# HISTORY IN EASY LESSONS

BY THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON

NOTHING gives to a calm observer, on the whole, more respect for children than their apparent dislike to the study of history. Nor does anything oftener impress one with the unreasonableness of parental demands than the efforts to force history by main strength into childish minds. The father comes home from his office or his workshop with a large volume done up in a parcel, and says hopefully to his little son, "Here, my boy, is the first volume of Bancroft's *History of the United States*. You will enjoy reading it very much, and when you have got through with it, there are six more just like it!" Then the father settles himself down to his daily *Herald*, and the mother to *The Smart Set*, feeling that all their parental duty is, for the moment, done. Far more just and equal was the proposal of a little girl of my acquaintance, who suggested to her favorite aunt to join her in a spelling match, and stipulated that they should "start fair." On inquiry as to her standard of fairness, she replied after a moment's reflection, "You shall spell Nebuchadnezzar, and I will spell cat; that will be starting fair."

We have discovered long since that every child is a born naturalist, but every child knew long before the arrival of Darwin that the most interesting of all animals is Man. One may see on any hillside in the country the open hole of a woodchuck, with sticks of various lengths lying round it, showing where the village children have vainly sought to explore the depths of that mysterious sheltering place. But there was never one of those boys who was not ready to leave his explorations at a moment's notice on seeing a party of two or three men coming up the other side of the hill with spades and pickaxes evidently intent to dig a larger hole for an unknown purpose, and perhaps for the cellar of some human woodchuck's abode. Never yet was a boy seen who did not enjoy the *Swiss Family Robinson*, but history written as it should be is all Swiss Family Robinson. Every girl takes pleasure in what is called at country fairs "A Centennial Teaparty," but history properly arranged is a series of just such parties. Instead of preferring fiction to truth, every child, if fairly treated, likes the truth. His dogs must actually bark, his cats actually mew. I once knew a professor's little son who had been brought up with every indulgence except the personal possession of a cat. Vainly had he pined for this crowning experience, till at last, on making a visit to a friend, he was lifted at once to the highest point of enjoyment by being introduced to a fine specimen of the feline race in full vigor. Shutting himself up in the room with it, he proceeded to try experiments in natural history, and when the cat roused the household by its wails, and a maid was sent in to hastily withdraw it, the child implored, "Ah, please, please, don't take it away; this is the most best noise I ever saw a cat do!" A similar taste for reality belongs to every youthful mind.

Is this treating the great cause of human education with too much levity? Yet its great local pioneer in the United States was Horace Mann, and the fundamental grammar of his science was to be found in his very first lecture on "The Means and Objects of Common-School Education," in 1837. In this he says, "Allow me to premise that there is one rule which in all places and in all forms of education should be held as primary, paramount, and, as far as possible, exclusive. Acquirement and pleasure should go



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hand in hand. They should never part company. The pleasure of acquiring should be the incitement to acquire. . . . Nature has implanted a feeling of curiosity in the heart of every child as if to make herself certain of his activity and progress." This he elsewhere follows up by a graphic description of a boy in school drooping sleepily and hopelessly over his lesson, and the same child five minutes after, when the recess bell has rung. It is perhaps his first lesson in a new game; all his faculties are on the alert; he learns as if by magic where to stand, when to run, whither to run, when he is "in," when and where he is "out," how to count the successes or failures on his side, in short, a harder ordeal than the whole school morning has furnished indoors, and yet he calls it play. It may be truly said that the basis of the whole public school system of the United States is to be found in those early observations by Horace Mann. He it was who first pointed out that, in the active mind of a child, whatever is understood interests, and whatever interests is remembered.

It is a curious fact that Dr. Samuel Johnson, who was in his day generally regarded among English-speaking people as the supreme authority on all intellectual questions, held that "great abilities were not requisite for an historian." "In historical composition," he said, "all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent. He has facts ready to his hand; so there is no exercise of invention. Imagination is not required in any high degree; only about as much as is used in the lower kinds of poetry. Some penetration, accuracy, and coloring will fit a man for the task, if he can give the application which is necessary." It is hard to take seriously a dogma so whimsical, yet it is a further fact worth noticing that the famous Dr. Thomas Guthrie in Scotland, who was said to have educated more men for the Christian ministry, a hundred years ago, than any other living preceptor, divided his training into three departments somewhat analogous to Johnson's "penetration, accuracy, and coloring." These three Dr. Guthrie called "proving, painting, and persuading," and they were known among his pupils collectively as "the three p's." His far-off correspondents, indeed, would frequently be reminded of them by a postscript at the end of a letter from Dr. Guthrie to this effect: "N. B. Remember the three p's." Let us consider these elements of all knowledge.

