

The Dictionary of American Biography

DURING sixty years of existence, the PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY has recorded in its pages and announced to its readers many significant achievements in American history. For during the life of this journal a new sense of historical scholarship has evolved in the minds of national historians and during these sixty years the great *corpus* of accepted American history has been written. While much of this writing lacks the inspiration or literary excellence of Bancroft, Prescott, and Parkman, nevertheless the canons of truth and the rules of workmanship used by its craftsmen have been of a stricter order. Super-patriotic, romantic history, and laudatory biography have been forced to yield place on library shelves, at least in part, to work produced under the new discipline.

Nowhere was this new scholarly purpose more necessary than in the study and writing of biography, one of the grand divisions of historical scholarship. The vivid and accurate portrayal of a variety of examples of human experience is a vital contribution to true history, but there is always the temptation to exaggerate. There is no greater abundance of historical material than biographical evidence, yet no type of data is so hard to use or so untrustworthy. Biographers are usually as human as their subjects, until they assume their chosen rôle. Then they are apt to lose both sense of perspective and sense of humanity. Easily do they fall under the spell of cant phrases. The human being fades and in his niche the biographer places a plaster saint or dour villain to survive for an eternity of false witness. It is not biography, but eulogy or a bill of indictment; yet it passes for the truth and future generations gloat or fume but fail to understand.

It is easy to understand, therefore, that one of the most significant contributions of these fruitful six decades to American history and likewise to Pennsylvania history is the *Dictionary of American Biography*, planned and carried out according to the best and latest standards. Devotees of Pennsylvania history have found much in this work to enlighten them, for a great portrait gallery of Pennsylvanians has been assembled. The statesmen are presented at full length: William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, and

James Wilson, to mention the greatest. Merchant princes such as Girard and Wanamaker, the literary and artistic masters from Charles Brockden Brown to Joseph Pennell, historians and scientists including McMaster, Bartram, and Rush, all these are included and the politicians from Thomas Mifflin to Penrose and Vare are likewise portrayed. The historical resources of the Commonwealth have been re-explored in search of material and Pennsylvania's scholars have contributed significantly to the great achievement. All who are interested in Keystone history will thumb the *Dictionary's* pages frequently and seldom in vain. In taking stock of the historiographical events of the last sixty years, therefore, it is appropriate to record the history of the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

Collections of American biographies, shorter or longer, have been familiar friends of historians and bibliophiles for many years. Early in the national period collections of *Lives of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* began to appear. Jared Sparks, in the midst of many duties, found time to edit a *Library of American Biography*, some of which he wrote himself. More commercial were works like John Livingston's *Portraits of Eminent Americans* which featured politicians in the ante-bellum period.

The possibility of commercializing family pride on a large scale has produced much biographical exploitation. About the time the *Pennsylvania Magazine* first made its appearance, certain enterprising publishers devised the scheme of going into the various political sub-divisions of the nation, and organizing large scale state histories. Their agents approached thousands with a plan for selling them space in a collection of biographical sketches to be appended to a local history which for a larger consideration would be adorned by an engraved likeness of the subject. There was little sales-resistance and thousands of men and women, prominent and obscure, had the pleasure of seeing in print a fulsome account of their victorious struggles for fame and affluence against overwhelming odds. At the same time that first numbers of the PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE were appearing, a New York publisher had become interested in a project of more scholarly character and James Grant Wilson, with the aid of John Fiske, began work on the volumes of *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, the first volume of which appeared in 1886. Many reputable

scholars contributed to its pages and the result was creditable. In fact it was honored by at least two imitators in the next twenty years.

None of these efforts, however, was satisfactory to the new generation of historical scholars. They yearned for more accuracy, more variety, less praise, and greater insight into human character. Besides they were not convinced that all greatness or worth was concentrated in warriors, politicians, and clergymen. The first volume of the great English *Dictionary of National Biography* appeared in 1885 the year after the American Historical Association was formed. The succeeding volumes of that great work as they appeared year after year provided a constant reminder. The leaders of the American Historical Association occasionally discussed the possibility of an American dictionary. But there were always obstacles. It would cost so much. Then the *Dictionary of National Biography* seemed to many a dull and lifeless project. Furthermore there was doubt whether American scholarship was sufficiently capable to carry on such a great task in any inspired fashion. Mighty as were these discouraging objections, the idea persisted.

Shortly after the close of the World War, several moves for co-operative scholarship matured and among them was the organization of the American Council of Learned Societies. The American Historical Association was one of the coöperating organizations and sent Dr. J. Franklin Jameson as one of its delegates. He had long cherished the belief that a dictionary of American biography might be projected and he placed his hope before the new Council in 1922. He was appointed chairman of a committee which studied the situation carefully and reported a plan. The drawback was seen to be the expense for it was estimated that a half million dollars would be needed for the project. But even such a sum did not prove an unsurmountable handicap. Through Dr. John H. Finley, Adolph S. Ochs, editor and proprietor of the *New York Times*, was interested and agreed that the New York Times Company should contribute \$50,000 a year for ten years. A committee of six, four from the Council and two from the Times Company, was selected to seek an editor and to exercise general oversight of the project.

