

THE WRITING OF HISTORY.

BY JAMES P. BAXTER.

I HAVE thought it worth while to devote a few moments to the consideration of a subject in which we are all interested ; namely, the writing of history ; especially of local history, of which, at present, so much is being written, sometimes without sufficient thought and method, perhaps I may properly say, in some cases without any thought or method, as though the writing of history was a light affair, requiring little preparation or literary talent.

Not long ago this question was put to a person of literary aspirations : "What would you rather be—a famous poet, historian, or novelist?" "You have," he replied, "exactly indicated my ambition by the order in which you have put your question. I consider poetry the highest form of literary art, or indeed of all art ; hence, I would rather be a great poet ; but, next to a great poet, I would be a great historian." "I think," said his questioner, "that the popular opinion is that anybody who can gather facts can write history." "Oh yes," was the reply, "and the popular opinion may also be, that anyone who can rhyme can write poetry. I am inclined to believe, though, that the field of history to-day presents more attractions to literary ambition than any other." This recalls to mind a remark made a few years ago by a friend having an intimate acquaintance with historic documents in European archives, to the effect that the history of the American Revolution has yet to be written. Further conversation with him on the subject led me to make application through our American Minister in London, for the privilege of examining the documents relating to that period in the office of the Public Records, to which public access is not allowed.

Upon receiving permission to do so, I spent a considerable time, in the presence of an attendant, in the examination of these documents, and so much was I impressed, after my study of them, by the truth of my friend's remark, that shortly after, I suggested to the late Mr. Blaine, who I believed was intending to abandon the political field and devote himself to literary pursuits, that here was a work worthy of his devotion, and I am inclined to think that if his health had permitted, he might have given the subject serious attention.

That the field of history has been but imperfectly cultivated and still affords excellent opportunities to literary workers, I have no doubt all who are acquainted with the subject will admit; but the writing of history requires special talent, and talent of as high an order as any other department of literature. The importance of good history in the education of a people cannot be over-estimated, yet we know how the study of history is neglected. This may be due in a measure to the quality of the history which has been placed in our educational institutions. Some of us may remember how we detested the drill in history to which we were subjected in our youth, and how long it took us to be able to regard with equanimity anything of an historic nature. To be compelled for half-an-hour daily to answer questions, rarely related to each other, was, to say the least, tiresome. Such questions, for instance, as, "When was John Carver chosen Governor of Plymouth Colony?" "What was the name of the Indian slain by Captain Miles Standish?" "To what tribe did Philip belong?" "When was the cruel savage Paugus killed and by whom?" Such questions were confidently answered, as well as some others, which are now warmly debated. I am not prepared to say that even history so taught was not productive of some good, but its value, I am sure, might have been increased an hundred fold by a more judicious method; and here let us consider briefly

one method, if no more, which is to begin with the history of the student's own town. Certainly he should know something of this, if of no other history, and it is quite possible to make the local history interesting, as may be made to appear farther on, when the town history is considered. Having familiarized himself with the history of his own town, it would seem that the next practical step would be to learn something of his county and state. In this study the student will get a knowledge of the aboriginal inhabitants and colonization of his state; its organization and development socially, commercially and politically, and the relations which bind its parts together into a commonwealth, which must be of immense importance to him. By the time he has acquired a knowledge of the history of his town and state, it is quite likely that he will have formed a taste for historical study, and will be quite ready to take up the study of the United States in its divisions and entirety. The student will by this time have perceived the intimate relations existing between the history of his own country and the countries of Europe; first, of course, England, whose history he will now find a fascinating study, instead of the dry array of events which, had he taken up the study of English history earlier, would have appeared to him to have no relation to the history of his own country. Having acquired a knowledge of English history, more or less thorough, he must perforce take up the history of France, which will present to him a more brilliant field than that of the cloth of gold, glorious "with plume, tiara and all rich array," and which is so intimately related to that of England and his own country, as to make it a part of a continuous narrative, whose splendid theme is the development of civilization. Of course the student will not stop here, but will continue to enlarge his field of vision, until it embraces the world. This method of studying history certainly possesses this merit, that the student, at whatever point he relinquishes

his study, will have acquired a practical knowledge of that portion of history most useful to him, which can hardly be affirmed of any other method.

Perhaps it may not be too much to affirm that the history of itself which a people puts forth, affords an approximate measure of its civilization, so intimately is it correlated with the popular intelligence. I hope that this may not be deemed severe later on, when I come to speak of the town history. While criticising, however, the lack of method and the carelessness of many historians, we should recognize the difficulties which lie in his path. At the recent opening of the new building of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the president, and our associate, while making severe strictures upon some former methods of writing history, spoke of the many sources of knowledge which have been opened to the historian, and noted how difficult it had become for him to avoid prolixity on the one hand, or undue concision on the other.

