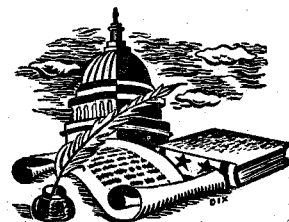


SHOULD AMERICAN HISTORY BE REWRITTEN?



A Debate Between Allan Nevins and Matthew Josephson

YES / By ALLAN NEVINS

Every so often, says the eminent historian Allan Nevins, the past should be viewed afresh from a new perspective. It is time, he suggests, to take another look at the last half-century of American progress and to re-evaluate the role played by the great industrialists of former years. Allan Nevins, who is professor of history at Columbia University, has adapted his article for SR from an address he gave before the Society of American Archivists. Matthew Josephson (who first employed the phrase "robber barons" to describe America's turn-of-the-century industrialists) disputes the soundness of Nevins's thesis on page 9.

ONE curious thing about history, as Philip Guedalla said, is that it really happened. Another curious fact about history is that while it was happening nobody really understood its meaning.

John Fiske, pausing one day in his young manhood before the window of Little, Brown & Co. in Boston, saw a volume within entitled "Pioneers of France in the New World" and noted that its author was identified as the man who had written "The Conspiracy of Pontiac." He remembered that when that earlier volume appeared he had wondered whether Pontiac was a barbarous chieftain of medieval Europe. He recalled also that some teacher at Harvard had once expressed the view that the French and Indian War was a dull squabble of no real significance to students of

history. Passing on, Fiske wondered why anyone should write about French pioneers in America. He lived to pen an essay on Francis Parkman which not only placed that author at the head of American historians (where he yet stands), but recognized that the epic significance of the struggle of Britain and France for the mastery of North America—a significance which Parkman had first expounded—could hardly be overstated. An interpretation of our continental history which nowadays we assume no child could miss had been beyond the grasp of the brilliant young John Fiske in the 1860's.

The idea that history can ever be so well written that it does not need rewriting can be held only by those foolish people who think that history can ever ascertain exact truth. It can-

not. We can go further than the assertion of that truism: we can say, "Fortunate for history that it cannot ascertain exact truth!" If history were a photograph of the past it would be flat and uninspiring. Happily, it is a painting; and, like all works of art, it fails of the highest truth unless imagination and ideas are mixed with the paints. A hundred photographs of London Bridge look just alike and convey altogether a very slight percentage of the truth, but Turner's Thames and Whistler's Thames, though utterly different, both convey the river with a deeper truth.

All parts of our history are always being rewritten; no segment of it, from 1492 to 1952, is not now in need of vigorous rewriting. Whenever an expert applies himself to the scrutiny of a special area he at once sounds a lusty call for more searching exploration of the terrain. Douglas Freeman, carrying Washington through the Revolution, agreed with Bernard Knollenberg, writing a history of that war, that every part of the Revolutionary struggle needs the most searching re-examination and the boldest reinterpretation. Merrill Jensen states in the preface to his study of the Confederation that the entire period 1783-1789 demands a study that will embrace every state and every act of Congress. There are men who believe that the historical study of the Civil War period has only just begun—and they are right. Margaret

Leech, now completing a study of the McKinley Administration, is convinced that a hundred research workers should be set to exploration of the dark nooks and secret crannies of the time.

"In vain the sage, with retrospective eye," wrote Pope, "would from the apparent what conclude the why." The three main reasons why history constantly needs reinterpretation include something more than the impossibility of ever learning all the truth about all the motives and actions of the past.

The chief of the three reasons is the need of every generation for a reinterpretation to suit its own preconceptions, ideas, and outlook. Every era has its own climate of opinion. It thinks it knows more than the preceding era; it thinks it takes a wider view of the universe. Every era, too, is affected by cataclysmic events which shift its point of view; the French Revolution, the Metternichian reaction, the movement for national unification in Italy, the United States, and Germany, the apogee of Manchester Liberalism, and so on down to the multiple crisis of our atomic age. We see the past through a prism which glows and sparkles as new lights catch its facets. Much of the rewriting of history is a readjustment to this prism. George Bancroft's spectrum was outmoded a few years after his laborious "last revision"; Charles A. Beard's begins to be outworn today, for we now possess what Beard would have called a new frame of reference.

