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978-1-107-49466-4 - The Historical Study of Anglo-American Democracy: An Inaugural Lecture

Roy F. Nichols

Excerpt

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THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF ANGLO-AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

I. *An Experiment in Anglo-American Scholarly Co-operation*

An American historian passing through the Great Gate of Trinity, or walking in the courts of Emmanuel, is at once reminded of the cultural kinship of Great Britain and the United States. These Cambridge surroundings recall to him the fact that the University was the birthplace of much of significance in American culture. In the days of colonial beginnings, an unusually large number of English University men came to New England. Massachusetts was scarce six years old when in this wilderness the founders must create a new Cambridge with as much of the academic ritual as they could muster. On the first board of overseers of this wilderness cloister were five Trinity men and one from Emmanuel. The new Cambridge was called Harvard, after John Harvard of Emmanuel. The first governor of the colony was John Winthrop of Trinity, and of the 134 University men in New England in these early years one-quarter were from Emmanuel. These

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Cambridge men laid carefully the firm foundation for a strong edifice, a foundation that has ever supported effectively the increasingly complex superstructure.

The creation of the Professorship in American History and Institutions in such a favourable environment has presented to the world of scholarship new opportunities for significant contributions. My esteemed predecessors in this chair have made clear some of these possibilities, and I can but carry on from where they left off. To my mind the nature of this opportunity may be described somewhat as follows.

The close familial tie which binds Britons and Americans has produced an interesting institutional relationship. But it is a relationship somewhat difficult to understand. Many institutions and culture patterns exist in both societies bearing the same names and too easily inviting the careless assumption that they are the same thing. This is not necessarily accurate, for it is a fact that institutions bearing the same designation may be quite different even in related societies.

The English language is not always an esperanto for Anglo-Americans; in fact, the common rumour that those in the United Kingdom and those in the United States speak the same tongue can be a hindrance to understanding. The unwarranted confidence that there is unilingual communication across the

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water gives rise to the careless assumption that there is no problem of comprehension. Often, therefore, there is no effort at avoiding misunderstanding because complete understanding is assumed. A little more care would often make for a more profitable meeting of minds.

In better developing interoceanic interchange it is necessary to realize that institutions that leave a mature culture, a metropolis, and migrate across the sea to become established on a far-off frontier suffer more than a sea-change. They leave an atmosphere of care and calculation, of thrift and relative scarcity, and are re-established in a stimulating environment marked by an abundance of resources and an encouraging exuberance of spirit and optimism which become congenial. In the younger newer culture these institutions retain the same names but they may not be really too similar. The association of scholars of two cultures such as the creation of this chair provides, makes possible co-operative studies of problems of this type. And the solution of some of them can contribute much to the world's understanding of inter-cultural relationship.

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II. *American Patterns of Historical Scholarship*

Before discussing possible methods of intellectual co-operation it is well for us to consider briefly the background of American historians so that those in England may compare it with their own immediate antecedents and their own criteria of thought. Such a discussion will make plainer the possibility of co-operation. The succession of scholars who come to sojourn with you, to exchange ideas with you and perhaps to join with you in opening new paths, come from an experience in historical working and thinking which will give its colouring to whatever they may undertake in Cambridge.

We, who come from the University world of the United States as students of history, appear in your midst fresh from discussions arising from a new effort to give more valid meaning to history. In recent years we have been giving much attention to that subjective starting-point of the historian's thinking, so long ignored or ignorantly denied, namely, the 'frame of reference' of the individual historian. There has been a vigorous contest over subjectivity and objectivity which has opened closets, revealed skeletons and all told stirred up much heartening intellectual activity. Being one who has discovered what he thinks is his

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frame of reference, it is only fair that I give you the opportunity to read the label on this scholar's gown.

Just about the time that the noted historian who once cultivated his genius at Trinity, Lord Macaulay, began the publication of his great history—and the year just passed was the year of its centenary—the first of the famed American historians, George Bancroft, was giving his thoughts to his fellow-countrymen and to the world. He presented the first real achievement in American historiography, and his work was marked by significant characteristics. He made extensive research in original sources, he had literary competence and he developed an interpretation, he attempted to give meaning to the American experience. To him the American Republic was a great climax in the work of Divine Providence. In developing this interpretation he but reflected the spirit of mission which was so strong among his fellow-Americans in those days. This was but another way of proclaiming liberty to the monarchical and aristocratic polities of Europe. It was a somewhat flamboyant manifestation of the passion for nationalism which was a phase of the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century. This tradition became firmly established among American historians and can be

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easily discovered. It resembles the Whig tradition that Macaulay so exalted in British historiography.

