

## Editor's Pages

### THE SPIRIT OF HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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There is an old saying that "poets are born and not made." In fact the same maxim may be and has been applied to teachers, preachers, financiers, industrialists, politicians, statesmen, and others, including "suckers." Barnum said of the latter class that one was "born every minute," implying that such a person was born that way and did not get over it. After all, the saying is not very helpful and I shall not apply it to historians. It does, however, seem to fit most persons who prove to be historians, or who, making the attempt, prove that they do not really belong. The old proverb, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," may be useful in the discussion. A friend of mine who is a professor of chemistry told me a few years ago that a chemist had actually made a very good silk purse out of a sow's ear, thus disproving the old maxim. However, since no one save an expert could turn the trick, the saying holds good for nearly everyone, and, for me, it means that there are persons who specialize in history or who take up the writing of history who can never become either historical investigators or writers. They were neither born to be historians nor can they be made into historians.

As to being born a historian, a poet or anything else, it must be admitted, as I once heard a gifted teacher say, that "being born is an old-fashioned way of getting into the world." It is true though that people are born with varying talents and with varying aptitudes, and, given a person with sufficient natural ability, he can usually be vastly benefited by training. An individual with a natural bent for research and historical writing, however strong his mental capacity, can undoubtedly improve with coaching and practice. The born historian, if there be any such, owes it to himself and to those who may read his works to make the most of his gifts. With high capacity and a natural talent for writing, he has an even deeper obligation than persons less favored to subject himself to the best training obtainable.

It is hard to conceive of one who is a careful investigator and a good writer of history as being without the spirit of

scholarship. These things seem to go along together. It is possible, nevertheless, for a graduate student in history or an outsider who dabbles in historical writing to go on for a long time with no conception of the true meaning of historical work. To put in the required time, to pass the examinations, to write the thesis—these seem to be, to many candidates for the master's degree, all that can be asked of them. Likewise to those who write history as a hobby, there often comes no feeling of responsibility and no sense of obligation to be accurate and unbiased. They are often out to prove something, not to search for the truth. Happily, there are both graduate students and amateur historians who are untiring searchers after the facts, who feel that, above everything else, they must discover the truth and who make a real effort to avoid prejudice. Such persons, if they can write well, or if they can be trained or train themselves, to write well are of the salt of the earth.

I have known candidates who reached the final examination for the doctor's degree with no understanding of the meaning of the process. To them, it was pretty much a matter of residence and credits, just as when they were moving through the grades, the high school and college. As every one knows, there are those who write history, whether self-taught or trained in university *seminars*, with no reason beyond the desire to write books in order to obtain royalties or get into the public eye, or both. This is not enough. Whether drawn to the work by natural inclination or because of extensive training, or both, there is an ideal that should never be lacking. Those who do research in history should be motivated first and last by a deep desire to discover the truth, to make it available to others, and to combat error. With such desires they will possess or cultivate the patience and skill necessary to thorough work. Those who write history must first of all be willing and able to do the required research, and then they must have no deeper anxiety than to present a truthful account. Other things such as are comprehended in the term literary style are legitimate and highly desirable, but the spirit of scholarship is the primary requisite of the historian.