1. The basis of all knowledge, historical or otherwise, consists doubtless in a sufficient number of facts, this number being of course dependent on the temperament of the person concerned. There is on one side the time-worn tradition that "a little learning is a dangerous thing." Yet I remember, on the other hand, that I met, while connected with the Massachusetts Board of Education, a teacher possessed of such remarkable knack at passing examinations that he literally never failed in the process; and on my asking him his secret, he replied that it lay in the fact that he had less of general knowledge, not more, than most of his competitors, the result being, as he said, that what he knew, he knew. Like this was, in some degree, the example of Wendell Phillips, whose use of historical allusion in public speaking was singularly effective, and who was wont to attribute it all to the fact that he had mastered one thing thoroughly in history, the period of the English Revolution. Personally, I can recall but three public speakers whose store of facts seemed to me absolutely inexhaustible, these three being John Quincy Adams, Theodore Parker, and Louis Agassiz; their treasures in this respect lying in three different directions, but seeming alike endless. With the mass of men, however, it is unquestionable that one fact drives out another, and it is doubtful if the most learned person carries in his mind more details of knowledge when fifty years old than he carried at twenty. It is only that he carries different things. The great lawyer, for

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instance, obliged to retain in his memory all the minutiæ of the most complex case, with the liability of hopeless defeat should one fact drop out of place in the chart of his mental voyage, may very likely have to enter on another case by wholly forgetting the first one. He can no more carry it all with him than he can carry the knowledge by which he perhaps graduated *summa cum laude* from college ten years before, as for instance chemistry, or the differential calculus. Still less can he rival his own little girl, whom he may perhaps hear through the piazza window reciting to her mother the rules for knitting her new bedspread. "Cast on 41 stitches. 1st row, knit across plain; 2d row, slip 1, purl 19, purl 2 together, purl 17, thread over, purl 2; 3d row, slip 1, knit 19, knit 2 together, knit 17, over, knit 2; 4th row, slip 1, purl 19, purl 2 together, purl 17, over, purl 2; 5th row, slip 1, knit 19, knit 2 together, knit 17, over, knit 2;" and so on through the rest of the lesson.

2. Granting thus that history must begin with a limited number of facts, offered simply as facts, we come to Dr. Guthrie's second intellectual department, which he describes as "painting." This may offer the additional charm that it presently takes us into the department commonly called "light reading," or still lighter conversation. It is said of Sydney Smith that when visiting his parishioners in their farmhouses and taken at once into the hopeless decorum of the best parlor, he would walk to and fro flinging open the windows and exclaiming, "Glorify the room! Glorify the room!" Give the child some variety; if it be only that achieved by an old black man among the freed slaves in war times, who first taught his pupils to say the alphabet, and then, having attained to the limit of his own knowledge, taught them to say it also backwards. Every person who has had much experience with children knows that the stupidest child develops plenty of vivacity when talking about what interests him. When standing up in recitation, he may seem hopeless, but wait till recess time, and hear him describe a casual dog fight, or a glimpse into a circus, or even that historic occasion when the schoolroom stove got red-hot and singed the teacher's overshoes; and we have Homer's Iliad in a nutshell. I well remember that, when just out of college, I was entrusted with the pleasing task of showing Flaxman's Illustrations of Homer, then a novelty, to a young girl who was reputed to be fond of reading, and that I pointed out to her the inferiority of Flaxman's horses to their riders. "Such thick necks," I added critically; upon which she remarked, with the proper humility of a young woman for whom there were as yet no colleges, "But did not the Thessalian horses have those thick necks?" Upon this the pride of Harvard sank defeated. Alas, I could write verses in Greek hexameter, but I did not even know that it was in Thessaly that the Greek riding horses were bred.

Detail, the animation of detail, is what the young student needs. How inconceivably stiff and dreary seems to many a child the early Puritan life in New England, until he comes across some casual anecdote from which it suddenly flashes upon him that those formal clergymen had a human side. "Holy Mr. Cotton," for instance, how remote and unapproachable he seems, until this fact suddenly comes into view, that this good man was pacing homeward in Boston, wrapped in his Geneva cloak, pondering on his next Sunday's sermon, when some "street boys" passing by — so the legend says, but can it be that there were "street boys" in those days? — were heard to whisper among themselves, "Let's put a trick upon old Cotton." Upon which one boy, more daring than the rest, ran up behind him and shouted in his ear, "Cotton, thou art an old fool!" "I know it, I know it," shouted the old gentleman suddenly, "the Lord make both thee and me wiser," and then reverted to his meditations. Whole pages of fact committed to memory had left the life of that time still

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dull and mechanical, but this single incident gives to the schoolboy a human side.