As a second reason, new tools of superior penetrative power are from time to time installed in the toolshed of even our rather unprogressive race of historians. Our council for research in the social sciences (it should be studies) justly emphasizes the value of overlapping disciplines. Much could be said for the contention that the best historians nowadays are prepared in some other field than that of history. Thus Wesley Clair Mitchell, the historian of the greenbacks, of business cycles, and of the ebb and flow of economic activity, whose National Bureau of Economic Research inspired so much fruitful historical writing, was trained as an economist. (He also was trained by John Dewey, who gave courses under all sorts of titles, but "every one of them dealt with the same subject—how we think.") Beard was trained as a political scientist. Parrington was trained as a student of literature. Carl Becker was trained in European history but wrote in the American field. James Henry Breasted was first trained in theology, a fact which stood him in good stead when this pioneer of Egyptology in America began to trace the development of

conscience and religion in the Ancient East. Not one historian in fifty knows as much as he should of the tool called statistics, or of psychology, or of economic geography, or of ecology. The kinship between Halford J. Mackinder, the geographer, and Frederick J. Turner, the historian, in loosing seminal ideas showed what the geographer could learn from history, and the historian from geography.

But the third great reason why history is rewritten is simply because the constant discovery of new materials necessitates a recasting of our view of the past. We might think that this would one day cease, but it never does. Everyone who has laboriously mapped any historical subject appreciates the impact of new facts upon that map, blurring some lines and defining new ones. Happy are those who live to rewrite their books, as Parkman rewrote one of his—"LaSalle and the Great West." One would have said that all the materials for a history of the Revolution had been assembled in print by the innumerable agencies, local, state, and national, devoted to that effort, but Freeman assures us that the great archives like the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, and the main state libraries bulge with unstudied documents. One would have said that all the material for the history of the Confederate War Office had been studied and restudied; but, behold!, the diary of the third officer of that department, Kean, is suddenly deposited in the University of Virginia, and we find it possible to make a sweeping reassessment of the Southern military administration.

Thus, the idea that history is photography is set at naught. It is art; it constantly requires a new mixture of pigments, new points of view, new manipulation of light and shade; and as an art it presents an endless challenge to the writer who perceives that the highest truth of history will always transcend a statement of fact; that, indeed, historical fact is but a foundation for the truth won by imagination and intellectual power.

The best history is always interpretive, but this does not mean that the best history is consciously or ostentatiously interpretive. The work of the historical masters, from Thucydides to Trevelyan, illustrates the fact that interpretation is most effective when implicit rather than explicit. The true historical attitude is a search for truth about a situation, force, or event—the War of 1812, the Abolitionist impulse, Pearl Harbor—which slowly, painfully, accurately dredges up an unforeseen interpretation. That is, history properly operates by the

inductive, not the deductive, method. The merit of an Olympian historian like Parkman is that he says in effect: "Let us collect and collate all the relevant facts and find what conclusions emerge from their impartial analysis." The cardinal weakness of a controversial historian like Beard is that he repeatedly gave the impression—perhaps falsely—of having said to himself: "Let us take this provocative theory of the truth, and see how impressive an array of facts we can collect in its support." Ideas in history, that is, should be applied in subordination to the ascertainment of all the facts, and not in control of the ascertainment of one picked body of facts. Hence it is that nothing could be more absurd than to try to predict in advance the interpretations to be applied to our history by future writers—who will certainly go their own way. But we may legitimately make some guesses—they are not prophecies, but mere guesses, offered with due modesty—as to the drift of some of the new interpretations.

AS AMERICAN history lengthens and the past falls into longer perspective, we tend not so much to discard major interpretations entirely as to place new ones beside them; not so much to substitute one simple synthesis for another as to embrace old monistic views in a new and complex synthesis. During the first century of our national history, 1775-1875, three great dominant developments lift themselves above all others. They are the establishment of American Independence, political, economic, and finally cultural, from Europe; the westward movement for the conquest and development of the continent; and the abolition of slavery and a Southern way of life in a civil war which vindicated national unity. Some students, to be sure, would select other elements in our historical fabric, but three special students out of five and nine lay readers out of ten would, I believe, choose these. Now it is evident to a cursory view that each of the three lent itself at first to a simple monistic interpretation, expounded in the work even of subtle historians; and that within one or two generations this simple view of the past was replaced by a dual or multiple interpretation. What had been a flat telescopic image was given depth and reality by a stereopticon lens.

