

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITING OF LOCAL HISTORY

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THE blueprints and deadlines which inevitably confront an author attempting to write local history to order, leave little opportunity for pondering the ultimate significance of his materials or for testing the soundness of the tools he must use. The present writer, who has completed two county histories in the past three years, ventures, however, as he looks back on that experience, to offer a few reflections on the scope and nature of local history.

The dual task of the professional historian—to dig for facts and to interpret them—requires many gifts. The one demands technical skill, perseverance in the search, and sound judgment in the use of sources. Unfortunately, too much of our local and state historiography fails to turn the coin to its more revealing side. It begins with facts, and ends with them in a relatively undigested mass. The artist's touch is lacking. This latter, the interpretive phase of the historian's profession, requires a higher judgment, a sharper intuition, and a more volatile intellect. If the artist's mind is lacking, the facts remain infertile and sodden. In this unleavened state the marshalled facts may be useful to other scholars, but sodden facts they will remain until their full dimensional scale is revealed and they are again invested with life.

The movement of the human spirit in Time, which we try to categorize with the word "history," is far more than a series of scientifically measurable facts identified by an academic discipline. To write history in its full dimensional scale, first of all, requires living intimately in the consciousness of the continuum of human experience, at least within the temporal and spatial bounds which the historian places upon himself. In this respect, at least, the local

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historian is at a distinct advantage. He begins with the life around him; the substance of the facts he uncovers is, if he has any sensitivity at all, mirrored in his own experience; his own intuition, if he has nourished it, is forced by the very events he records. How far short the profession of local and state history has fallen from the sensitivity and intuition thus required can be pretty well determined by the very few books in this category that stay by one's bedside and easy chair—that are not mere tools of scholarship and cross reference, but possess a vigorous life of their own, and carry with them an inward glow.

There is no formula or technical equipment that can create this special sensitivity. It may indeed be likened to what in ages gone by was known as patriotism, but in these latter days even that word—related as it is to the national mythus and the possessiveness of the modern gargantuan state—has come to have too mechanical a ring. I would rather liken this sensitivity to mysticism and the inward ferment stirred by the love one bears toward the hills and cultures that men have called home.

Literature is full of tales of wanting to “go home again,” and much local history is written in the nostalgic spirit of this fundamental human impulse to seek the security known in younger days in place and time and society. Even if we can't really go home again—particularly in our overcharged time—the love and faithfulness implicit in that impulse are important elements in recreating the historic spirit that has marked out the destinies of the place. I was poignantly impressed with this fact in the writing of *The Montgomery County Story*. My father had been the first of six generations to move further than fifty miles away from the original Alderfer homestead there, and though I had not been a resident since the age of four I had retained, by some mystical process, the enduring “presence” of the place. That sensitivity, of course, does not stop at county boundaries; it responds almost equally to the larger region of which the county is but one of various political artifices.

Hence it was not difficult for me to feel entirely at home in a county like Northampton with its similar land forms, ethnic make-up, and historical experience—or for that matter the entire Piedmont region, the fertile crescent of Pennsylvania Dutch country extending from Easton to York which has provided Philadelphia

with one of the handsomest hinterlands in the world. Yet geography and sociology cannot alone create this sensitivity to place. The mind searching the depths of historical experience must find a kinship at other levels, particularly in the realm of ideas.

Even when this sensitized linkage does not exist in a direct and personal manner, it is the historian's duty to bridge as many gaps as possible between the island of his own mind and the society whose pulse he is taking. It is surprising how strong these links become once they are forged, even after the assignment is completed. I find myself often returning, both in body and in spirit, to the Whitefield House at Nazareth, focal point of so many memories of the Northampton frontier. In thoughtful moments the harmonic images of Valentine Haidt, the unsung but I believe first truly great American painter, whose best creations are stored at Nazareth, return again and again. Every time I go back to the Whitefield House I open up the old organ there—the oldest existing pipe organ made in America, every part hand-fashioned by Gustavus Hesselius, painter of the oldest known American portrait, and John Klemm. Even the modest combination of modulated chords I am capable of playing seem to blow through that organ's wondrous pewter pipes with an unearthly consciousness of time and human aspiration.

