



[Solon J. Buck Papers.](#)

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compiled, May, 1931

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Solon Justus Buck— Scholar-Administrator

By THEODORE C. BLEGEN *

University of Minnesota

FOR ME, as a former student and colleague of Dr. Buck and a friend through more than four decades, it is a very special privilege to take part in this program in his honor. I find it difficult, however, as my memory runs across the years, to compress my thoughts and impressions into a talk of only a few minutes. My mood is like that of a woman who, speaking across the garden fence to her neighbor, said, "Never give me the gist of the matter—just give me the details." But I am mindful that Dr. Buck himself tutored me in the art of condensation, and here I recall a six-word speech that he gave many years ago in Minnesota. We had a long program dealing with different periods in the growth of the Minnesota Historical Society. One speaker discoursed lengthily on "The Past," another expatiated on "The Present," and then Dr. Buck was called on to speak on "The Future"—a subject holding infinite possibilities. He rose and said crisply, "Ladies and gentlemen: The future will speak for itself," and sat down. Today perhaps the oil portrait will speak for itself, but the occasion seems appropriate also for a little portraiture in words.

A half-dozen years ago the University of Minnesota conferred on Dr. Buck the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, and it fell to my lot to present the doctoral citation, before the president of the university officially conferred the degree. As a setting for what I have to say today, I should like to quote that citation or summary of a career of service and contributions:

Native of our sister state, Wisconsin; distinguished graduate of the University of Wisconsin and Harvard University; for seventeen years member of the faculty of the University of Minnesota, interpreter of western history, and guide to advanced students; for an equal period modern rebuilder of our sister institution, the Minnesota Historical Society, and inspirer of public interest in our state and local history; author and editor of notable books de-

* One of two addresses made at the unveiling of a portrait of Solon Justus Buck in the National Archives conference room, Apr. 8, 1960. The writer is dean of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota and is a distinguished historian and author. The second of the two addresses at the unveiling follows this article, and Dr. Buck's own brief remarks are printed in our news notes.

picting the role of Minnesota and the West in national history; organizer of historical work in Pennsylvania and other states; one-time Archivist of the United States, Chief of Manuscripts and Assistant Librarian of the Library of Congress; great scholar, far-seeing historical administrator, hunter and interpreter of records of the past . . .

If this may fairly be considered the gist of the matter, let me suggest a few details that can help us to interpret it. Dr. Buck's basic role in our cultural history is that of a remarkable scholar-administrator, and it is a twin and interrelated role. His national career tended to move him more and more into high administrative responsibility, but underlying the inevitable administrative drive has been the scholar's constant quest for quality, exactitude, and productivity. With all the emphasis on his administrative achievements, we should not forget the scholarly foundation built by *The Granger Movement*,¹ which stands as a classic nearly a half century after its publication and has opened the way to scores of books and articles; his bibliographical work on *Travel and Description, 1765-1865*;² his *Illinois in 1818*;³ his interpretation of *The Agrarian Crusade*;⁴ his charming *Stories of Early Minnesota*,⁵ done jointly with a certain Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck; and his *Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania*,⁶ also in joint authorship with Mrs. Buck. These and other books and a prodigious output of scholarly articles would represent for ordinary mortals a full career, and they mark a secure and high place for Solon Justus Buck in American historiography.

But the imagination, drive, and constructive planning and work of the man whose portrait we unveil today could not rest content with a shelf of books and articles, however impressive. And so we honor a series of interrelated careers. One is teaching, and here I speak with firsthand knowledge, for I had the experience of being a student in his seminars and writing a doctoral thesis under his very critical guidance. His instruction turned me away from the Stuart period of English history into American western and American social history; and, alongside such great teachers as Guy Stanton Ford and Wallace Notestein, he gave me a sense of excitement about diaries, letters, and other original records, plus a rigorous training in method and in writing. I speak of these matters because I want to underline Dr. Buck's generous interest in the

¹ (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1913).

² (Springfield, Ill., 1914).

³ (Springfield, Ill., 1917).

⁴ (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1920).

⁵ (New York, 1925).

⁶ (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1939).

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education and encouragement of succeeding generations of scholars both through his own writings and through his formal instruction. I am only one of many who are grateful to him as to a master teacher.

