

Writing STATE HISTORY

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IT IS with considerable fear and trepidation that I approach the topic of writing state history. In the first place, I am still a novice at the trade, warily plodding my way through the forest of historical data and consequently still in blissful ignorance of the many pitfalls that inevitably beset an author on his literary journey. Others, who have ventured along the same road, have already completed their mission. They can speak with the voice of experience, whereas I must resort to speculation and theory. In the second place, as I repair to my task and conjure up my ideal, I fully run the risk of raising a Frankenstein. I stand in danger of setting up standards that are impossible of fulfillment.

Before launching into a discussion of the art of writing state history, it becomes necessary to justify the worthwhileness of the subject itself. Why a state history in the first place? Why not leave the whole matter of state and local history to the antiquaries and, in newer states, to old settlers or, at any rate, to old settlers' clubs. I am assuming, of course, that my audience does not need to be convinced of the inherent values of state history. Nevertheless, the role of state history has been questioned so often by professional his-

torians that a brief statement for the defense may not be out of order.

The history of a community is in many respects a kind of cross section of the history of the country at large. Unless the local data are sifted and analyzed, the larger perspective may become distorted or placed out of focus. We endeavor to turn more and more to the grass roots in order to provide general history with verified and verifiable facts gathered at the local level. Only by comprehending its local facets can a general movement be properly understood.

Viewed in this manner, state history becomes a representation of general history on a greatly reduced scale—a sort of miniature for a smaller region. And the author of state history finds himself confronted with the same difficulties that the general historian experiences in examining and interpreting local data. The problem becomes essentially one of integration, the solution of which basically distinguishes the historian from the antiquary. It was actually the earlier antiquarian character of local and state history that brought them into disrepute in the past. Only by reclaiming them and clothing them with the proper professional garb can we assure them dignity and respectability.

It naturally follows that state history cannot be disassociated from general or national history or from the history of the region or section of which the state in question is a part. The need for integrating the local pattern with the general immediately poses the problem of balance.

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Is the final product to be more or less general with special reference and application to the particular state, or is the narrative to be confined primarily to the local or state setting? If too severely restricted to local data, the relationship of the state's story to the larger pattern may become obscured and the narrative may become too antiquarian in tone. On the other hand, if too much of the national background is introduced, the publication of the final product may not be justified.

THE CRITERIA to be followed in writing a particular state history are considerably circumscribed by the clientele to be served. The type of history I have in mind in this discussion is one designed for both the professional and the general reader. A third group of readers may be found in college classrooms. Since in most parts of the country state history is required at the elementary level, courses have become fairly common in colleges which train teachers, thus supplying a utilitarian motive for writing at the adult level. How to accommodate these several groups of prospective readers without deviating too far from the ideal set up in one's frame of reference becomes a difficult assignment.

That objectivity and historical detachment are requisite for state history must be taken for granted. The task must not be approached in a spirit of chauvinism or with a sense of civic pride or state loyalty. The finished product must not be a chamber of commerce piece, nor should it be designed to promote a tourists' bureau. History becomes no less interesting when debunked or shorn of the glamor provided by local color artists among historians.

Assuming that a state history should be in the nature of a synthesis, it is pertinent to inquire into the proper time for attempting such a work. Has enough pick-and-shovel work been done to undertake the venture? The answer is a relative one and cannot have universal application. The problem is variable, differing in scope

among the older, and the younger states. The newer sections of the country are more devoid of monographic studies than the older, and historically more mature, regions. The time for exhaustive investigation of the sources has been shorter, and consequently serious gaps occur in the historical data available for a synthesis.

To burst into print prematurely is to run the risk of almost immediate obsolescence. On the other hand, lacunae are like the will-o'-the-wisp, luring historians on and never entirely disappearing. As soon as we close up one gap in our fund of historical knowledge, we raise a new one with our creative thinking. If we defer plans for publication under the delusion that we can eventually exhaust most of the sources, we will never publish. One's historical conscience, if there is such a thing, must guide him in deciding when to publish.

At any rate, one can scarcely consider himself qualified unless he has explored rather minutely a vast body of materials covering every important phase of his state's development, including the political, economic, and social. Personal accounts, diaries, and reminiscences are indispensable in any effort to reconstruct the past. Unfortunately, such sources often have been so widely dispersed that in the past they were virtually inaccessible to researchers who lacked subsidies or grants-in-aid. Today, however, the problem of distance is no longer of great moment. Microphotography has been a godsend to those interested in manuscript sources, as well as other not readily accessible materials like newspapers, unpublished books, including dissertations, and items that are either scarce or out of print.

