ESSAY REVIEW

"Scientific" History at
The Johns Hopkins University


Historians generally credit Herbert Baxter Adams and his famous seminar at The Johns Hopkins University with introducing "scientific" historical method to late nineteenth-century America. Modeling his Johns Hopkins historical seminar after the Heidelberg University seminar he had attended in the years 1874-1876, Adams by the early 1880s assumed leadership of the Friday evening gathering of professors, graduate students, administrators, and sometimes distinguished visiting scholars. After general introductory remarks by Adams, one or two speakers shared with the seminar the fruits of their ongoing research. Before the end of the evening, graduate students presented oral critiques of current books and articles. A graduate student kept detailed records of each week's proceedings. So began Adams's landmark seminar—what historian James Schouler termed the first "systematic training of critical historians" in America.¹

Influenced strongly by German scientism and evolutionary thought, Adams launched a campaign at Johns Hopkins to promote historical research. Like other pioneer historians of the 1880s, Adams proceeded "not in a narrow or provincial sense but in a liberal spirit" that fostered "not merely American history but history in America."² In 1922 James A. Woodburn, a former Adams student, declared that "no man in America . . . was more instrumental in promoting historical study and the effective organization of historical knowledge" than Adams. Woodburn continued:

In force of knowledge and in his ability to see the possible achievements ahead . . . [Adams's] powers came near to those of a genius. His best work was not in

¹ James Schouler, Historical Briefs (New York, 1896), 54.
² [Herbert Baxter Adams], "A New Historical Movement," Nation 39 (1884), 240.
writing history, but in training others to write it, and I doubt if any man's influence went beyond his in creating in America a new school of historical research. He was a great teacher, a great director, a great organizer.\(^3\)

Over the years numerous scholars have paid homage to Adams. They have underscored his dedication to "objectivity," his concern with "institutional" studies, his emphasis on the acquisition of primary sources, and his commitment to historical publication through *The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*.\(^4\) And scholars long have recognized that the records of Adams's seminar provided a treasure trove of information on the development of American historiography and the evolution of Johns Hopkins—America's first university devoted to advanced training and research.

Led by Adams, the "scientific" historians broke with both the Romantic Nationalists as well as the "critical" historians who supplanted the romantists in the post-Civil War years. The new breed of "scientific" historians viewed the past as a continuum, focused on political institutions, and championed a methodology, they said, that resembled the natural sciences. According to David D. Van Tassel, "though they had no hope of formulating historical laws based on information obtained from repeated and controlled experiments, they could gather sufficient data from the past to test certain historical hypotheses."\(^5\) Adams utilized science as a metaphor to such a degree that in 1887 he remarked that the meetings of the seminar "are laboratories where books are treated like mineralogical specimens, passed about from hand to hand, examined and tested."\(^6\)

The original manuscript records of Adams's Johns Hopkins "laboratory" are located in the Ferdinand Hamburger, Jr., Archives at Johns Hopkins. Garland's ambitious documentary project makes these records available in facsimile reproduction. The first full appearance of the seminar records in

---

\(^3\) James A. Woodburn, "Promotion of Historical Study in America Following the Civil War," *Illinois State Historical Society Transactions* 29 (1922), 45-46.


print, the multi-volume project joins two previous documentaries closely associated with Adams and his seminar: *Historical Scholarship in the United States, 1876-1901: As Revealed in the Correspondence of Herbert B. Adams* (1938), edited by W. Stull Holt, and *An Historian's World: Selections from the Correspondence of John Franklin Jameson* (1956), edited by Elizabeth Donnan and Leo F. Stock. In addition to appending textnotes, biographical notes, and an index to the facsimiles, Marvin E. Gettleman supplies an introductory essay that surveys the main themes that dominated Adams's seminar over a period of almost thirty-five years. In the editor's opinion, the records illustrate best "the outlook and mentalité of the early generation of home-grown American university professors" (1:ix).

In editing the Johns Hopkins Seminary Records, Gettleman makes a useful contribution not only to the field of documentary editing but also to our understanding of the training of historians during the profession's formative years. Significantly, he revises several common assumptions concerning Adams's seminar. For example, Gettleman cautions against "overly simplified, mechanical notions of [German-American] cultural transfer" in describing Adams's method (1:10). While "Germanic intellectual notions," especially the Teutonic germ theory, dominated early Johns Hopkins, the historians there never paid blind obeisance to them (1:13). In fact, Gettleman insists, such famous Johns Hopkins-trained historians as John Franklin Jameson, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Charles McLean Andrews were deeply skeptical and outright critical of the "scientific" training they received under Adams. Jameson, for instance, blasted his Johns Hopkins experience as "unspeakably stupid" and intellectually superficial (1:4). In his opinion, the widely acclaimed Seminary contained "too much mutual admiration and not enough savage criticism." But, Gettleman is quick to note, "there is not a scrap of surviving contemporary evidence that Adams tried to deflect any student from pursuing any legitimate research goal" (1:27). As the Seminary records themselves suggest, not all of the research conducted at Johns Hopkins emphasized New England history and the discovery of Teutonic germs in the American experience.

Nor were the pioneer monographs completed at The Hopkins limited to dry-as-dust, narrow "institutional" studies. Significantly, Gettleman credits Adams with possessing an uncommonly broad conception of history as a social science—encouraging students to examine a wide array of subjects including reform movements, businesses, legal processes, and local adminis-

---

tation. He favored inductive, interdisciplinary studies that integrated specialized research and civic concern. In Adams's view, social reform played a significant role in university life, and he made Johns Hopkins a "major epicenter of the new progressive vision" (1:39). To an important extent, members of the seminar bridged the ideological gap between the Mugwumps and turn-of-the-century Progressives. In doing so, Gettleman argues, Adams prefigured the "new history" of the Progressive era as well as the "new social history" of the later twentieth century. Adams's "scientific" history, then, functioned more as a new socially conscious historiography than as a weapon with which to battle the old literary narrative history.