The administrative story is a long one that reaches from Illinois to Minnesota to Pennsylvania and then to the Nation, and I shall touch upon only one segment of it—Minnesota. Here, too, I can speak from firsthand knowledge because I was associated with him all through the 17 years of his Minnesota Historical Society career and his teaching career at the university, first as a student and then as a colleague until he chose to leave the land of sky-blue waters for the smoky atmosphere of Pittsburgh.

In American history we have too fond a liking for *firsts*, for initial settlements, foundings, and institutional beginnings; and we sometimes fail to realize that refoundings and turns of direction can be more significant historically than absolute firsts. This generalization is nicely illustrated in the Minnesota Historical Society, which was actually founded in 1849 but was rebuilt from 1913 and 1914 on, when the team of Dean Ford and Dr. Buck appeared on the Minnesota scene. A placid antiquarian society, housed in the basement of the State Capitol, was transformed from a skull-capped institution with a genteel genealogical fragrance into a modern, scientific historical society that took rank among the very best in the nation. Dr. Buck, enticed to Minnesota by Dean Ford, who is justly known as a "fisher of men," accepted the superintendency of the society, ignored the cries of anguish from the skull-caps, and proceeded to reorganize and revolutionize the institution. He launched its quarterly magazine, now in its 37th volume; engineered the transfer of the society into a new, glistening, modern building; re-formed the staff; brought about increased financial support; scouted the State for vast and important additions to the manuscript collection and extended the search for materials to other parts of the country, to Canada, and to Europe; expanded the library; modernized the museum; started a movement for adequate handling of the State's archives; initiated summer tours that were described as peripatetic seminars in history; marked historic sites; encouraged the establishment of county historical societies—a movement that grew in succeeding years until every one of the State's 87 counties had a society of its own; stirred wide popular interest in history; promoted research; edited Dr. Folwell's four-volume *History of Minnesota*;⁷ and generally, in

⁷ William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (4 vols.; St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1921-30).

the society's administration, set standards that were observed and studied throughout the nation. He himself emerged as a national leader in the area of preserving historical materials and advancing historical work—all this alongside his writing, teaching, and participation in regional and national historical conferences and organization. My own training in administration, like my training in research, came in close association with Dr. Buck, for in the midst of all this excitement he chose me, perhaps for Scandinavian flavoring in a blue-eyed State, to join him as assistant superintendent in his administrative and editorial adventures. He was a tough-minded chief, highly critical, often exasperating in his passionate concern with details, but always alert to improvements in methods and procedures, never content to rest on his laurels, and, I must add, always appreciative of ideas and responsibility in his staff associates.

As I now review this story, I realize that he was schooling himself through those years, preparing for the later career that came in other regions and in national fields of service. I can barely mention his influence in the formative years of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, his directorship of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey and editorship of the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, and his 20 years of service as treasurer of the American Historical Association.

The kind of scholarly, administrative, and organizing energy and achievement I have described does not come to an abrupt end when its dynamic human center moves away. Good institutions are ongoing; ideas and movements continue to grow, changing with time and need, but pushing forward as the years go on; and so, like the books on the Buck shelves, the work I have sketched merges into the living present and will carry forward into a long future. The unveiling of this portrait today is symbolic of another kind of portrait built into American institutions and ideas and ongoing education and culture that contribute to the enrichment of human life and understanding.

And now let me only add that if my words often have been couched in the past tense, I have come here with a lively sense of the presence of Dr. and Mrs. Buck, whose friendship means very much to me and whose work and influence are present and ongoing. I cannot close without voicing my admiration for a man of great integrity who merits the accolade of "scholar and gentleman" and for a lady of rare ability and grace, whose portrait, I suspect, will one day be unveiled in a like ceremony.

Solon Justus Buck—Archivist

By ERNST POSNER*

American University

ON DECEMBER 9, 1944, before the Literary Society of Washington, Solon J. Buck read a paper entitled "Let's Look at the Record."¹ To look at *his* record, on the day on which his picture is being unveiled in this conference room, is an honor deeply appreciated by one who for many years had the privilege of respectfully observing the manifestations and the impressive results of his leadership in the archival field.