For the historian of any of the younger states in the Union, a trip to the National Archives at Washington becomes practically a "must." A mere perfunctory glance at any of the published volumes of *Territorial Papers of the United States*, edited by Clarence Carter, will readily reveal the richness of the materials that have been

brought together in a central repository by the national government. This ambitious chronological publication project, begun in 1934 and now comprising more than twenty volumes, is of such magnitude that it will require at least another decade before the selected documentary materials dealing with the Dakotas and the states of the Northwest will appear in print. I say "selected" materials advisedly, because the published *Territorial Papers* are very limited in scope and make no claim to complete coverage of the great variety of subjects embraced by the archives, even for the territorial era. As for the period of statehood, the vast body of materials in the National Archives bears irrefutable testimony to the fact that Washington is, and has been for a long time, the center of gravity in the American political system. Without utilizing these materials, the local or state historian finds himself immeasurably handicapped. In fact, he cannot afford not to explore them.

I DO NOT WISH to imply that the author of a state history is himself necessarily expected to carry on all the original research involved in his project. It is likely, however, that he will find the most voluminous materials still relatively unexplored, making it necessary for him in such cases personally to do much of the spadework. For obvious reasons, he must rely upon specialized studies made earlier. The writing of a state history thus represents, as it were, a co-operative project, a composite of all the research that has been conducted in the field. One can be especially grateful in this connection for the suffering graduate students who have been willing to elect local and regional topics and make available their findings in theses. The success of any state history rests largely upon the efforts of a whole corps of researchers.

In planning the mechanics of a publication on state history, the problem of organization is of immediate concern. What form should the organization assume?

Should the arrangement consist of an array of topics or brief essays after the manner of some of the earlier works on state history? The contributions of Logan Esarey, in his history of Indiana, come immediately to mind in this respect. Such an arrangement, however, is likely to lack continuity, or it may miss that common thread needed for unity. Works of this type are often also lacking in interpretation, reflecting usually the author's own conception of the nature of historical writing. The writers usually felt that their responsibilities ended with "stacking the facts," as the old saying goes, and letting them speak for themselves.

Such a viewpoint is not widely accepted today. The historical profession has shifted to the interpretative aspect, insisting that historical data must be meaningful and significant. Through the medium of interpretation, state history can make its special contribution to the field of general history. A word of caution, however, may be in order. Historical motivation tends to remain somewhat elusive, and historians who would apply the methodology of the behavioral sciences in their eagerness to explain the why and the wherefore, especially with reference to political activity, run the risk of losing their objectivity.

The goal to be sought in any state history is a systematic treatment of the various aspects of at least the major political and economic developments. The inclusion of social and cultural progress is also highly desirable. The fullness of the coverage is determined by the writer's own personal predilections, or by the availability of data. Invariably it is the latter factor which accounts for the brevity with which some topics have to be handled.

A particular bugaboo to any historian is the recent past. Few writers in the field of state history have been able to satisfy reviewers with their coverage of the period since World War I. There are obvious reasons for the usually scant treatment of the recent past. This area is still relatively un-

explored by researchers and consequently less ready for a synthesis or for generalizations that will stand the test of time. Moreover, many of the sources still remain inaccessible. Particularly is this true of the records of some of the decentralized federal agencies. Other government materials destined for the National Archives are still hidden away in boxes, waiting to be inventoried. The tremendous volume of the sources that need to be examined is well-nigh forbidding, and, while studies of the recent period are constantly getting under way, it will be some time before the field can be adequately covered. An excellent example of what can be done with contemporary history is T. A. Larson's *Wyoming's War Years, 1941-1945* (1954), a volume that can well serve as a model for research on a broad basis within a narrowly restricted space of time. Such studies, unfortunately, are still too rare. No matter how much this is to be deplored, the time is not yet for a very satisfactory account of recent developments in state history.