Even so, Gettleman reminds us not to underestimate the importance of the doctrine of the Teutonic origins of American institutions that received considerable attention in Adams's seminars. It supplied, Gettleman insists, "a creative and far-reaching intellectual synthesis," one that united "diverse intellectual and political strands: imperial expansion, racism, 'scientific philanthropy,' reformist economics, and a variety of other research initiatives in American social history" (1:16). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Jeffrey R. Brackett, one of Adams's first graduate students to study the institution of African-American slavery, emerged early in the new century as an influential social worker, first in Baltimore and later in Boston. As Gettleman correctly observes, the publication of the Johns Hopkins seminar records underscores the common ideas, ideals, and ideologies that bound together a community of scholars for more than three decades.

And like many other Progressives, the Johns Hopkins historians also were blinded by the "invidious particularism of the Teutonic germ theory," especially when they viewed blacks, immigrants, and other minorities (1:81). In their numerous studies of African-American slavery, for example, Johns Hopkins students tailored elements of the old proslavery argument into new, scholarly, "scientific" garb. According to Gettleman, historians James C. Ballagh, John Spencer Bassett, and Jeffrey R. Brackett espoused "a kind of cheery agnosticism toward the old regime of plantation bondage" (1:75).

---


9 Gettleman argues that the contributions of the Johns Hopkins students on slavery added little "to the understanding of the South or Afro-American life" and are of value "mainly . . . as part of the interlocking mosaic of beliefs and convictions propagated in the Seminary" (1:71). For a different interpretation, see John David Smith, An Old Creed for the New South: Proslavery Ideology and Historiography, 1865-1918 (Westport, 1985), 137-62.
While praising the planters as humanitarians, they blamed the excesses of slavery on the cruelty of overseers and slave drivers. Always sensitive to the racial etiquette of white southerners, the early Hopkins students paid little attention to blacks as persons. They interpreted slavery as a positive force, an institution that prepared blacks not for full participation in political life, but rather for a decidedly second-class status in Jim Crow America. The Johns Hopkins school of slavery studies represents yet another "thread in the broader pattern of authority—including social class power—promoted at Johns Hopkins" (7:80).

Gettleman's edition of the Johns Hopkins seminar records is essential for any research library. It makes available an invaluable primary source that documents the evolution of critical historical discourse in a broad range of fields and chronological periods. It is perhaps the single most important source for examining American historiography in its formative years. And Gettleman's introduction provides a useful overview of the themes that dominated the weekly meetings of Adams's seminar. No longer must scholars trek to Baltimore to gain access to these rich documents.

Nevertheless, Gettleman's documentary project suffers from serious deficiencies. Significantly, in his introduction, the editor ignores the social composition of the Johns Hopkins seminarians and fails to place the records into the broader context of American culture in the Victorian age. He also offers too little analysis of the records themselves to guide the researcher through the more than two-thousand pages of facsimiles and editorial apparatus. Throughout the five volumes he provides few signposts to aid researchers unfamiliar with the documents. Readers would have been far better served had Gettleman prepared a more concise, selective edition, one that included only the most important entries and listed or calendared the contents of all additional text. As anyone who reads them will recognize immediately, the weekly seminar reports vary greatly in importance and insight. Even Gettleman admits that "Some of the entries are contentless, giving the subject of a presentation or discussion without really indicating what went on" (7:x). Indeed, their content is both so voluminous and uneven that researchers will encounter difficulty knowing where and how to begin their work.

The access problem is exacerbated by other factors as well. Gettleman's "highly selective" (5:[104]) and largely topical index is inadequate. Reviews of books and articles, as well as the names of many authors, simply are omitted. To be fair, it is important to note that Gettleman provides researchers with some guidance: textnotes ("annotations" in more conventional documentary edited jargon) accompany the facsimiles in each volume, and volume five includes a seventy-page biographical index. While these certainly assist the researcher, they are cumbersome and poorly positioned. Further, they present needless complications to access and comprehension. Textnotes
are keyed to the documents only by the dates when the seminar met. More coherence would have been attained had Gettleman inserted consecutive pagination throughout the volumes. Much of the holograph portion of volume five, for example, lacks page numbers, and Gettleman fails to supply them in the margins.

The editor could have avoided many of the problems that plague this documentary had he opted to transcribe the seminar records and publish them in a letterpress, not facsimile, edition. Although for the most part Garland has done a commendable job in reproducing the holographs (text definition and clarity are generally good), the variety in handwriting styles and sizes of letters necessarily renders some of the material difficult to read. While facsimiles often add to the "flavor" of a given historical period, readers gain little if pages are difficult to decipher. In addition, a letterpress format would have enabled the use of more conventional—and potentially more useful—annotations. At the very least, the editor should have explained the rationale for the chosen method of publication.¹⁰

Despite these weaknesses, the seminar records provide immensely valuable glimpses into the varied intellectual life at Johns Hopkins in the late nineteenth century. Gettleman’s project illumines the collective mind of a generation of America’s earliest professional historians at a time when the Teutonic germ theory provided the central paradigm, the organizing principle, for diverse historical research and interpretation. Future scholarship must probe German sources to test to what extent American historians comprehended the German notion of “scientific” history. Availability of these primary sources will allow scholars to grapple with the contemporary understanding of “scientific” history, its uses and abuses, and its long-range impact on the historian’s craft.

North Carolina State University

JOHN DAVID SMITH

¹⁰ Gettleman comments on the “style of editorial annotation” selected, but not on “the chosen method of facsimile reproduction.” See 1:xi.