In Montgomery County I have a special affection for another house. Mill Grove, Audubon's home just before and during his courtship of Lucy Bakewell, stands high above the Perkiomen. Even divorced from the painter-naturalist's formative years, it is beautiful to behold. One spring day on my first visit there, following one of the woodsy paths no doubt known to John James, I saw my first orange-crowned warbler, probably on his way to Hudson's Bay. And ever since then the place and that modest, unspectacular species of life has represented for me the curious flight of time, the tide of the seasons, and the kinship of all creatures to those who, like Audubon, will but respond to it.

Examples of this intuitive responsiveness are, I believe, valid symbols for the sensitive historian. We may *know* historical facts on the flat two-dimensional plain like so many of our nineteenth century local historians, or even on the three-dimensional scale of the psycho-social historian of our own century—and yet we may fail to *experience* and transmit it adequately.

I cannot escape the feeling that a great part of our historical writing and scholarship has not come to terms with the spiritual requirements of the modern mind. Particularly does this seem to be true at local, regional, and state levels where the extreme minutiae of historical fact traditionally take precedence over the meanings and values of historical experience. Consult the bibliographies: Among the hundreds of pedestrian collations of sodden, undigested facts one is lucky to find one work of depth, artistry, and understanding. We have insisted so naïvely on the precise, measurable accuracy of the Fact—and on the materiality of Fact—that the living, breathing body of history at these levels has become minutely segmented. Fact gives us a groundwork, that is true, and the groundwork must be accurately measured. But when are we going to get on with the superstructure which alone carries meaning, utility, and beauty?

Academic discipline, I suppose, has been in part responsible for this worm's eye view of history. After all, it is easier to teach the mechanics of using source materials than to give nourishment to the apprentice's sense of values. But in doing so, have we not been creating draftsmen rather than architects? A mere look at the titles of doctoral dissertations would lead one to suspect so. And the learned societies and public projects in behalf of history—what percentage of the work supported by them aims to find and represent *life* rather than segmented fact only in the historical heritage? One can think of many current projects expending large sums and sound talents on both facts and artifacts of the most minute character which, in the final analysis, can only add a bit to the rattling skeleton of a particular historic personage or set of events but can no more clothe the skeleton with the flesh of meaning than can a surgeon. Meanwhile, almost the only breadwinning area open to those with a flair for history who rebel against the fetish of segmented fact is the historical novel. To the trained historian the historical novel may be neither fish nor fowl (I can't seem to read them myself), but their enormous popularity in our time is, it seems to me, an index of the failure of our craft to represent by traditional disciplines the life and meaning of the heritage we write about.

Lacking knowledge of modern theoretical physics, I may be on shadowy ground in attempting to adapt its terms to historiography,

but it seems to me that much of our scholarship is conceived, if you will permit the analogy, in terms of a Newtonian framework and a Euclidean geometry—complete in itself, precisely measurable in all its parts, with neatly segmented categories, but thoroughly mechanical and materialistic. One must admit that a lot was accomplished with the Newtonian system: its limited mechanical infallibility helped to open the doors of the industrial revolution and the age of speed and gadgets. But we know now that its three-dimensional mathematics failed to answer some very important, indeed crucial, questions. A fourth dimension, and with it a new Riemannian geometry, had to be introduced to get at the heart of questions which the Newtonian system left unanswered. In the “science” of history I suspect we are in much the same position—except that, apart from the Toynbees and Spenglers, we are about half a century further behind the intellectual requirements of our age than the scientists were.

Lest we think this is searching too far afield for a metaphor, a descriptive analysis of the four-dimensional scope of historiography may be to the point. I like to consider the dimension of breadth, in the creative interpretation of history, to be the spatial environment and man’s reaction to it. Here again the local historian is at an advantage because the material he works with is tangible, visible, immediately at hand, and relatively simple in form. Local history without a fine sense of geography and a vital intuition of its qualities is empty and formless. Most local historians, even when failing to express the more intimate and subtle relationships between environment and man, nevertheless give some evidence of understanding the environmental detail.