A still more striking illustration of the changed point of view in which George Washington is now regarded, is to be found in the fact that all this wider intelligence dates back to a single passage introduced by Washington Irving in a footnote in very small print at the bottom of a page in the third volume of his memoirs. Four or five biographers had preceded Irving in their narrations, Ramsay, Marshall, Weems, Sparks, and the elder Bancroft. Yet not one of them had ventured to concede for an instant that the Father of his Country was capable of laughter. Irving at last ventured to recognize this possibility, and, having once done it could not restrain himself from telling how his hero was so amused while in camp, with a story told by one of his young lieutenants, that he not only laughed, but was actually seen to roll on the grass, over and over, to get to the other end of his laughter. Fancy the situation! Six feet and three inches of Father of his Country, rolling over and over on the sod in the ineffectual effort to get to the other end of that laugh. What a trivial and almost despicable fact was this, as forming a part of that great man's career! Yet it is only since that discovery that Washington became to his fellow citizens not only the Father of his Country, but a fellow man. At the present day it would be difficult to find a country school-teacher so remote that he would think it morally wrong to admit that the first American President was capable of laughing.

3. Dr. Guthrie's third department, that of "persuading," now shows itself in the higher form of freedom of discussion, such as prevails more and more universally in all our public high schools, where Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant, are encouraged to search subjects for themselves, the pupil simply looking toward the teachers as presiding officers in the debate. There could hardly, for instance, be a finer example of this than in the classes in American history which I once saw conducted by that fine teacher and large-minded author, Alice Wellington Rollins. When I said to her, "You could not, of course, go through the period of the Protestant Reformation in this way?" she replied that there was no period so interesting and successful, in her experience. Her class, she said, was about equally divided between Catholic and Protestant; the girls in succession brought out all they knew, and then, for want of ammunition, begged to have the debate adjourned until the next week, when they would come back with their cartridge boxes replenished. In answer to my inquiry "if either side converted the other," she replied, "Probably not," but that perhaps they lived all their lives holding their own view in a larger spirit, as understanding the points at which honest minds could differ. The same principle applies still more to later questions, as to those resulting from the Civil War, where it is undeniable that the children of each great party can do more justice to the others' point of view than would have seemed possible immediately after the contest. The same result is found with still earlier cases. When consulting with that gifted teacher, Jane Andrews, as to the topics that should be included in a school history I was just then writing, I hinted somewhat drearily, perhaps, at the hopelessness of making the early Colonial charters clear, or even intelligible, to very young classes, and she at once set any such fear aside, saying that there was nothing which her pupils, girls of twelve or thereabouts, followed up with more ready interest than those very charters. It was not long after when her widely famed book, *The Seven Little Sisters Who Live on the Round Ball that Floats in the Air*, reached these very sisters so thoroughly as to be translated into Japanese and Chinese.

Now it hardly needs to be pointed out, as we go farther on, that all these little rules and maxims which apply to the child apply also to the veteran historian.

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Its proving, its painting, its persuading, must be the same to him. Coleridge said that the dullest writer could write an interesting book if he would but relate the events of his own life with honesty, not disguising the feelings that accompanied them.[1] All depends, after all, on the teacher, and even that teacher has his inspired moments. It is a curious fact that those men of genius who have done the most to recognize the picturesqueness of our earlier American life were the very men who at the outset were troubled by the theory that it was tame and commonplace; as in the case of Lowell, who complained that the details of New England history were essentially dry and unpoetic; and Hawthorne, who had maintained that the same period furnished only "a dull routine of commonplace prosperity; no picturesque and gloomy wrong."

