

## Edward Eggleston: Historian

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What reputation Edward Eggleston enjoys today he owes almost exclusively to his first novel, *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*. That he was a pioneer in the writing of realistic, regional literature is the single fact seized upon by historians of American culture. That his name occupies a worthy place in the annals of our church history, that he founded the first Christian Endeavor Society in America, that the growth of his mind in some respects may symbolize the growth of the American mind from fundamentalism to free thinking in religion, that his aid in securing the passage of an international copyright law was considerable, and that as a historian he enjoyed a respectable and prominent place in his own day are facts lost sight of at the present time.

As an exception to this general neglect, one finds this estimate of Eggleston as a historian of interest:

Written at a time when American historians of the new scientific school envisaged history mainly as "past politics," these volumes [*Beginners of a Nation* and *The Transit of Civilization from England to America in the Seventeenth Century*] offered a rich synthesis of colonial life in its varied aspects as affected both by its European background and its American environment. Compared with the contemporary historical work of J. B. McMaster, who was animated by a somewhat similar ideal, the material in Eggleston's volumes was more philosophical, less political, better digested and more gracefully written.<sup>1</sup>

Before examining his historical career, let us trace the earlier facts of Eggleston's life. He was born of Southern parentage, December 10, 1837, in Vevay, Indiana. His formal schooling was interrupted and fragmentary because of chronic illness, but a diligent reading program in a library purchased under the wise direction of his father served to give the boy no mean acquaintance with Virgil, Pope, Homer, Emerson, Theodore Parker, and a score of others. Contrary to the opinion one receives from his novels of rude

<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Edward Eggleston," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (ed. by Edwin R. A. Seligman, 15 vols., New York, 1930-1935), V (1931), 440; quoted with the permission of the publishers. Similar recognition is found in Dixon R. Fox, "Civilization in Transit," *American Historical Review* (New York, 1895- ), XXXII (1926-1927), 753-68; and Charles Hirschfield, "Edward Eggleston: Pioneer in Social History," in Eric F. Goldman (ed.), *Historiography and Urbanization, Essays in American History in Honor of W. Stull Holt* (Baltimore, 1941), 189-210.

frontier life, his environment in Indiana was far from an uncultivated one. His father, a lawyer, was an honor graduate of William and Mary, a member of both houses of the Indiana legislature, and a Whig candidate for Congress.<sup>2</sup> His mother, Mary Jane Craig, was the daughter of an experimenter in improved agriculture, especially in the breeding of new varieties of fruit trees. One of his teachers, Mrs. Julia Dumont, who had an incalculable influence upon him, employed methods of pedagogy which might well shame progressive educators. She was the author of poems, articles, and at least one book.<sup>3</sup> A debating club organized by Edward but discreetly steered by an older cousin, Guilford, was an intellectual force of some moment. Eggleston's father died young, leaving his family an income of \$250 a year and directing that his law library be sold to purchase classical books for his children. When he was sixteen, Edward spent a year in Virginia with his father's relatives, remaining as a guest in each home until he had exhausted its well-stocked plantation library. In this manner he continued his studies in French, Latin, Greek, and mathematics.

A distaste for the indolence of the life about him and for the institution of slavery sent him back to his family, then at Madison, Indiana. The cough which was to enfeeble him all his life growing worse, however, he left the broad Ohio River, an avenue of communication and intercourse as well as of commerce, for the yet more uncivilized frontier of Minnesota. After a period of desultory activities, he returned to Indiana where, at nineteen, he was ordained as a Methodist minister.<sup>4</sup> For a few months he rode circuit in the backwoods, but the demands of health soon sent him back to

<sup>2</sup> Meredith Nicholson, *The Hoosiers* (New York, 1900), 135; Ralph L. Rusk, "Edward Eggleston," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1928-1936), VI (1931), 52-54.

<sup>3</sup> George C. Eggleston, *The First of the Hoosiers* (Philadelphia, 1903), 20, 24, 146-68; Lucille Detraz Skelcher and Jane Lucille Skelcher, "Julia L. Dumont of Vevay," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1905- ), XXXIV (1938), 298-306. Mrs. Dumont's book was *Life Sketches from Common Paths* (New York, 1856).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholson, *The Hoosiers*, 137-43; Effa M. Danner, "Edward Eggleston," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIII (1937), 435-53. For an account of the Minnesota experiences see John T. Flanagan, "The Hoosier Schoolmaster in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* (St. Paul, Minnesota, 1915- ), XVIII (1937), 347-70; for the Indiana years, see James A. Rawley, "Some New Light on Edward Eggleston," *American Literature* (Durham, North Carolina, 1929- ), XI (1939-1940), 453-58.