Not long after Dr. Buck had been appointed to the distinguished office of Archivist of the United States a great number of his friends and collaborators, at the invitation of Dr. and Mrs. Luther H. Evans, gathered at the Mayflower Hotel to celebrate the event and to wish him Godspeed. Many of us still remember the warm glow that excellent sherry and a happy anticipation of Dr. Buck's future achievements gave to the occasion. The day was December 7, 1941, and when the party broke up and the guests returned to their homes the news of Pearl Harbor was coming in over the radio. It seemed a somber enough prelude to Dr. Buck's term of office, and indeed it ushered in a period that would challenge the administrative and professional leadership of the man who was to be at the helm of the National Archives during the difficult war and postwar years. Still in its formative stage, the young institution's problems were to be of towering magnitude, comparable possibly to those of the early years of the National Archives of France, which had to grope its way during the days of the Revolution and the interminable wars of the Napoleonic Empire. How fortunate it was that the second Archivist of the United States had brought to Washington so rich an experience in the administration of historical source material—how felicitous that his voice had carried great weight in the conference of American archivists since its inception—and how appropriate that his portrait should now take

*The second of two addresses made at the unveiling of a portrait of Solon Justus Buck in the National Archives conference room, Apr. 8, 1960. The author, Fellow of the Society of American Archivists and the Society's past president, recently resigned as dean of the Graduate School of the American University and has returned to the duties of professor of history and archival administration at that institution.

¹Published in *American Archivist*, 8: 109-114 (Apr. 1945).

its place with those of the founding fathers who have preceded him in this growing Hall of Archival Fame!

When, in 1935, R. D. W. Connor, the first Archivist of the United States, began to select his principal aides, Solon J. Buck was his logical choice for the position of Director of Publications. From the vantage point of his office, Dr. Buck was in a position to observe both the growth and the growing pains of the infant National Archives, to gage its accomplishments, and to assess its working arrangements with a view to the services it should render to the Government and to research. To acquaint the scholars of the Nation with the increasing store of source materials in the National Archives, as early as 1937 he provided for inclusion in the Archivist's *Third Annual Report* a 58-page guide to the holdings, forerunner of the more elaborate *Guide to the Materials in the National Archives*, which, only five years after the Archives' establishment, described in more than 300 pages the records received before December 31, 1939. Old-line archivists could but marvel at the effectiveness thus displayed in forging a descriptive tool that most of the archives of Europe had been slow or remiss in furnishing the scholar.

Broadly interpreting his duties as a liaison officer with the world of archives and documents, Dr. Buck sought at an early time to obtain for the National Archives recognition of its place among the archives of the nation and those of foreign countries and to establish its contacts with other organizations in the field. He played a leading role in establishing the Society of American Archivists, officiated at the birth of the American Documentation Institute, and, in the summer of 1938, served as one of the delegates of the United States to the Eighth International Congress of Historical Sciences at Zurich and chairman of the American delegation to the Fourteenth International Conference on Documentation at Oxford. He took advantage of this opportunity to visit archival agencies in France, Switzerland, Belgium, and England, and thus broadened his knowledge of the evolution and status of archival work in other countries of the world.

While abroad, he also familiarized himself with the facilities for the training of archivists that had been developed in some European countries; for the problems of selecting and properly preparing the members of the growing corps of American archivists were of considerable concern to him. By serving as a visiting professor of archives administration at Columbia University during the academic year 1938-39, he himself introduced the subject of archives into the curriculum of American institutions of

higher learning. Wisely, however, he decided that such a curriculum should be made available at the seat of our national archival agency, and so in the following year he taught the first class in the history and administration of archives at the American University, including me as a partner in the enterprise.

Perhaps the crowning achievement of his career as Director of Publications was initiated when on March 11, 1940, the Archivist was inspired to appoint Dr. Buck chairman of a committee to study finding mediums. Proceeding from the conviction that the technicalities of archival description (the committee's immediate concern) could not be isolated from other aspects of archival work, the committee probed into the basic problems of the organization and control of archival holdings. There emerged from its deliberations the concept of the record group, the pragmatic adaptation of the vague concept of *respect des fonds* to the distinctive nature of the records of twentieth-century government with its mammoth agencies, its hectic growth, its ever changing structure. As a result of the deliberations of the committee, the Archivist issued, on February 28, 1941, his "Directions for the Preparation of Finding Mediums,"² containing the concept of the record group, born of the traditions of archival economy but adjusted to the problems of the present—a concept that has proved to be a most effective means of controlling and making accessible the information in the bulky records of modern administration.