Every locale is dominated by a complex of land forms that determines much of the local destiny. A mental vision of the Northampton County heritage, for example, is impossible to obtain without reckoning with the stark reality of that hulking land form lying like a great blue snake across the landscape and bounding the county on the north. Kittatinny Ridge was a tremendous geographic fact in the early history of this Commonwealth. South and east of it the white man could soon build a European civilization and a prosperous agrarian life, but on its other side men walked in uncertainty for years. Even to this day that ridge separates two essentially different patterns of life. A similar example of the

importance of the environmental dimension is the stream pattern of the Schuylkill and Perkiomen which played so vital a role in Montgomery County's history. The Schuylkill and Perkiomen Valleys guided the people who were to become "the Pennsylvania Dutch" to their agrarian heritage in Montgomery, Bucks, and Berks Counties and from there into fertile pockets to the west. Look around you wherever you are: you will find literally dozens of crucially important environmental factors which, because of their impact on the emergent patterns of civilization, possess a grandeur all their own.

The dimension of height corresponds, it seems to me, to the historian's concept of society, for upon the spread of an environment man rears a societal structure. This socio-political dimension is the group experience reacting to environmental needs and limitations, and is expressed primarily in terms of human institutions. So much of our current historiography seems to be obsessed with this dimension, perhaps because we live in a highly institutionalized age and the alphabet soup of organization leaves no appetite for the meat and wine that nourishes the inner life of men.

While it has perhaps become customary for the national historian to over-value the societal and institutional dimension of history, on the other hand too many local historians seem to have inherited a nineteenth-century habit of treating this important dimension in a most exasperatingly naïve manner. We have, of course, learned to relate colonial and revolutionary experience in stories and anecdotes which, if they lack depth, at least have the quality of continuity and the spark of life. But how many local histories, having passed the year 1790, package the rest of the locality's story in neatly wrapped but dreadfully dull chapter-categories on schools, churches, industries, banks, "bench and bar," military companies, civic organizations *ad nauseam*. As if to say that ever since the Yorktown campaign local history has been but a disembodied congeries of segmented institutions. As a matter of fact post-revolutionary America has witnessed great readjustments in community life as a whole, of which these neat little institutional categories are only the fingers and toes. The community is still a whole body—breathing hard perhaps in the oppressive atmosphere of both nationalism and internationalism—but alive and breathing nonetheless. Were it not so, the community would cease to exist. Centralization of power

and standardization of opinion have not yet been able to amputate the limbs of the community, and the historian is therefore duty-bound to view its continued evolution as a total organism, and leave the counting of fingers and toes to the antiquarians who have nothing better to do.

I like to think of the third, depth-giving dimension of history in terms of the creative spirit of man which perpetually deepens and enriches the social organism. It is at this level that the historian must cast off the fetters of statistical materiality and the tyranny of Fact, and allow the intuition its just role. The spirit of man is not a statistical entity. The multitude of forms by which it finds expression—the houses and barns and buildings of a community, the songs and symphonies of men, the products of the studio and the potter's wheel, the poem and the newspaper, the sermon and the dialogue, the learning process and the products of the scientific laboratory and a hundred other forms—these are evidences of human aspirations which no statistical formula can define.

It is in this dimension that the human spirit surcharges a far larger area than the locality to which it is bound by environment and society. It is on the flood of these individual charges that the history of a locality re-enters the stream of human consciousness at large and re-unites with the continuum of history from which the community took its birth. For there is, in the final analysis, no final spatial boundary in history, and one cannot really stop the clock of time and say, "Here we begin."