the more favorable climate of Minnesota. A variety of pulpits increased his experience. As he rode deliberately from one appointment to the next, he managed to do a considerable amount of reading which ripened his understanding. In 1868 he was ready to accept a post as editor of *The Little Corporal*. Subsequently he was on the staff of several magazines and served a brief interval as editor of the New York *Independent*. His reputation was still to be made, however, for he had written nothing of note except the popular "Chicken Little" stories for children.<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 1871 with his brother, George Cary, he took over the moribund *Hearth and Home*, added to its contributors a list of distinguished writers, and composed seriatim, "The Hoosier Schoolmaster." Its success was instantaneous. It was reprinted in a dozen or more papers in the United States, and the lack of an international copyright law made it available abroad. As *Le Maître d'École de Flat Creek*, it appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*.<sup>6</sup> Within fifteen years it had sold more than fifty thousand copies.

This popular success was partly to be explained by a Dickensian humor and pathos but still more by the fact that it was a new departure in American letters. What Ralph Waldo Emerson had, in the year of Eggleston's birth, asked for in "The American Scholar" was at last coming to pass: American writers were turning to American themes and American scenes. Bret Harte had anticipated Eggleston by two years in the use of local color, but the fact that the latter had probably never read Harte, coupled with his avowal of indebtedness to Hippolyte A. Taine's "Art in the Netherlands,"<sup>7</sup> makes his experiment appear individual. A second novel soon was published, then a third, and so on. For the most part and for probably his best work, he used the Ohio Valley setting. But in the *Mystery of Metropolisville*, he drew on his experience in Minnesota and wove his story upon a background of land speculation and lawlessness. The

<sup>5</sup> Nicholson, *The Hoosiers*, 144.

<sup>6</sup> George C. Eggleston, *Recollections of a Varied Life* (New York, 1910), 35-36, 145.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholson, *The Hoosiers*, 145; Hippolyte A. Taine, *Philosophie de l'art dans les Pays-Bas, Leçons professées à l'École des Beaux-Arts* (Paris, 1868). This was translated and republished in *Lectures on Art* by H. Taine, translated by John Durand (2 vols., New York, 1883), II, 157-356. The second volume had first appeared in the United States in 1876.

scene of *The Graysons* was laid in Illinois and into it was brought discreetly and without heroics the person of Abraham Lincoln, as he figured in the famous Armstrong trial.<sup>8</sup>

Having won his laurels in literature, he was not content to rest upon them. Upon his return from Europe in 1880, he informed his brother that he was determined to give the next ten years of his life to writing a *History of Life in the United States*.<sup>9</sup> He missed his prediction, as he was still at work on his project at the end of twenty years. In the two decades he finished but two books of the series and left at his death copious notes taken with such lack of system that no one was able to use them. His research was thorough. Abroad he worked in the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and many private libraries. In this country he studied in the Astor and Lenox libraries in New York, the Boston Public Library, and the Athenaeum, gained access to many private collections, and was a familiar figure in the Congressional Library in Washington. Hamlin Garland has given a memorable picture of the graying historian in his leisure hours:

His [Major Powell's] direct antithesis was Edward Eggleston, whose residence was a small brick house just back of the Congressional Library. Eggleston, humorous, ready of speech, was usually surrounded by an attentive circle of delighted listeners and I often drew near to share his monologue. He was a handsome man, tall and shapely with abundant gray hair and a full beard, and was especially learned in American early history. "Edward loves to monologue," his friends smilingly said as if in criticism, but to me his talk was always interesting.<sup>10</sup>

While working in the British Museum, he discovered an account of Nathaniel Bacon's rebellion written by Bacon himself. This formed the subject of one of his many his-

<sup>8</sup> Nicholson, *The Hoosiers*, 148-52. Some of Eggleston's own accounts of his early life, which is important because he drew upon it to write his novels, are his articles "Formative Influences," *Forum* (New York, 1886- ), X (1891), 279-90; and "Books That Have Helped Me," *ibid.*, III (1887), 578-86. See also Harlan de Baun Logan, *An Unpublished Journal of Edward Eggleston's with Supplementary Letters* (M.A. thesis, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, [1932]).

<sup>9</sup> Coming as it did shortly after the publication of John R. Green's *Short History of the English People*, this resolution probably owed something to that influential work, as Professor Allan Nevins pointed out to the writer. It first appeared as a one-volume work (London, 1874) and was then enlarged to four volumes (London, 1877-1880), the word "short" being dropped from the title.