No doubt it was in recognition of these outstanding contributions of Dr. Buck that the Archivist, on March 3, 1941, broadened his responsibilities and changed his title to that of Director of Research and Publications. His office had truly developed into a center of research in which the basic principles of archival administration were being explored with due attention to comparable experience abroad and its possible application to the American scene. And when, some six months later, the first Archivist resigned to accept a recently endowed chair of American history and jurisprudence at the University of North Carolina, it was but fitting that Dr. Buck should have been made the second Archivist of the United States.

Characteristically, when the duties of the highest office were conferred upon him, the new Archivist rose to meet the challenge with a deepening sense of responsibility. Still struggling with the problems arising from the confused and frequently amorphous character of the records from which the National Archives must select and assimilate those of enduring value, he was convinced that the

² Published as appendix 3 of the *Seventh Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States, 1940-41*, p. 65-68.

remedy lay in action taken within the agencies of origin, at the time when the documents are filed, when they are first consciously considered as record material. He knew that the judicious appraisal and selection of records of enduring value depended on their having been initially arranged and administered with that end in view. He knew that the problem of records, from the day they come into existence in the agency of origin until they are finally either disposed of or deposited in the archival agency, should constitute the subject matter of an integrated program—records administration. With a Government operating under the stress of international tensions and war, with new war agencies being established and additional masses of record material coming into existence at a vastly accelerated rate, the Archivist obtained a supplemental appropriation from Congress and set up formally as a new activity his own records administration program designed to “persuade and assist the operating agencies . . . to give adequate attention to the problems of records management.”³

The agencies, especially the war agencies, were only too happy to cooperate. Many of the members of the National Archives staff went out into the war agencies to assist in the establishment and operation of records administration programs, and thus the ideas, concepts, and techniques of records management found their way into the bloodstream of the Federal Government. Dr. Buck’s initiative and guidance and the pioneer work of his emissaries laid the foundations for what was later to become the legal responsibility of an expanded and reorganized National Archives and Records Service. Of the forward-looking and sensational nature of this development there can be no doubt. What in their fondest dreams European archivists had never hoped to achieve, within 15 years after its establishment the National Archives was able to do.

Another innovation almost as dramatic as that of the records administration program was the initiation and expansion of microfilm publication as a service to both Government and scholarship. True, most European archival agencies had recognized the scholar’s right to ask for and obtain microcopies of whole runs of records, and many had in fact assisted a Library of Congress mission in producing them. But a program under which copies of important bodies of records would be readily available for the modest cost of positive prints was a totally new departure in the field of reference service and was bound to eradicate completely the famous proprietary attitude of the archivist toward his records. If, in Dr. Buck’s own words, archives are “the official record of human exper-

³ *Eighth Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States, 1941-42, p. 4.*

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ience in organized living," multiplication of copies by means of a cheap publication program was the most effective way to enhance "their effective utilization in the maintenance of peace and the advancement of civilization."⁴

Precious little time and money, however, were available during the war years for the furnishing of service to scholarship. In that period the National Archives assisted other agencies in their war efforts by providing information upon receiving individual requests and by anticipating and constructively meeting such requests through its series of *Reference Information Circulars* that described material pertaining to critical problems and strategic areas.

Soon, however, Dr. Buck and the National Archives were to be called upon to extend their services beyond the confines of the United States and to enter the field of archival concern on an international plane. Early in July 1943 representatives of the Committee on the Protection of Cultural Treasures in War Areas met with Waldo G. Leland and Dr. Buck, in the latter's office, and asked for the Archivist's cooperation in a program designed to assist in the protection of cultural monuments, including archives, in war areas. Dr. Buck, intensely interested in contributing to so important a task and dedicated to the common cause of the profession, made the facilities of the National Archives available to prepare the desired data for the committee and to issue the material in the form of lists of archival repositories in enemy and enemy-occupied territories. Although the contribution these lists made to the actual protection of archives cannot be measured, it is certain that Dr. Buck's initiative helped to establish the National Archives as the country's expert and official voice in archival matters pertaining to the war. Later on, archives officers of the U. S. Army, selected and recommended by the National Archives, rendered effective service not only in securing and making available the records of German agencies but also in helping to rehabilitate damaged archival depositories abroad and in returning displaced and confiscated archives to their rightful owners. Such efforts convinced European archivists that the National Archives and their colleagues in the United States were willing and ready to extend them a helping hand.