The vast rapidity with which studies in history, and especially in American history, are multiplying every day can only recall to us the fact that the professional historian, like the professional lawyer or physician or poet, was only developed by degrees in our American society. In Virginia the early leaders were planters; in the New England Colonies they were clergymen; and all other intellectual leadership was done by this class or not done at all. There was no distinct class of lawyers in Massachusetts, at least, before 1701; and even then they were simply admitted as attorneys, with no examination and no study required. One favorite Boston attorney, for instance, was a quick-witted tailor, others were merchants. Attorney-General Bullivant was an apothecary. A few men had been trained to the bar in England, but even those were liable at any moment to have their plans interfered with by clergymen who came into court, expressed their minds, and often carried the day. Among others in the courts there was no courtesy and no deference. There was jury trial, but it happened sometimes, when a juryman stood out against the rest, that he was refused food and starved into compliance. The court bullied the counsel and were treated without respect by the bar. One day when a poor old woman came hobbling into the courtroom and found no seat, the lawyer who had summoned her as a witness bade her go up on the judges' bench, which she innocently proceeded to do, and the lawyer when reproved replied that he thought that place was "made for old women." The first English-bred lawyer who set himself up as an attorney, Thomas Lechford, in 1637, was allowed but one case and then forbidden to practice; and Jeremy Gridley, called "the father of the Boston bar," came to it about 1730. Out of all this chaos, order was evolved in time. But it is a remarkable fact that the three leaders most conspicuous in the early days of the Revolution, John and Samuel Adams and Oxenbridge Thacher, were all originally destined for the church, the family of Samuel Adams objecting to his becoming a lawyer because it was not considered an altogether respectable profession.

None of these careers would be likely, as we can now see, to train the historian, and when the higher training arrived it came in the purely classic form and hindered as much as it helped. The late Professor Henry W. Torrey told me that he, Charles Sumner, and Wendell Phillips used to learn by heart at the Boston Latin School whole books of Virgil and Homer in the original, and recite lessons from them without referring to the text. There were still cultivated families where the gentlemen of the house would cap verses, as it was called, by the evening fireside. Public oratory was measured by just such formal standards. We have in the diaries of Rev. John Peirce the precise measurement of the length of orations and poems at Harvard Φ. B. K. meetings for many years; no address, he shows us, had exceeded fifty minutes down to 1824, when Edward Everett, then in his early

[1] *Quarterly Review*, xcviii, p. 456.

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glory, went up to one hour and fifty-one minutes.[1]

So vast and complex are the developments of modern history, it is quite certain that no American scholar of high standing would now treat with any respect the belittling statement of Johnson as to the gifts required of an historian. The criticism now belongs rather on the other side as to the permanence or final quality of the work. The late Justin Winsor, who was recognized by almost all as the chief among our American historians, always pointed out with sadness that even a vast specialist like Parkman — the one striking instance among us of one who chose his life career in college days and never swerved from it — would inevitably be superseded as time went on by the man of later knowledge; as we already see, indeed, in the case of Parkman that he underrated from the outset the claims of the Indians on the imaginative side, and did not keep up with the later observations. Even Rufus Choate, when he turned from his forensic triumphs, and said, "After all, a book is the only immortality," left the problem unsolved, for he did not tell what that book should be; and no one ever met the fatal possibilities of that ordeal. Voltaire perhaps solved the problem more nearly than Choate, for Voltaire laid it down as final that nothing can be more difficult than to be obscurely hanged.

[1] *Massachusetts Historical Collections*, ix, p. 119.

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# ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

## BY LAFCADIO HEARN

A MEMORY of long ago. . . . I am walking upon a granite pavement that rings like iron, between buildings of granite bathed in the light of a cloudless noon. Shadows are short and sharp: there is no stir in the hot bright air; and the sound of my footsteps, strangely loud, is the only sound in the street. . . . Suddenly an odd feeling comes to me, with a sort of tingling shock, — a feeling, or suspicion, of universal illusion. The pavement, the bulks of hewn stone, the iron rails, and all things visible, are dreams! Light, color, form, weight, solidity — all sensed existences — are but phantoms of being, manifestations only of one infinite ghostliness for which the language of man has not any word. . . .

This experience had been produced by study of the first volume of the *Synthetic Philosophy*, which an American friend had taught me how to read. I did not find it easy reading; partly because I am a slow thinker, but chiefly because my mind had never been trained to sustained effort in such directions. To learn the *First Principles* occupied me many months: no other volume of the series gave me equal trouble. I would read one section at a time, — rarely two, — never venturing upon a fresh section until I thought that I had made sure of the preceding. Very cautious and slow my progress was, like that of a man mounting, for the first time, a long series of ladders in darkness. Reaching the light at last, I caught a sudden new vision of things, — a momentary perception of the illusion of surfaces, — and from that time the world never again appeared to me quite the same as it had appeared before. . . .

This memory of more than twenty years ago, and the extraordinary thrill of the moment, were recently revived for me by the reading of the essay "Ultimate

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