<sup>10</sup> Hamlin Garland, *A Daughter of the Middle Border* (New York, 1921), 55-56.

torical articles for the *Century*.<sup>11</sup> In the writing of history his aim was the same as in writing imaginative literature. He wished to depict the actual life of the people with a realism based upon a fidelity to detail. Life in Indiana had furnished the material for the one sort of writing; life in the libraries of two continents had to furnish the material for the other. A respect for primary sources which almost amounted to awe and an undisciplined intellectual curiosity which led him astray into many interesting but extraneous fields slowed his work. The transition from the art of fiction to the scientific aspects of history was apparently not an easy one for him to make.<sup>12</sup> During the score of years given over to history, he published, in addition to the two major works, a number of school histories in which his purpose of a realistic brushing away of the cobwebs of sentimentalism and misguided patriotism prevailed. He also delivered lectures at Columbia College and other institutions. Those given at Columbia in November and December of 1892 were on the general theme, "The Culture-History of the American People."<sup>13</sup>

In 1891 he published *The Faith Doctor*, a novel laid in the New York scene; and two years later, *Duffels*, a collection of short stories.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this period he was contributing with a frequency amounting almost to regularity to the *Century* in the halcyon days when its pages were graced by such names as Henry James, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Theodore Roosevelt, Eggleston's fellow Hoosier James Whitcomb Riley, and occasionally Matthew Arnold.

The first work of the series undertaken in 1880 did not appear until 1896. Called *The Beginners of a Nation*, it brought the story of colonial development down to 1640 with the dispersion of colonies from Massachusetts Bay and the settlement of New Haven. Following a dedication to James

<sup>11</sup> Edward Eggleston, "Nathaniel Bacon: the Patriot of 1676," *Century* (98 vols., New York, 1881-1930), XVIII (1890), 418-35.

<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to understand why Michael Kraus claims the contrary in his *A History of American History* (New York, 1937), 588-89.

<sup>13</sup> For a list of the titles of these eight lectures, see *Fourth Annual Report of President Low to the Trustees* (New York, 1893), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholson, *The Hoosiers*, 153.

Bryce, Eggleston indited a preface which merits lengthy quotation:

It has been my aim to make these pages reflect the character of the age in which the English colonies were begun, and the traits of the colonists, and to bring into relief the social, political, intellectual, and religious forces that promoted emigration. This does not pretend to be the usual account of all the events attending early colonization; it is rather a history in which the succession of cause and effect is the main topic—a history of the dynamics of colony-planting in the first half of the seventeenth century . . . . I have disregarded that convention which makes it obligatory for a writer of American history to explain that intolerance in the first settlers was not just like other intolerance, and that their cruelty and injustice were justifiable under the circumstances. This walking backward to throw a mantle over the nakedness of ancestors may be admirable as an example of diluvian piety, but it is none the less reprehensible in the writing of history . . . . Literary considerations should have some weight in deciding how fully an episode shall be treated, unless the historian is content to perform the homely service of purveyor of the crude ore of knowledge. I have sought to make this “a work of art as well as of historical science,” to borrow a phrase from Augustin Thierry.<sup>15</sup>

He began by tracing the search for a westward passage and for gold and by describing the interest aroused by the Indians and the American animals. His purpose was clear:

These erratic notions regarding America give one an insight into the character of the English people at the period of discovery and colony-planting. Credulity and the romantic spirit dwell together. The imagination in such an age usurped the place of discrimination, and the wonderful became the probable.<sup>16</sup>

With such a beginning he moved ahead with his story, but he did not give as complete a picture as one might wish, though he excused himself from that duty. He wrote, however, with an unusualness of detail, a felicity of style, and a clarity of method which call forth admiration. The construction of the book is delightful and helpful; large print and a generous margin at the open side of the page contribute to pleasant reading. The wide margin serves a utilitarian purpose for in it Eggleston has inserted dates, topic

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Eggleston, *The Beginners of a Nation* (New York, 1897), vii-ix.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

headings, and sources. He left more extended footnotes to the end of the chapter in sections called "Elucidations." These bibliographical notes, often running to several pages, attest to unremitting pains for accuracy, revisions of opinion as his research progressed, discoveries of fact, and to an intimate acquaintance with the *belles lettres* of the age he was studying.