But this was only the beginning of the National Archives' career in the field of international archival leadership, which, in the post-war period, was to reveal most clearly the imprint of Dr. Buck's personality and guiding hand. In his presidential address on the archivist's "one world," delivered on October 24, 1946, before

⁴"The Archivist's 'One World,'" in *American Archivist*, 10:12, 24 (Jan. 1947).

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the Society of American Archivists,⁵ he made two proposals. The first, calling for the establishment of a United Nations Archives, played its part in getting that unit established, though it failed to develop into the great international archival agency that Dr. Buck envisioned. Farther reaching and more effective was the proposal for a UNESCO archives program aimed at the creation of an international organization of professional archivists. Happily, at the 1946 Paris conference, his suggestion was included in UNESCO's program. Encouraged by its approval, Dr. Buck in his dual capacity of Archivist of the United States and president of the Society of American Archivists could take the initiative in calling upon about 120 prominent archivists in other countries to join with him in determining "the nature of the organization that archivists want to see established . . . and the next steps to be taken."⁶ At a meeting held upon UNESCO's call in Paris in June 1948, a committee of experts considered a proposed constitution prepared by the United States and, resolving itself into the first constituent assembly, adopted this constitution with certain changes. In due recognition of the leading role he had played in organizing the International Council on Archives, Dr. Buck was elected one of its two vice presidents. Two years later, at the First International Congress, also held in Paris, Dr. Buck, as spokesman of the American delegation, effectively pleaded for a more democratic organization of the Council that made it "a professional organization of archivists" rather than "a federation of national archives and national archival societies."⁷

When he attended the 1948 Paris meeting, Dr. Buck had already resigned as Archivist in order to accept the position of Chief of the Division of Manuscripts and incumbent of the chair of American history in the Library of Congress. While this position brought him closer to research activities in the field in which he had his roots and while it reduced to more manageable proportions his heavy administrative burdens, it did not diminish his continued interest in archival work. In fact, it enabled him to inject the archival point of view and experience into the handling of private papers and thus to reduce the existing cleavage between the techniques of the archivist and those of the custodian of manuscripts. (This, to the archival generalist, seemed a most important step, inasmuch as—in most of the older European archives—government records

⁵ Published in *American Archivist*, 10:9-24 (Jan. 1947).

⁶ *American Archivist*, 10:229 (July 1947); the full text of the letter and annexes is on p. 227-231.

⁷ Margaret C. Norton, "The First International Congress of Archivists, Paris, France, August 21-26, 1950," in *American Archivist*, 14:15 (Jan. 1951).

and private papers had been treated in accordance with identical principles and techniques.) In that manner, Dr. Buck's term of office in the Library of Congress was an extension of his archival leadership into a closely allied field.

Meditating about the archivist's status and stature in modern society, the British archivist Hubert Hall regretfully arrived at the conclusion that "archivists are feeble folks." Not so the second Archivist of the United States; on the contrary, his was a profile in archival courage. He diagnosed, attacked, and solved some of the pressing problems of the National Archives; and he did so with determination and incisiveness, always with firm convictions and often with a crusading spirit. Surely he did not do so single-handed; for while he had a liking for "do-it-yourself projects," as a wise administrator he knew how to make use of the manifold talents and abilities of a distinguished staff, how to arouse their enthusiasm for the attainment of his purposes, and how to recognize their contributions. And, speaking of his collaborators, who would not want to single out for highest honors his lifelong collaborator Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck, beloved First Lady of our archival microcosm?

As we have looked back upon his record, we cannot fail to pay tribute to the size and significance of Dr. Buck's achievements. When, in 1941, he took over the governance of the National Archives, archivists the world over knew little of the existence of this debutante. Its first reports adorned the shelves of archival libraries but remained largely unread. When he left, it had developed philosophies, practices, and techniques that attracted the interest of our colleagues in foreign lands, and its role as one of the leaders in the field was recognized and gladly accepted. In the world of archives, it had achieved a place of prominence. A large part of the record it has established for itself is the record of Solon J. Buck. We rejoice in seeing it visually perpetuated in this conference room as an expression of the admiration of his friends and coworkers and as an inspiration to future generations of archivists.

A Proper Unit of Treatment

. . . A single document in a body of modern archives is as a rule no more a proper unit of treatment than would be a single leaf, or at least a single chapter, of a book. . . .

—Solon J. Buck, "The Training of American Archivists," in *American Archivist*, 4:84 (April 1941).