Thus it was that the old simple view



of the Revolution as a politico-military struggle was amplified and enriched by subsequent views of the Revolution as a great movement for social and institutional change of a purely internal character. The old simple view of the conflict of North and South as centering in the slavery struggle was widened and deepened by later treatments of that collision as arising also from the increasing moral, social, economic, and cultural differences between the two sections. The old simple view of westward expansion as significant for what the pioneer did in changing the wilderness was immensely enlarged by Turner's thesis that a greater significance lay in what the wilderness did in changing the pioneer.

NOWADAYS the character of a fourth great development, accomplished and sealed in the last fifty years of our national life, can hardly be missed. On that new phase of our history, too, general agreement will perhaps be found. We have become first a great world power, and then the great world power. We have moved first into the open arena of world affairs, and then into the very center of that arena. We now view our national past from the vantage-point of this new turn, and with the changed perspective which it gives us.

Just as John Fiske saw our history from 1607 to 1789 as an evolutionary preparation for the gift of practical democracy and the Anglo-American principle of self-government to the world in the shape of our Constitution and Federal system; just as Von Holst saw the whole period from 1776 to 1861 as a preparation for the vindication of human liberty and national unity; so now we have historians who view our whole national life as an unconscious preparation for the time when we should become Protector of the Faith for all democratic peoples; when, having turned away from Western European affairs until we gained first place among the nations, we returned to them as the pivot and support of Western European civilization. These writers regard American history not in terms of the Western continent, but in terms of an Atlantic community. We find, indeed, that we never left that community; that the Seven Years' War was our first world war, the Revolution our second; that we have but awakened to our consciousness of a global role. And when these historians write of our national future they speak not of short-term objects, but of what Lincoln called "man's vast future."

This tremendous change of the past forty or fifty years—this emergence
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—From "The Red Badge of Courage."

Benedetto Croce: "All true history is contemporary history."

SHOULD AMERICAN HISTORY BE REWRITTEN?

NO / By MATTHEW JOSEPHSON, author of "The Robber Barons" and other books on American history.

WHEN Professor Nevins read the foregoing paper before the Society of American Archivists in Dearborn, Michigan, the newspapers rose to the significance of certain passages in it as foreshadowing a new fashion in our historical writing. These were quoted very widely, in some cases, under fairly alarming headlines, such as that in *The New York Times* for September 20, 1953:

REWRITING HISTORY IS URGED BY NEVINS

Our writers and scholars had been growing a bit edgy at reports of the banning and burning of books and of the predations of Senator McCarthy and his "literary department" in the republic of letters. Now came news that Professor Nevins was out to "rewrite" some of our recent history and it gave many persons quite a turn. He has been saying much the same things for several years and with less reservation or prudence than in the Dearborn lecture. In the 1953 edition of his biography of John D. Rockefeller ("A Study in Power"), as earlier, in August 1951, before a meeting of history teachers at Stanford University, he had asserted that many of our contemporary writers had done grave injustice to

negies, Hills, and Morgans . . . In the past our historians tended to a feminine idealism. They were apologetic about our dollars, our race to wealth, our materialism. . . . They spoke scornfully of the robber barons who were not robber barons at all: they intimated that America had grown too fast.

Professor Samuel Eliot Morison, president of the American Historical Association, sounded the same notes last year in an address before that learned body. He assailed the tendency to the "economic interpretation" of our history as exemplified by Charles Beard, and he went to great lengths to castigate the "debunkers" who in the 1930's and 1940's, by their excessively critical spirit, as he argued, often insulted our "folk-memories," stripped America's "great figures" of all virtue, all nobility, and in fact of their greatness. Mr. Morison, therefore, urged that our damaged heroes should be salvaged from the historical junk heaps where they had been consigned, that they be patched up, varnished, and made to look like real antiques. At the same time *Fortune* magazine, which candidly glorifies our large corporate enterprises, in April 1952 published a long article by E. N. Saveth surveying the many injuries done to the reputes of our business class by American historians old and new, from Parkman and Prescott,

. . . the leaders of our material growth—the Rockefellers, Car-