’s work among the general public was a testimony to the success of his style of writing. As mentioned earlier, he felt that historical writing should be as vibrant and attractive as any other literary work,

¹²⁸ Ticknor, 106, 110-111.

¹²⁹ Ticknor, 160-165, 167-169, 193

¹³⁰ Ticknor, 194-205.

and he succeeded in reaching this goal in his own histories. Ticknor speaks glowingly of Prescott's descriptions of scenery and events, and says that the "freshness and freedom" of his descriptions were unsurpassed, and well fitted to the romantic nature of the subject. But a fluid and unstrained style is not necessarily as simple to craft as it is to read. For Prescott, it was the result of long, deliberate labor, at a level which often wearied him, but in which he persevered, "as he always did in what he deliberately undertook." The most important thing, in his mind, was developing his own style, and the way he did this was to look back on something he had written far enough in the past that he had forgotten it. He could then analyze and refine his style as if it were another's work. He "heartily dreaded" any suggestion of imitation, arguing that a good imitation is bad enough, so a bad imitation must be infinitely more horrible. The only thing that would serve would be for him to follow his own "natural current of expression." Years before he published his first history, Prescott made note of his personal stylistic requirements. A general rule of thumb was "to write with freedom and nature . . . with alternation of long and short sentences; for such variety is essential to harmony." But far more important than the arrangement of the sentences was that they be "warm, lively, forcible . . . put life into the narrative, if you would have it take." The pains he took in his early studies to develop and polish his style bore fruit, for nearly all the reviews of *Ferdinand and Isabella* made a point of discussing and praising the style. For the rest of his life, he never allowed anyone to convince him to alter any characteristics of his style, for, as he said, "a man's style, to be worth anything, should be the natural expression of his mental character." As long as an author was careful to avoid falling into factual errors, the originality of the writer was sufficient to compensate for "a thousand minor blemishes . . . the best rule is to dispense with all rules except those of grammar, and to consult the natural bent of one's genius."¹³¹

Prescott followed this doctrine of historiographical style throughout his writing career, though some say he reached his peak in *Conquest of Mexico*. His success, though, by no means prevented him from continuing his scholarly endeavors. After his autumn of delightful indolence, Prescott turned his mind to a new subject, though still within the bounds of Spanish history. On February 3, 1844, he recorded that he proposed "to break ground on 'Peru.'" His intention was to write a history of the conquest of Peru as comprehensive as that of the conquest of Mexico. But he was in no extreme haste; as he himself said, "I shall work the mine . . . at my leisure." He sat for a portrait, traveled and visited with friends, and in every respect procrastinated, "from an unwillingness to begin hard work." One thing he did have as an advantage this time; he had no need to collect materials, as nearly all that he would need were already present in the documents and sources that he used for his *Conquest of Mexico*. He was interrupted by the death of his father in mid-1844, which crushed him and made him incapable of working for a time. But by June 1845, he was once again hard at work, and his diligence was rewarded and increased by his being in unusually good health that summer. In March 1847, he finished the work and sent it to the printers. The book

¹³¹ Ticknor, 217-224.

met with as warm a reception as the previous volumes. Within five months, five thousand copies had been sold in America, half that in England, and an entirely new edition of the original was published in Paris.¹³²

Prescott had intended his next work to be a life of Philip the Second, but was stalled by the condition of his only eye, which was weakening rapidly. An oculist had informed him that if he wished to retain any use of it, he would have to cease using it for any sort of reading or studying. This did not prevent him from planning his next work, but it did slow him down, as everything had to be done through an intermediate. But he continued to weaken, and realized in 1850 that he would have to do something to regain his health. His friends suggested that he travel to England for a change of climate, and he finally agreed, embarking for England at the end of May 1850. London received him as “the lion of the season,” and he made a triumphant tour of the nation. The change of climate seemed to improve his health, and the relaxation and devotion to social life rather than to work reinvigorated him. He returned home in the autumn of the same year, and set himself to work in earnest.¹³³