It may be noted that he displayed a tendency toward generalization. He wrote: "Not religious disputants only, but the world in general, exaggerated the importance of vestments and ceremonies in the reign of Elizabeth."<sup>17</sup> Yet if one will examine the sources, he will discover that the historian had the right to generalize for he proceeded from the particular to the whole in approved inductive fashion. This quotation, for example, was based on "Machyn's Diary," "Evelyn's Diary," the "Domestic Correspondence, James I," and "Inedited Tracts, etc., Roxburghe Library." He was also capable of oversimplification:

The petty squabbles of the English exiles [the Protestants who fled from Queen Mary's rule in 1553], transplanted to England, grew into bitter feuds and brought forth persecutions and political struggles. The settlement of New England, the battles of Marston Moor and Naseby, the temporary overthrow of the English monarchy, the growth of non-conformity, the modification of the English Constitution and of all English exiles at Zurich and those at Geneva, and in the squabbles of Cox and Knox, of Whitehead and Horne at Frankfort-on-the-Main about gowns and litanies and the authority of the priest. It is not often that a great historical movement can be traced through a single rill to its rise at the fountain head.<sup>18</sup>

But such social history as he wrote is immensely valuable in many ways. To understand, for example, the significance of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount," an account such as Eggleston gives of the Puritan opposition to Maypoles, is illuminating.<sup>19</sup>

His diction is felicitous; his style, graceful and compelling. His history is informed with the literary imagination. Speaking of the rise of the Separatists, he said, "In truth, the rise of this sect, from which came the earliest New England colony, appears to be lost in obscurity. Significant

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-21.

movements are usually cradled in rustic mangers, to which no learned magi think it worth their while to journey."<sup>20</sup>

Although his interpretations are not always the most acceptable because they sometimes tend to oversimplification, they are usually sound, full of interest, and strikingly presented.

It was the wedding of an austere creed to an austere soil under an austere sky that gave the people of New England their marked character, and the severe economic conditions imposed by the soil and climate were even more potent than Puritanism in producing the traits that go to make up the New England of history.<sup>21</sup>

His exposition of the forces behind the founding of Maryland is remarkably tough-minded if one considers his earlier sentimentality in literature, and revolutionary if one considers the indigestible pabulum given in the old school texts. Clearly he showed the elder Calvert to have been narrow and bigoted, cherishing his scheme of a tolerant colony for his own glorification and to secure a haven for his beloved Catholics. That first citadel of religious liberty about which youth are taught in grammar and high schools was a practical expedient forced upon the Calverts to win tolerance for Catholics!

The other work in his series was more definitely a pioneer work. In its preface he noted,

There were many books on Shakespeare, more or less good when they were not bad, and there was Masson's ponderous *Life and Times of John Milton* in six octavo volumes. These afforded something, but the civilization of the century was not told in any of them. It became necessary to build a description from the ground . . . . We must apply to the seventeenth century the severe canons of history; people with ancestors will be disappointed.<sup>22</sup>

This work was written as a series of essays rather than as an integrated narrative of the transplantation of culture. The chapter titles indicate the subjects to be considered: "Mental Outfit of the Early Colonists," "Digression Con-

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-78.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Eggleston, *The Transit of Civilization from England to America in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1901), vii-viii.

cerning Medical Notions at the Period of Settlement,"<sup>23</sup> "Mother English, Folk-Speech, Folk-Lore and Literature," "Weights and Measures of Conduct," "The Tradition of Education," and "Land and Labor in the Early Colonies."

The first chapter is masterly. Here he amassed a fund of knowledge showing the scientific notions held by the early colonists: their belief in astrology, in portents, in the spontaneous generation of life, in the winter migration of birds to distant planets, in devils, and in witchcraft. His attitude was critically expository; he did not seek to "debunk." If the work is iconoclastic to some, he did not assume the feigned superiority of the iconoclast. This is straightforward reporting.

The chapter on "Mother English, Folk-Lore, and Literature" attests the interests of the man of letters, the student of languages, and the dialect novelist.<sup>24</sup> The product of long study, his research into the transit of language to America is replete with interesting illustration. In general he found that "Americanisms," our "rustic words and accents," are English in origin and have undergone environmental change. A people of little education finds a substitute in proverbs and folklore. The nature of these continental and English predecessors was shown by Eggleston. The importance of such attention by a historian was explained: "To call such surviving mediaeval and ancient beliefs quite useless would be rash; they at least supplied material to the imagination and rudely served as substitute for literature."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, his treatment of the literature of the common people is abler than that which is usually dignified as early American literature. Adopting an attitude more prevalent in his time than in our own, he wrote, "Nothing that can properly be called American literature was produced in the colonies in the early seventeenth century—nothing worthy of the name in its later time." He dismissed charmingly

<sup>23</sup> For another article on this subject, see Edward Eggleston, "Some Curious Colonial Remedies," *American Historical Review*, V (1899-1900), 199-206.