Under this influence much of our political and therefore our schoolbook history has continued. Hardly had Bancroft and his disciples, later aided by some remarks from abroad such as Gladstone made about the Constitution, started well on their work of establishing a hagiology among our colonial and revolutionary ancestors, when the lamentable Civil War almost sundered the Republic. The triumph of the Union forces, the tragic death of the martyred Lincoln, and the speed with which certain political and military leaders broke into print, produced a renewed outburst of nationalistic patriotism and a decidedly liberal interpretation. The war had been a triumph of the forces of right and liberty, resulting in the strengthening of the republican form of government and the freeing of the slave. It was a triumph of liberalism.

In the midst of this demonstration of the strength and righteousness of democracy the industrial revolution, operating in a region so rich in natural resources and so well supplied with capital and labour, began to bear fruit. Great corporations and fabulously wealthy entrepreneurs began to rise meteorically on the American business sky. The power which these corporations and individuals amassed was used in part

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to make their own share of the results of their operation much the larger. Poverty, oppression and various legal or almost legal forms of larceny, plus the unhappy results of the operation of certain natural forces, meant that too large a proportion of the population, whether labouring directly in industry or not, had to pay tribute to these controllers of the national wealth. Political protest was organized under the banners of domestic party organizations whose leaders demanded that the government exercise powers of control which would protect the rights and the standard of living of the people at large.

Dynamic figures like William J. Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Robert M. La Follette and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, all of them eloquent in expressing the prevailing political thought of the nation, elaborated the ideas of Jefferson, Webster and Lincoln and produced an interpretation of our history which became current just as a spate of school texts was being written in response to a growing demand for history teaching in the schools.

The result of this has been that, as in England there is the definite Whig tradition dominating historical thinking, which Butterfield describes, there is in the United States a dominant Democratic or Progressive tradition. This stems from the American Revolution

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and Bancroft just as the English Whig tradition grew from the Puritan Revolution and Macaulay.

Within fifty years after Macaulay and Bancroft a second and sometimes conflicting tendency developed in American historical writing. This reflected European practice likewise. Many of the American students who went to the German Universities for post-graduate study during the latter half of the nineteenth century sat in the lecture rooms and seminars of the new 'scientific' school of German historians.

They came home to think of history not so much as literature, not so much as the stirring story of a wonder-working Providence, but as science. They were to seek and clarify data and then formulate law such as the natural sciences could compass. The chief impression that these German savants made upon their American disciples was twofold. There was to be method and objectivity. Elaborate concepts of method and criticism were built up. 'Lehrbücher' were written and the seminar was recognized, as its name implied, as the seed bed in which would be cultivated the young plants of this scientific history. These students came back to the United States, and through their efforts graduate study was organized in the new university atmosphere which began to develop about 1890.

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The new generation of professors of history was intensely interested in method, and their instruction was frequently almost exclusively confined to the multifarious directions in Bernheim and Langlois and Seignobos. These disciples of scientific history were dedicated to the great principle of objectivity which, together with the method, would reveal everything 'wie es eigentlich gewesen war'. Truth came that way. As I understand it the English Universities were never so overwhelmingly impressed. While due respect was paid to objectivity, and Professor Bury dedicated history at Cambridge to the status of science, nevertheless, English historians avoided the confining bounds of the seminar and methodological overweight.

The result of this scientific preoccupation in America was a much more critical attitude toward sources, a keen interest in a genetic theory of institutional development and a liberal use of the comparative method of seeking similar institutions in different societies. The main interest was political, and many could agree with Freeman that history was past politics. The politics and the political institutions quite frequently emerged from the German forests and reached America via the British Isles. The emphasis on objectivity, however, developed a tendency to let the facts tell the story. The historian, by applying his

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critical methods, had come to believe that he could discover the facts and that their arrangement in proper sequence, generally chronological, would give the result needed without the intervention of the historian's original thinking or the employment of much if any subjective element. Much of this work, particularly in the form of doctoral dissertations, was heavy, compendious and without meaning.

The questions of meaning took on more and more importance as the years of the twentieth century began to take shape. Frederick Jackson Turner rebelled against the genetic theory, that previous European experience was the dominant influence in shaping American institutions, and developed a hypothesis of environmental determinism which he preached with a romantic nationalistic fervour. Charles Austin Beard, fresh from Oxford and the Ruskin school, examined the basis of constitutional structure and produced 'an economic interpretation' of the Constitution.

Almost simultaneously there occurred a revolt against the exclusive sway of political history. History to have meaning must be conceived of as more than past politics. The field was much more complex than hitherto considered, and the scope of research must be widened. Beard's interest in economic factors re-