It seems that every time Prescott set himself to a new topic, someone close to him died. His daughter died as he was beginning his work on *Ferdinand*, his father in the midst of his history of the conquest of Peru. Now, as he continued his work on Philip II, his mother passed away, to his great sorrow. He was in low spirits for the rest of the summer, and did not regain his productivity until the winter of 1852-1853. From then on, he made good and often rapid progress, finished the second volume in August 1854. He completed the revisions in May 1855, and it was published a few months later, and met with all the success that might be expected. He continued to work on the next volumes in the set, though he was often ill. On February 4, 1858, he suffered a stroke while out walking, though he was strong enough that he recovered in a reasonable period of time. But he was never able to take up his work in the same manner again, though he was not aware at the time that this would be the result. He finished the third volume of *Philip the Second*, but not to the extent or in as much depth as he had originally intended. It was published in April 1858, the last volume of history he would ever send to the press. On January 27, 1859, Prescott talked seriously of beginning work on the fourth volume of *Philip the Second*, wondering whether a different diet would make him better able to work. The following morning, he was still talking of his subject and looking forward to returning to his labors. Around eleven thirty, when he was in his study, his secretary heard him groan and rushed in to find that he had been “struck with apoplexy.” There was nothing that could be done; Prescott passed away peacefully at half past two, without regaining consciousness, but surrounded by those who loved him. The world mourned, for “a brilliant and beneficent light had been extinguished.”¹³⁴

Prescott was the first best-selling historian in America. He proved that a professional, academic historian can also become a popular sensation. As someone who did not have an innate work ethic, but had to force himself to work,

¹³² Ticknor, 231-233, 258-259, 265-266.

¹³³ Ticknor, 278, 281, 298-299, 302, 342, 346.

¹³⁴ Ticknor, 384, 403-404, 407-410, 424-428, 442-446.

Prescott is an excellent example for the student who tends to be easily distracted. Even up to the day of his death, he was planning new subjects; even when he was forced to not work for weeks or months, due to his health, he kept his work in mind. His perseverance and discipline are worthy of being imitated by the modern historian, and it is this that makes Prescott both a great man and a great historian, even more than the artistry and depth of his writings themselves.

V. Conclusion

Though Parkman, Prescott and Bancroft all died before the dawn of the twentieth century, their influence continues into the modern world. They were both popular and academic, readable and enjoyed by the common man but finely reasoned and exquisite enough for the academic reader. For instance, Prescott's work, with its popularity, introduced an entire nation to the delight of well-written history, but Prescott, for all his popularity, was also painstakingly accurate in his research. He was the first truly popular historian, the first best seller, but his legacy remains strongest in the historians who continue to write for the general public, non-academics such as Shelby Foote and David McCullough. There is great benefit in having the experience and ability to craft one's work to grab the attention and the loyalty of one's reader. Parkman, Prescott, and Bancroft knew this, and it was the reason why they so often relied on first-person accounts and letters to piece together their histories, giving a personal and eyewitness touch to accounts that might otherwise have been dry and dusty. Though Henry Adams once said these three were "none of them men of extraordinary talent," he owes much of his narrative style to their influence. Samuel Eliot Morison, a modern Brahmin, held them in great regard, especially Parkman, whose insistence on going out into the wilderness and actually experiencing the conditions which he was to write about must have made a great impression on Morison. For Morison did the same, only with much less detriment to his health, following, in one case, the exact route of Columbus' ships. Morison affected a wealth of younger scholars, including Page Smith, passing down the Brahmin historians' legacy into the modern world. They have become an inescapable part of our history.

The legacy of these three historians is broad, though their particular political and historical views are not only out of fashion, but may even serve to offend. It is no longer acceptable to discuss the Native Americans in Parkman's manner, yet Parkman showed us the difficulty of maintaining progress and civilization in a new world. Bancroft's ideal of a constant march of progress, with America at the forefront, is now thought weak, but his optimism and hope for human nature as a whole, though it at times led him to be overly biased in his political analyses, is something that could be resurrected with benefit. We can grant that they fell into the flaws and biased ideologies of their time; but we are no better than they, though we do not yet know it. We are all products of the time and era in which we live. That their era is currently seen as particularly malodorous is not an adequate reason for us to exclude them from our studies and bookshelves. That which is obsolete in their style can be seen as a historical artifact, helping us understand

their own age better. That which is timeless – their style, their accuracy, their devotion to their muse – should be taken as a model for the modern historian.

In summary, Parkman, Prescott and Bancroft are examples of precision and persuasion, as well as imagination and interpretation, which are trickier to cultivate. Today, we live in a scientific world, and we like to have our conclusions laid out, with only one acceptable right answer. But in reality, our world is not a world of black and white, but a continually shifting universe of grays, of ideas and motivations and convictions which need to be developed and explained. The three historians that have formed the central focus of this thesis all thought that historical thinking was an important part of being educated, and historical thinking requires the ability to look the past in the face and accept the bad as well as the good. If we cannot look into the past without shying away from the things which are ugly in it, we will never be able to extract the good from it. And there is always a modicum of good in the past, even if it is but a rose in the center of a briar patch.

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