<sup>24</sup> For other articles by Eggleston on this subject, see "Wild Flowers of English Speech in America," *Century*, XLVII (1894), 848-56; and "Folk Speech in America," *ibid.*, XLVIII (1894), 867-75.

<sup>25</sup> Eggleston, *The Transit of Civilization from England to America*, 118.

Michael Wigglesworth, author of *The Day of Doom*, as "the doggerel Dante of pioneer New England."<sup>26</sup> But the very presence of such a chapter in a work on American history is in itself remarkable; and on the whole the chapter must be reckoned one of the best in the book.

"The Tradition of Education" glows with the riches of its illustrations. The story is familiar—the beginnings of secular state-supported grammar schools, the establishment of Harvard College to furnish a learned clergy, the extension of education to combat the rising tide of illiteracy. But such details as illuminate the theme—the Maryland vestry clerk who wrote that the vestrymen took the oath of abjuration "without equivocation or governmental reservation"; the explanation of the crisscross row on the schoolboy's horn-book; the Englishman Seymour shouting to Blair who was arguing for a Virginia college to save the colonists' souls, "Damn your souls, make tobacco!" Following this chapter, one might mention, are seventeen pages in small print of bibliographical notes.

The volume ends with the close of the seventeenth century. On the whole it is more valuable, more usable at the present day, and more adequate within its sphere than the first volume. The initial work is to a greater degree the orthodox story—the colonization. Better syntheses and interpretations have succeeded it. But the story of the transit of civilization is less well studied. What Eggleston included in this work has thus not been outmoded by more recent research. The history of the Carolinas and Pennsylvania was ignored, but this was intentional. He purposed to reserve their short histories in the seventeenth century for fuller treatment in a subsequent study.

In his review of this work, Professor Charles M. Andrews made some trenchant and severe criticisms. He complained of a lack of thoroughness, of a lack of sympathy with the ideas and opinions of the seventeenth century, and of a neglect of the research done in the field since 1890.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 123, 176.

<sup>27</sup> Charles M. Andrews' review of Eggleston's *The Transit of Civilization from England to America*. . . is in the *Political Science Quarterly* (New York, 1886- ), XVII (1902), 162-66.

Several points should be made in defense of Eggleston to judge this work fairly. In the first place it should be noted that he was profoundly dissatisfied with the book. In 1899 he suffered a stroke of apoplexy, which blinded him in one eye for a time, and which was followed by a steady decline in health. Fearing death, which came in 1902, he published his book prematurely. Secondly, it should be emphasized that he was a pioneer in history as well as literature. Here was a man writing "the new history," coming after McMaster to be sure, but preceding James Harvey Robinson and his school's emphasis upon that shibboleth. Andrews himself did not publish his *Colonial Folkways* until 1919, eighteen years later; and this did not confine itself to the small compass of the seventeenth century that Eggleston set for himself but strode hastily over a much larger area.

The year 1901 marked the publication of this volume and was the apex of Eggleston's career as a historian. In spite of his infirm health, he served as president of the American Historical Association from 1899 to 1900. His presidential address was characteristically entitled "The New History." It was an eloquent plea for "cultural history," which is neither all politics nor all war. "The main object of teaching history," he wrote with an ethical stress which is reminiscent of the minister, "is to make good men and women, cultivated and broad men and women."<sup>28</sup> The entire discourse was informed with a catholic outlook and a tolerant understanding. The writer was an apostle of the new order, a pioneer in the literary-scientific school of historiography.

It was Edward Eggleston's misfortune, when one considers his reputation as a historian, to die before the completion of his projected *History of Life in the United States*. The slenderness of his fame may be in part accounted for by the slenderness of his production. Two slight volumes are not sufficient supports for a great reputation. A second circumstance, however, enters in to explain his present position. He was part of a stream of influence, in his time a

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<sup>28</sup> Eggleston was too ill to attend the meeting; James Ford Rhodes gave an address instead. See *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1900 (2 vols., Washington, 1901), I, xi, 35-47, 51.

tributary, but soon to become the main current of American historical thought. Greater exponents of the new history succeeded him, towering above them the figure of James Harvey Robinson, so that he was swallowed up in a mighty torrent. The importance of the pioneer has not yet been generally appreciated.