

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Principles

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The proliferation of historical literature makes it increasingly difficult to see the broad perspectives that the study of history is supposed to reveal. Historical studies become fragmented, specialisation replaces generalisation, and it is a bold man who ventures far from the field in which his authority is recognised. There are thousands of volumes which neatly package great chunks of history for the educational supermarkets, but it is uncommon for historians to contemplate the production of the multi-volume histories which were once regarded as the supreme achievement of historical craft. The accumulation of specialised literature makes it almost as difficult for the historian as it is for the scientist to keep abreast of studies outside his chosen field; there is even developing a professional etiquette which discourages trespassing and demands that scholars continue to travel along the channels marked out by their first research.

Specialisation proceeds by period and by topic. It may not be precisely true that one rich and great university maintains a full professor for each decade of American history, but it is not far from the ideal to which many universities aspire. The Revolutionary period, the 'early national' period, Jacksonian America, the era of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and so on, have each produced their high priests, their rites, and their ritual controversies. The history of the South tends to become segregated from the history of the United States; so does the history of the West. The various branches of history develop their own internal processes so that they become unintelligible to outsiders, while economic history, which is normally separated administratively from Departments of History, becomes incomprehensible to fellow

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The United States 1789-1890*

historians. Traditional branches of study—constitutional history, political history, and intellectual history—strive to maintain their separate existence. Urban history has now staked out its claim for separate courses and a specialised literature. Black history is the newest and most vocal advocate for independence. As the demands for autonomy are recognised each study develops its own techniques, its own criteria, and its own concept of valid evidence; yet all are studying the same society.

For the student history tends to exist in two forms: the survey course in which complex issues are reduced to lucid but bland generalisation, and the specialist course in which he samples some source material and reads some professional literature. But even in the advanced course it is probable that much of the source material comes to him in a pre-digested form—in ‘readers’ along with some modern chapters or articles which are said to mark ‘turning points’ in historical interpretation. Frequently, in this palatable form, the footnote references in modern extracts have been removed by the editors, so that the student sees the argument without means of judging the evidence.

The panorama of historical studies may therefore be compared to a mountain landscape. In a survey the student can see the peaks but little of the valleys; he learns to appreciate the cold impersonality of the heights but knows little of those who toil on the lower slopes; nor does he know anything of the geology, the biology, the botany, or the materials of which his landscape is made. At the same time the men working in the valley or on the mountain side know little of life in other valleys or on other slopes.

The reading of history is not confined to students and professional scholars. There is an immense appetite, amongst educated people on both sides of the Atlantic, for works which reconstruct the past in a readable way. Professionals are apt to scorn ‘popular history’, but they ignore it at their peril. A scholar’s reconstruction of the past, conveyed in closely written pages with dense documentation, may influence future generations as it percolates down through layers of the pedagogic world, but the successful popular historian may have an immediate impact. Some popular history is bad history in that it exploits the bizarre and sensational,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General Introduction*

selects what is striking or shocking, leaves aside what is dull but important, and is careless of evidence provided that an effect is produced. But not all widely read works of popular historians are like this and some are based on intensive research into the sources and a scrupulous respect for truth. Bruce Catton's books about the Civil War are 'popular' in the sense that they are vividly written and sell widely, but their literary elegance rests upon a solid foundation of knowledge. The difficulty is that the non-professional reader finds it impossible to distinguish between sound history and unsound history. Only if he knows something about the materials out of which a historical edifice must be built can he begin to assess the credibility of popular history.

This book has therefore several aims. It is not intended to tell the specialist anything about the sources of his own field; it may tell him something about the sources, and their problems, in other fields. It is intended to give the student some conception of the mass of evidence which lies beneath the survey, and suggest ways in which history is dependent upon sources. For the person who reads works of history for literary enjoyment, its message is that history is not easy; that the dramatic personality or the moving incident is part of a past society which can only be reconstructed carefully and professionally from the debris of information left by men who lived in another age.

In the following pages it will frequently be necessary to comment upon the limitations of particular kinds of source material, and to convey warnings against attempts to use a source for a purpose which it cannot serve. It may therefore, at this stage, be appropriate to indicate some general limitations upon all kinds of historical source material.

The first limitation is that, with a few exceptions, historical evidence consists of that which was written down, and its purpose was seldom to inform posterity. Laws were passed, documents were issued, letters were written because of needs which existed at the time. It is a major part of historical research to discover what these needs were, for evidence cannot be evaluated until one understands why it was committed to paper. The historian is often therefore arguing in circles: from cumulative evidence he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The United States 1789-1890*

builds up a picture of the environment which enables him to evaluate particular sources. This is a justifiable method provided that one realises its limitations; it can tell us a great deal but it cannot go beyond the range of the original evidence and we must continually beware of travelling too far into the realms of imagination or of piling hypothesis upon hypothesis.