Everyone who has seriously and conscientiously made it a business to gather historical material relating to a particular subject, realizes the magnitude of this difficulty, and how agreeable it would be to have some guide for its solution; yet, at present, no such guide exists. Histories, imposingly voluminous, are written, which give one but the vaguest idea of important events, and too often no idea at all. This grows out of the attempt to cover too wide a field, and the necessity of condensation, and leads us to the belief that the future historian is to devote himself more and more to the writing of monographs. If this belief is correct, a most attractive view is opened to the historical writer, who can concentrate his attention upon a part of the field particularly interesting to himself, in which he can freely exercise his powers in the discovery of new facts and in tracing obscure relations between events, which enforced attention to a wider field would not permit him to undertake.

Perhaps it may be urged that, as history is the orderly expression of great forces whose continuity of action give it unity, it will by this method of procedure become fragmentary and probably chaotic; but reflection will show that this need not be so, for these so-called fragments will naturally come together and fall into their proper places in orderly sequence. Without doubt, when the ground shall have been sufficiently covered by monographists, general histories of an encyclopedic character will be compiled, with analytical indices, referring the student to existing monographs, and briefly summarizing them, thereby serving as convenient reference books for those who do not desire to pursue the study of history more deeply. Of course general histories will be written, and if time permitted it would be interesting to consider what such histories are likely to be. Will they be philosophic in their character, following and laying bare the forces which operate in the evolution of civilization, and which result in epochs of startling significance? Very likely, and such study will present a field worthy of the powers of a Gibbon, a Hume, a Ranke, a Montesquieu or a Buckle.

A well-known thinker, some time ago, in an address to a learned society, remarked that the writing of history was once a pleasant recreation, but had now become an exacting task. He depicted the man with a lively imagination, who upon a few facts, or even half facts, would rear such structures as his genius might devise, structures artistically attractive, but quite as unreal as modern historical fiction; though it should be observed that our modern romancists are becoming more and more careful to conform to historic truth.

Since the admirable work of the Johns Hopkins University has come under public observation, this method of writing history has fallen into disrepute, and people are demanding more of the historian than formerly. The author who takes his material at second hand and pads it

with rhetoric, however artistic his work, will find a poor market for his wares. The public will no more be satisfied with such pabulum than the hungry man who comes too late for the roast will be satisfied with the sweets. Substantial facts, following each other in orderly sequence and sparingly garnished, alone satisfy the present taste. Substantiality and simplicity are made the order of the day.

It has been suggested that the study of history should begin with the Town History; yet it is a common remark that the most unsatisfactory historical writing of the present day is to be found in our town histories. Everyone acquainted with the subject must be painfully aware that many of these works are constructed upon as haphazard a plan as our grandmothers' porridge, "a bunch of herbs, such things as are handy, and salt to the taste." An author of a New England town history who begins with a sketch of the mythical visit of the Scandinavians to our shores, continuing with a *résumé* of the voyages of Gosnold and others hither, and finally gliding without apparent effort into the genealogies of John Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, and other distinguished residents of the town, may be justly open to the suspicion that he has failed to give a due amount of attention to method.

Such a history, however, is not without value, as it of necessity records some facts which might otherwise be lost; indeed, it sometimes becomes of considerable pecuniary value, especially when a convenient fire reduces the edition, thereby enabling the enterprising bookseller to place it on his scarce list, so seductive to a certain class of collectors.

The writing of a Town History is not an undertaking to be entered upon lightly. It is indeed a serious matter and requires the most painstaking research, as well as keen powers of analysis, and considerable facility of expression. If the student is to begin his historical study with local history, it should certainly be made as attractive to him as

possible. A collection of unconnected events scattered through a prosaic narrative will give him a distaste for history from which he may never recover. It therefore behooves us to demand the very best work in the Town History, if we would place history where it belongs, in the front rank of educational agencies.

Doubtless the selectman considers it praiseworthy in him to help nominate the worthy pastor, the pushing young schoolmaster or the life insurance agent, for the latter is popularly believed to possess abundant genealogical ability, to construct a history of his town, and it is, moreover, a laudable ambition for such nominees to place their names upon the title pages of such books, and far be it from me to discourage them. My plea is for a method which will render the Town History more useful. Is it possible to outline a method which may be applied generally to the writing of Town Histories? In considering this question a few things seem evident. It would seem, for instance, that in writing such a history the first object of the author should be to place before his reader all the knowledge concerning the town under treatment, which is available; in fact, to anticipate, as far as possible, every question which he thinks anyone may be able to ask about it.