WHAT GOES INTO any state history naturally varies with the state to be treated. The writer of this paper, for purposes of discussion, may be pardoned for confining himself to the Northern Plains region, and more specifically to the state of South Dakota with which he has been identified for thirty-two years. Whatever frame of reference one constructs, it is imperative that the state to be covered be placed in its environmental setting. Whether one wishes to agree or disagree with Professor Walter Prescott Webb that South Dakota is a desert rim state, the fact remains that the physical environment on the Northern Plains has conditioned and is still conditioning its agricultural development. The agricultural history of such a state is the story of adjustments to climatic conditions, as well as to land forms and soil types. South Dakota occupies a transitional position between the Great Plains proper and the Prairie Plains, and,

consequently, it lacks the elements of homogeneity that define a simple physiological entity. There are, therefore, variations in the economy, as well as in the agricultural practices, of the several regions characterized by the differing physical conditions.

The problem of proper land utilization inevitably projects itself as a major theme for consideration in agricultural history, demanding attention to irrigation activities, dry farming practices, and the formulation of orderly programs of soil conservation. Intimately related to the general topic of land utilization is the grazing industry, from its first appearance as a frontier phenomenon on the open range to its later modified form of ranching.

In South Dakota as well as in the other states of the upper Missouri Valley, proper emphasis must be given to the intimate relationship between the state entity and the national government. This relationship, which originated in the territorial organization, was not terminated by statehood. The impact of the national government has been continuous, since it has retained ownership of a large portion of the state's physical resources, complete jurisdiction over Indian lands and Indian policy, and control over the Missouri River. The grass roots for any study looking toward the evaluation of national Indian policy and the administration of the public lands are found within the state.

In tracing the state's political evolution, the territorial system, which was a form of colonialism generally inefficiently and haphazardly administered, must be put under the microscope. Its workings must be carefully studied for its impact upon political behavior and the growth of political institutions within the state.

In any state containing a large Indian population, the handling of its story virtually constitutes the writing of a history within a history. It requires a survey of the whole gamut of experiences in the transformation of Indian society from its

primitive and communal way of life to the individualized form of white man's society. For a proper evaluation of Indian policy, one must examine its functioning at the agency and on the reservation for both its successes and its shortcomings. The treatment of this topic, to be adequate, must include the workings of the allotment system and recent changes in policy. The Indian problem is still far short of solution and is commanding much attention currently. Any rational approach to the situation must be predicated upon experience in order to avoid a repetition of past mistakes.

THE STATE has at times been aptly referred to as a sort of political and sociological laboratory in which new ideas may be put to the experimental test to determine their practicality or workability. This commentary has been particularly applied with reference to new political devices as well as to economic policies strongly imbued with socialistic tendencies. The Western states, beginning with the appearance of the Granger movement in the 1870s, have furnished the major drive for the control of economic institutions through regulatory legislation. Although the forces of agrarian discontent have a common history in the states of the Middle West, divergencies among them are sufficiently numerous to challenge the validity of some of the generalizations appearing in textbooks. State histories thus serve a valuable function in pointing up the factors that prove the exceptions.

In many respects, for instance, the two Dakotas afford an interesting study in contrasts despite a supposedly common political background. The sectional cleavage between them may be traced back to territorial times. Its origins lie in differences that arose perhaps mainly from the dependence of the farmer upon the economic institutions controlling his market. At any rate, the history of the Nonpartisan League and the related Farmer-Labor movement in South Dakota differs in many details

from that in North Dakota and Minnesota. The political divergencies definitely do not stem from any significant differences in the population structure. It is incumbent upon state history to place such political movements in proper perspective. The explanations for any variations must be sought at the grass roots.

It might be suggested at this point that considerable spadework still needs to be done at the local and state levels if we are to arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of the influence of the credit system upon the Western farmer during the second half of the nineteenth century. Recent studies of farm mortgage companies and European investments in Western farm communities, though they make no pretense at completeness, are significant.

In the sphere of economic history, the story of pioneer efforts to promote manufacturing in an agricultural state like South Dakota can be of more than passing interest to the present generation concerned with building up a balanced economy. The history of past efforts at industrial development provides a background for current campaigns to attract industry.

What has been said thus far should be sufficient to warrant the conclusion that the writing of state history can be both an opportunity and a challenge—an opportunity to serve the current popular interest in local history and a challenge to place local and regional developments in their proper national setting. In arranging the contents of a state history, the author must be guided largely by his objectives. The plan of organization is inherently highly subjective. An examination of state histories already published fails to reveal any common pattern. Perhaps the best that an author can expect from prospective critics is a comment like that made by the reviewer of a certain work published some years ago: "Until the art of writing state histories has been better perfected, this history will serve the state for which it was written."



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