Much evidence on which historians depend consists of ephemeral responses to particular problems. Even statistical evidence, so often regarded with greater respect than literary evidence, is often explained by the political need for information at a particular point in time. Historians may give figures a universal importance, but their original compilation was often the outcome of a specific question which had to be answered. The many gaps in quantitative evidence are readily explained, of one realises that the demand for information was not sufficiently urgent or important to put an official to the trouble of supplying it.

In historical sources one is therefore constantly dealing with human factors; not only do we see before us the handwriting of a long dead man, but we are looking at things written down because other men requested, prompted, or ordered these things to be done. It follows that there is always an element of chance; the information may have been lost or it may have never been recorded because no one thought of asking for it. In an era in which the sources are abundant we are apt to overlook this simple fact and to assume that everything can be known. In fact, of all the events that have ever happened only minute portions have been recorded, and of all the persons who have ever lived only a tiny minority have left records behind them. Even in a modern record-keeping society, which amasses a great deal of information about every individual—birth, marriage, children, employment, liability for tax, death, and social security number at the very least—the facts about his character and personality vanish for ever, unless he plays some part of note which he himself or others wish to explain.

Limitations upon the usefulness of evidence must be recognised, but the exercise also reveals the strength of what remains. The misuse of evidence results from a failure to understand the environment in which the evidence was produced and the circum-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General Introduction*

stances under which it was collected or recorded; but when these things have been understood the sources become the foundations of an impressive edifice. Reflections upon the sources of history, and upon the way in which they can be used by trained minds, should therefore inspire confidence. A great deal of the history must be taken on trust, because only a few have the necessary knowledge, skill or access to sources to check the finished product; but it can be treated with respect when one understands the nature of the evidence upon which it rests.

It would be far too ambitious to perform this task for every aspect of the century of American history covered by this book, and it is necessary to select examples to demonstrate general propositions. Selection is necessarily a personal matter, and criticism will undoubtedly fasten upon what is not said as much as upon what is said. The choice has been guided by the topics which have engaged numbers of historians and provided the staple for survey histories: the growth of the nation, the government of the Union, the life of the people, and American ideas and attitudes. It is necessary to deal all too briefly with some important topics, and to deal with others in a somewhat selective way. There is, for instance, nothing on Indians or public lands (though it is hoped that something will be said on these topics in another volume in this series); there is not much on overseas trade, science, medicine, and technology. Economic history is treated so far as it enters (and must enter) the cognisance of general historians. These omissions and inadequacies are certain to cause some annoyance; but one can only reply that this book is intended as an essay upon the sources of American history, not as an encyclopedia of historical sciences, a manual of technique, or a union catalogue.

There are excellent reasons for beginning this study with the year 1789. The inauguration of the first President, and the meeting of the first Congress meant a new departure in the history of the United States. In the wider perspective of world history American events may have been overshadowed by those in France, but the balance may be redressed when one recalls that in the United States the world's oldest written constitution came into force, that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The United States 1789-1890*

the first successful experiment in federal government for a large nation was launched, and that, for the first time, an assembly elected by wide suffrage took its place at the centre of a modern government.

The historian has other reasons for regarding 1789 as the start of a new era, for the establishment of a new government meant the beginning of the great series of national records. The financial accounting of the national government began. The separation of powers meant regular and public communications between the Executive and Congress. The first reports from the Treasury appeared and the first census was taken in 1790. The reporting and publication of debates in the House of Representatives began, though in an incomplete and garbled form. Information of all kinds began to flow and to leave its mark on the record. Within a short time violent dissensions in Congress and in the country would produce a torrent of polemical literature, which would include profound controversy about the meaning of the American political system. For all these reasons 1789 is an appropriate year to begin a volume on the sources for United States history.

The end of the 'period' may appear to be more arbitrary. 1890 has been taken as a symbolic date to mark 'the closing of the frontier', but its significance can be exaggerated and is, in any case, not strictly relevant to the theme of this book. If 1890 does not symbolise 'the closing of the frontier' it could be argued that the year has no greater significance than 1877 or 1896 or 1901 and certainly less than 1917. Indeed 1890 has been chosen not because it marks a single event but because it stands in a cluster of events which together constitute a watershed; on this side lie the developments which dominate contemporary America, on the far side the issues which dominated the nineteenth century. Of course there is continuity, but in almost every field one finds some indication, round about the year 1890, that American civilisation was taking on a new shape.

The Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 marked the acceptance of new and far-reaching public responsibility; the Anti-Trust Act of 1890 laid the foundation of a new code of commercial ethics under the supervision of the Courts. The golden age of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General Introduction*

small businessman was not quite over, but the age of the great corporation was definitely on the way. The rise of Populism in and after 1890 has been interpreted by some historians as a backward-looking peasant's revolt; but it can equally well be seen as the parent of a host of subsequent social, political and legal reforms. The prophets of imperialism were already being heard in 1890, though they would reap no harvest until 1898 when the acquisition of a colonial empire would mark a clear break with the traditions of the past. About 1890 the American Federation of Labor was establishing a new pattern of unionism which depended upon the tight organisation of the skilled and neglect of the unskilled. In 1890 the Republicans finally abandoned their attempt to enforce the fifteenth amendment in the South, and in 1896 the Supreme Court accepted 'separate but equal' as an acceptable interpretation of 'equal protection of the laws'. There are marked changes in immigration, with eastern Europe and the Mediterranean taking a long lead over northern Europe as the traditional source of 'new Americans'.

In the more prosaic field of administration far-reaching changes were occurring in both public and private fields. An increasing use of the typewriter meant that copies of 'out letters' could be made easily and as a matter of course. The telephone meant that the most important discussions might never be recorded, and that it would be necessary to read more and more between the lines of increasingly voluminous documentation. Men working together had always conferred in private, and the telephone was still far too expensive and erratic to take the place of letters over long distances; but the addition of a new means of communication would be of profound significance for the future. At the same time the increasing size of bureaucracies, both public and private, meant that administration became more impersonal and more dependent upon rules laid down for subordinates; this was a long-term trend but it is one of the features which separate the twentieth century from the simpler world of the past. In urban government the years after 1890 see more and more pressure for professional non-political administration. It may also be suggested that the last decade of the nineteenth century sees the final defeat

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The United States 1789–1890*

of the lucid language in which public business had once been conducted and its replacement by prose which is neither elegant nor readily understood. Language comes to have three principal and separate purposes: the satisfaction of lawyers who wish to cover every contingency, the rhetorical appeal to emotion, and the concealment of meaning.

The first government under the Constitution was a simple affair though it confronted great problems. Small offices with a few clerks, messengers and cleaners sufficed, and departmental heads could meet face to face the humblest of their subordinates; a hundred years later government was not yet on its vast modern scale, but it was well on the way. The Civil War caused a surge forward in the size and range of government activity, but even before that—in an age which still paid lip-service to the ideal of ‘wise and frugal government’—there had been a steady upward trend in the number of government employees and in the tasks which they performed. After the war, in a period when subsequent historians have diagnosed ‘laissez faire’ as the dominant mood of America, the upward trend continued. Between 1820 and 1890 the population increased by a factor of less than eight, but the number of Federal employees was multiplied by more than twenty-six. If records existed for business administration they would undoubtedly show growth of equal or greater magnitude. A growing army of subordinate officials and clerical workers was interposed between governors and governed, between the people making decisions and the people affected by them. The period covered by this volume is the formative age of modern government, and the change is evident in the accumulating number of sources available for the historian.

A modern society is a record-keeping society, and a modern government is dependent upon the possession of a vast range of information. Early in this century it could be said that

Few persons realize how crowded with the richest material has been the brief record of the United States since it achieved its independence. The life of our society has made up in intensity what it has lacked in duration. So far are we from being destitute of materials for history that, in fact, for the time covered by our existence as an

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29156-9 - The United States 1789-1890

William R. Brock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

General Introduction

independent nation, we possess them in an abundance that is quite unique.¹

Today far more sources are known to exist than were then contemplated. Not all of these sources are officially compiled—and many private sources will be described in the later chapters of this book—but government has led the way and provided a backbone of evidence without which the other sources would appear impressionistic and insubstantial. It will be necessary to emphasise many weaknesses in the statistical apparatus of the earlier part of the period; yet from the outset it is evident that the age of statistics has dawned and that this makes an extraordinary difference to the historian's task of reconstructing the past. Again and again, where the historians of more distant periods and of less developed nations must fall back upon hypothesis, the study of nineteenth-century America can be brought down to the solid foundation of quantitative evidence.

The abundance of evidence does not rule out the necessity for imaginative hypothesis, but it does mean that historians need never venture too far from verifiable material and can devote more of their attention to personality, attitudes, and the inner springs of human conduct. Indeed the vast range of sources available does not make history less personal but gives greater scope for investigating what is erratic, irrational, or dependent upon assumptions which are accepted without investigation.

It is inevitable that many historians should spend a great deal of time upon the history of their own country. The combination, in the United States, of a large demand for university teachers, of the great mass of material still to be explored, and of challenging questions about the character of American civilisation, has produced an enormous volume of professional work upon nineteenth-century history. Some of this work has been too faithful to the creed of scientific history so that accumulation of material, and its orderly presentation, completes the historian's task. On the other hand the apparent urgency of questions about the meaning of American experience has produced some bold guess-work

¹ John Bates Clark in the Introduction to John R. Commons *et al.*, eds. *Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (New York, 1910).