Let me illustrate. The town of Bethlehem in Northampton County began its tangible, spatial existence in 1741 when a few Moravians from far off Germany put the last hewn log into place on the first hut at the big bend of the Lehigh one bitterly cold March day. But is that the beginning of its history in time? If it is, we could never know what heartaches and soul-searching goaded men out of the towns of central Europe and drove them to this edge of the then known world. And if we began its story in 1741, we could have no knowledge of its inheritance from three previous centuries of direct spiritual preparation for this birth of a community. When Count Zinzendorf came to this cabin ten months later, he carried with him the spiritual climax of an entire age, and a strand of the web of Europe.

I cannot help but think of many other illustrations of the boundlessness of history. One can draw a political boundary around Montgomery County, but who can delimit, in time and space, the influences and personality of the Lutheran patriarch, Muhlenberg? of the astronomer and revolutionary David Rittenhouse? of Charles Thomson, secretary of the Continental Congress and first American translator of the Bible? of the youthful Audubon, roaming the woods of the Perkiomen in patent leather pumps but beginning to drink in the heady wine of the American wilderness? of the mature Lucretia Mott, determined out of love to mankind to break the evil of slavery? even of scholarly Governor Pennypacker, who found great solace, after he emerged from the mire of his day's politics, in the Pennsylvania German heritage? These men and women lived and had their being for a time within the same county boundary, were subject to its environmental and social influences and influenced by the destiny of the place. But through them and their like we enter a proportionately timeless and boundless arena and move more closely to the destinies of mankind at large which cannot be precisely bracketed by dates nor delimited by land forms, nor, for that matter, defined by or discovered in footnotes and cross-references.

When the historiographer recognizes the significance of this spiritual dimension, he knows that, in limiting his work in place and time, he is only putting a spotlight on an area and a period, and beyond the light's circumference are hosts of stimuli that interact on and react to what happens within the circle of light. Just as the earth's atmosphere cannot shield us entirely from the mysterious bombardment of cosmic rays, so land forms and time limits cannot contain all influences upon us. We live in a continuum, not a vacuum.

So much, then, for the three visible, demonstrable dimensions of history: environment, society, and the human spirit in communication with others. This is the classic Newtonian framework with the solid geometry of Euclid. But just as our scientists have found that the Newtonian framework, though complete in itself, failed to answer some very important questions, so also does our three-dimensional history fail. To understand the universe in which we live and the forces that give it reality, a new geometry had to

be invented to cope with the curvature of space and the non-visible realities of universal space and energy.

There is a reality, in the scope of man's destiny and reflected even within the microcosm of the community, which seems capable of being understood only by intuitive perception. This is the historian's fourth dimension. It is in effect, a re-solution of the first three coupled with what we might call, in the terms of literary criticism, the stream of consciousness connecting the three visible dimensions of life in a particular spatial environment with the total human experience in Time. It is, using the terms of the physicist, a space-time dimension.

It is hard to express this dimension in historiographic terms because we have not yet evolved the semantics or mental geometry to make definition possible. Yet something of this four-dimensional approach has appeared in the architecture of the human mind ever since the dramatists of fifth-century Athens came close, through their concept of the role of fate, to creating a four-dimensional mythus. The work of Polybius, the Greek historian of the ancient Roman world, contains hints of a four-dimensional image of history. Emerging from the sheer massiveness of his architectonic method, Gibbon may have been close to the brink of the fourth dimension of human affairs. In our own time we need mention only such names as Spengler, Toynbee, Pareto, Ortega, to realize that the science of history is graduating from its Newtonian limits, and combining science (scholarship) with art (intuition) in a new space-time geometry.

And high time too. With twilight deepening on western civilization, society is desperately in need of answers that only history can provide. But the old answers have lost their meaning and effect; the rudder of three-dimensional history doesn't work any more. We are beginning to lose the capacity for identifying ourselves with our past. Consider the communities you know. How many people in them find real security in their heritage at home? Facts and genealogies will not suffice any more. Today, if ever, we need the security of a spiritual linkage with far broader expanses of human experience than the family tree, and far deeper truths than sodden, undigested facts provide.