If this assumption is true, it might be well for him to start with a description of its natural features; its geology; its *flora* and *fauna*, and, if practicable, of its aboriginal inhabitants. All these are subjects of importance, which the citizen desires to know something about, and upon which it is the manifest duty of the historian to enlighten him. Apparently this should be followed by an account of the reasons that led its early settlers to select it for residence; of their characteristics, and proceedings in organizing, naming and shaping it into a communal abode.

Every town has an interesting history respecting its beginning, and often of its naming. Here is a town whose pioneer settlers, few in number, owing to religious differ-

ences of opinion, which embittered their neighbors against them, pushed their way into the wilderness, far beyond the limits of civilization, and after many hardships found a promising place for settlement. Here they felled the forest, reared their rude cabins, and planted. They were not permitted to pursue their labor in peace. The savages prowled about them in the shadows of the forest, and they had to keep ever at hand a weapon of defence against their wild fury; yet so pleasant were the relations of these isolated families, and those who soon joined them, that they called their town Harmony. Great bowlders were strewn about their cabins, and the ledges were ploughed with deep furrows. Near by was a strange mound, probably of aboriginal origin, and rude implements of stone were turned up by the ploughshare. These and many other things connected with the locality furnish subjects of interesting research. Finally the time arrives when the citizens of the town desire a history, and how ought they to regard the man who undertakes to supply this want by beginning his book with a few unmeaning records, which he has found by chance, continuing with an account of a militia company, gossip respecting troubles in the first church, anecdotes of the village tavern, and a mass of genealogies as they have been picked up at hapazard? The question is a grave one, and worthy the cogitation of the selectmen of many aggrieved towns.

But to continue the outline of a method for writing a Town History. Having given an account of the beginnings of a town, the author's task should not be one of much difficulty. He should have at hand all the records and documentary material relating to the subject attainable. The gathering, arranging and indexing of such material should have occupied him for a long time, and he should from this, and such other material as he possesses, prepare a brief chronological skeleton of his subject for constant reference. He can now go forward, giving an account of

the development of the town year by year; of its educational, religious, political and business affairs; and the part which it has played in the state and nation. If a genealogy of the town is needed, let that form a separate volume, and bear its proper title. This outline of a method for writing a Town History, as I am aware, is quite incomplete. I have only intended it to be a suggestion, and if it serves this purpose it is sufficient.

I wish also to occupy a moment in speaking of some Indian words. It will be remembered that at a recent meeting of this Society, our honored associate, Dr. Hale, gave us an interesting talk upon this subject. At present, great confusion exists with regard to the pronunciation, orthography, and especially the etymology of Indian words. So far as I have been able to discover, the Indian himself is unable to give reliable testimony regarding the etymology of his language. I have questioned him searchingly and seen him shift his ground, after I thought I had settled a point, leaving me as perplexed as before. I recently spent some time with an intelligent Indian in camp and canoe, and availed myself of the opportunity I enjoyed to question him upon points regarding which I was in doubt; one, in relation to accent. In words of three syllables, the accent is almost invariably upon the penult, and of two syllables on the ultima. Thus a fish is *Nemás*; the good spirit, *Glooscáp* (*glooscárp*); the bad spirit, *álbæuse* (*arlóæuse*); a man, *Sanápè*, (*sanárpay*); an exception is *Ságem* (*sárgem*), a chief, and *Ságemä* (*sárgemar*), the chief. Using the word *Abnáki* I was rather sharply corrected. "No," exclaimed the Indian, "it is *Wábauáki* (*wárbauarky*). As the word came to us through the French, it is easily seen how we lost the sound of the *w*. One of the old names of Portland Neck was pronounced in the usual way *Máchigon*. "Very bad," said the Indian, "it is *Machágon*." *Piscátaqua* was also changed into *Pascátáquä* (*pascatáwquar*). It requires

patience to elicit information from an Indian respecting the etymology of a word. "What," I asked, "is the meaning of *Wickhagon*?" The reply was, "a book." "But," I said, "the Indians had no books. What is this bit of written paper?" "*Wickhagon*"; "and this bit of bark with characters upon it?" "*Wickhagon too*," was the answer. "But what are you thinking of," I asked, "when you say *wickhagon*?" "Something that tells," was the reply. This is probably near the etymology of the word; but one can never be sure of exactness. Behind what may be termed the apparent or sensuous etymology of a word is a subtler meaning which baffles every effort to grasp it. The Indian readily coins words for our modern inventions. Thus the telephone is "*archimontic-oonäquäbish*," a term complex in structure as well as meaning.

Words adopted from European languages by the Indian are often claimed as his own. Many curious instances of this kind might be adduced if time allowed. Haliburton tells us that "*loken*," or "*poke-loken*," as the word is more commonly used by the Indi-

Errata.—Page 146, for *Wäbauäki* read *Wäbanäki*.
" 147, for *archimontic* read *archimoutic*.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.