After a careful canvass and due deliberation, Professor Allen Johnson of Yale was chosen in 1925 to take charge of the enterprise. He had made his mark not only as an historical writer, but he had

lately finished the editorial supervision of the *Chronicles of America*, a fifty volume history of the United States published under the auspices of the Yale Press. The committee further provided for establishing headquarters at Washington, D. C., and for the organization of a staff. Eventually the committee concluded arrangements with Charles Scribner's Sons for the publication of twenty volumes. Offices were opened in February, 1926, and the project was launched.

The task was a difficult one. A new fashion of writing had to be developed. A wide group of people literally had to be taught to write sketches which would be authoritative, accurate, and yet record a vivid impression of a personality. There were many who were industrious and careful, but there was all too small a number who possessed a sufficiently judicious sense of character and adequate ability as word painters to make a vivid portrait within the limits of a few hundred or at most a few thousand words. The editor started out to seek these people and to instill within them a sense of the character of the undertaking. He had very definite ideas of the character of this great task. Although the new dictionary was inspired by the English *Dictionary of National Biography* it was to avoid certain faults of the older work. The pages of that great project had been written in the less enlightened days of a previous generation. The sketches were too formal, too stereotyped. Since then Strachey and others had infused a new spirit into biographical writing and the new *Dictionary* was to profit. Eulogy was ruled out but there was the hope, sometimes realized, that humor, lighter touches, penetrating insight, and inspired writing might occasionally be contributed to the *Dictionary's* pages.

The problem next in difficulty was the list of subjects. What should be the criterion of choice? The editor decided that the scope should be broad, men and women of distinction in all fields of endeavor should be included, even in such realms as sport, charlatanry, and crime. A true picture of the variety of the American social experience should be presented. So ball players, midgets, and bandits appear page by page with statesmen, authors, and capitalists. Great pains were taken to perfect the lists of contributors and the lists of sketches. All preceding work was scanned and voluminous lists were sent to authorities in all branches of endeavor to make sure that none who were worthy had been excluded. Then the assignments were made of subjects in the A and B volumes. A widespread interest immediately developed; of

course some scholars refused assignments, others agreed to undertake them but did not fulfill their promises, but in general there was coöperation. Yet had the editor been able to give the contributors a clear idea of his standards and requirements? Time alone could tell.

Receiving the sketches was always to prove a trying experience. A few were just right. Many could be made to do with some editorial labor. But so many were too long, too eulogistic, too stereotyped. Many were careless and inaccurate, some grossly so. Then came the difficult task of persuading accomplished scholars of reputation that their work would have to be greatly altered or done over. The correspondence on both sides in those early days was sometimes fiery.

The editor soon learned that the scholarship in the country which would coöperate was not sufficient. Two functions had to be developed by the headquarters staff. In the first place, all sketches had to be checked, fact by fact, wherever possible. Secondly, a corps of writers had to be organized at Washington which prepared many hundreds of sketches. In this fashion after great labor and much travail of spirit the first volume appeared in 1928 as scheduled. The scholarly critics acclaimed it as a great achievement and there was general recognition that a high standard had been set.

The succeeding volumes appeared regularly. Before long, Dr. Johnson found the burden too heavy a tax upon his strength and in 1929 he associated Professor Dumas Malone of the University of Virginia with him; volumes IV-VII appeared under their joint editorship. In January, 1931, the scholarly world was shocked to learn that Dr. Johnson had been struck down by an automobile in Washington and killed. Fortunately, Dr. Malone was at hand to assume his mantle and the work went on smoothly and regularly until at length in 1936 the work is about completed. The twentieth and last volume is in proof and will be out even before the time appointed in the original plan.

The *Dictionary of American Biography* is a notable contribution to American scholarship. Here is a picture of the life of Americans, always competent, sometimes inspired. No phase of American activity has been neglected. The standard of workmanship is high. Much new material has been brought to light. Much that would otherwise have been lost, has been preserved. Above all, a sense of personalities, not figures, pervades the work. True there are faults; none will agree in

every case with the selection and rejection of subjects and authors. Some valuable coöperation was lost in the early days, particularly by the unwillingness of the editor to work out a program extending through the alphabet with certain busy scholars. Also the writing is of necessity uneven, and the work sometimes stereotyped, but this latter condition has persisted in spite of the heroic efforts of the able staff to make it otherwise. When and if any or several of them sit down to write memoirs, some amazing sidelights on human nature may be preserved to history. The conclusion can be drawn that the work is decidedly above the level of historical scholarship throughout the country. The doubters, who were many, have been confounded and the work will stand to speak for itself unchallenged for many years to come.

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