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William R. Brock

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THE SOURCES OF HISTORY:
STUDIES IN THE USES OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

GENERAL EDITOR: G. R. ELTON

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*The Sources of History:
Studies in the Uses of Historical Evidence*

The United States
1789–1890

by

WILLIAM R. BROCK

*Professor of Modern History,
University of Glasgow*

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General Editor's Introduction

By what right do historians claim that their reconstructions of the past are true, or at least on the road to truth? How much of the past can they hope to recover: are there areas that will remain for ever dark, questions that will never receive an answer? These are problems which should and do engage not only the scholar and student but every serious reader of history. In the debates on the nature of history, however, attention commonly concentrates on philosophic doubts about the nature of historical knowledge and explanation, or on the progress that might be made by adopting supposedly new methods of analysis. The disputants hardly ever turn to consider the materials with which historians work and which must always lie at the foundation of their structures. Yet, whatever theories or methods the scholar may embrace, unless he knows his sources and rests upon them he will not deserve the name of historian. The bulk of historical evidence is much larger and more complex than most laymen and some professionals seem to know, and a proper acquaintance with it tends to prove both exhilarating and sobering—exhilarating because it opens the road to unending enquiry, and sobering because it reduces the inspiring theory and the new method to their proper subordinate place in the scheme of things. It is the purpose of this series to bring this fact to notice by showing what we have and how it may be used.

G. R. ELTON

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Preface to *United States 1789-1890*

This book was first published in 1975. If written today some sections would be expanded and new ones added. My own later work explored the wealth of information for social, political, and administrative history contained in the reports of state commissions, boards, and bureaus to their legislatures; but these were sources that had been little studied when the book was written. More would now be said about the sources for the history of cities, higher education, science, and medicine. Women may complain that their history was ignored. But to list omissions is to misinterpret the purpose the book. It was not a check-list of available sources nor a guide to archives but a survey of some principal sources for our knowledge of the past in the hope that this would suggest ways in which all sources should be approached. It was to promote discussion not to lay down rules. Every source has value but also limitations. All provide hard evidence but there comes a point at which imagination, together with knowledge of the context, must take over. Even statistics can mislead unless we know why they were collected and what questions were asked. The passage of time has not diminished the importance of knowing what the sources can and cannot tell us. With this in mind I offer this book to a new generation of readers.

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June 2008

William Brock