

Literature and History: The Early Novels of Edward Eggleston

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In 1900, Edward Eggleston, newly-elected President of the American Historical Association, urged his colleagues to abandon the traditional "drum and trumpet" history and to turn their attention to the "new history," the history of the people. Hailing Thomas B. Macaulay as the greatest historical writer of the nineteenth century and Macaulay's famous third chapter as a model for future historians, Eggleston denied that "history is dead politics and politics living history." History, he maintained, should be a record of life. Following the examples of the great classical historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, writers of history have placed too much emphasis upon wars and battles. "We can not always cover our pages with gore," Eggleston declared. "It is the object of history to cultivate this out of man; to teach him the wisdom of diplomacy, the wisdom of avoidance—in short, the fine wisdom of arbitration, that last fruit of human experience." Eggleston optimistically foresaw the final achievement of this ideal, a recognition among historians of the "new history," which he defined at one point as a keen interest "in the little details of life." History, he thought, would embody his ideal in the time to come. "When the American Historical Association shall assemble in the closing week a hundred years hence, there will be, do not doubt it, gifted writers of the history of the people. . . . We shall have the history of culture, the real history of men and women."¹

These views marked the culmination of an active career as both a writer of fiction and as a writer of history. Although his views stand today as one of the first expressions of the need for social history, the ideas were not new ones to Eggleston. For nearly thirty years, in his novels and in his historical works, Eggleston had attempted to portray the "new history." As a result, he has earned a place in American historiography alongside John Bach McMaster as a pioneer in social and cul-

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¹ Edward Eggleston, "The New History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1900* (2 vols., Washington, 1901), I, 35-47.

tural history. In the field of American literature, he is recognized as a precursor of the "realism" of the latter nineteenth century and as one of the first writers to popularize the West in fiction. The development of these ideas in his novels led him to bring the relationship between literature and history into sharper focus. Lastly, Eggleston's appreciation for native dialect and folk speech has brought him repute as an American philologist.

Eggleston's "new history" and its relation to the function of literature was first expressed in his early novels, the so-called "Western" novels, written between 1871 and 1888. It will be the purpose of this paper to trace the development of this concept through these early novels.²

Eggleston's own background played an important part in shaping his literary and historical beliefs. In later years, he attributed his tendency to write social history to the rapid change in environment experienced as a child and as a young man.³ The son of a prosperous lawyer, Eggleston was born in 1837 in the small Ohio River town of Vevay, Indiana. His father, Joseph Cary Eggleston, was a native of Amelia County, Virginia, and a graduate of William and Mary College. His dislike for slavery, coupled with a desire to practice law in a free state, led him to Indiana. Vevay had been settled early in the century by a colony of French-speaking Swiss; by 1837, the Swiss no longer formed a predominant part of the population, but their influence remained strong. In this town, where English and French were spoken side by side, Edward spent his early boyhood; here he first became conscious of linguistic differences.

When Edward was nine years of age, his father died. In the ensuing years, Edward made numerous excursions into backwoods Indiana, visiting relatives and coming into contact

² These novels, with dates of first publication, are *The Hoosier School-Master, A Novel* (1871); *The End of the World, A Love Story* (1872); *The Mystery of Metropolisville* (1873); *The Circuit Rider: A Tale of the Heroic Age* (1874); *Roxy* (1878); *The Hoosier School-Boy* (1883); and *The Graysons, A Story of Illinois* (1888). The latter two have not been considered in this paper because they were written after Eggleston had made the transition to historical writing. A discussion of Eggleston's novels, but without reference to these historical aspects, may be found in John T. Flanagan, "The Novels of Edward Eggleston," *College English* (Chicago, 1939-), V (1944), 250-254.

³ Edward Eggleston, "Formative Influences," *Forum* (103 vols., New York, 1886-1940), X (1890), 290; "Edward Eggleston: An Interview," *Outlook* (165 vols., New York, 1870-1935), LV (1897), 433.

for the first time with the primitive manners and speech of the Hoosiers. By 1851, his mother had remarried and the family moved to the larger southern Indiana towns, first New Albany and then Madison. In 1854, Edward left home, partly to relieve family pressure, to spend a year with his father's relatives in Virginia. The change of environment from the active, energetic life in Madison, Indiana, to the relatively slow, aristocratic life of the Upper South was an education in itself for Edward Eggleston. Although he remained in Virginia for nearly a year, he was never quite happy there. Slavery, at its best in Virginia at this time, displeased him, as did the complacent attitude of his relatives towards religion. Frontier Methodism had, by this time, taken complete control of Eggleston. Upon his return to Indiana, he resolved to enter the ministry and for some months after his return he was employed as a Bible Agent. Eggleston attacked his new duties with such vigor that by the early part of 1856, his health, always frail, had completely broken down.

In 1856, Eggleston again left Indiana, this time heading westward, in an attempt to restore his health. His journey led him to the boisterous frontier communities of Minnesota Territory, where he mingled with land speculators, gamblers, and frontier politicians, all eager to share in the easy profits of the land boom. A few months in Minnesota sufficiently restored Eggleston's health. After an abortive attempt to reach Kansas, where he intended to participate in the slavery struggle, Eggleston returned to southern Indiana. Six months as a Methodist circuit rider again proved ruinous to his health. In 1858, he was back in Minnesota, where he lived for the next nine years. Although he found steady employment in the new state as a pastor to several small churches, his interest in religion began to wane. In 1866, he gave up the ministry and turned his talents to journalism. During the next few years, he occupied editorial positions with several periodicals, both in Chicago and in New York. Eggleston had also begun to write; by 1870, he had achieved some renown as a contributor to juvenile magazines.⁴

In 1871, Edward Eggleston assumed the editorship of

⁴ The details of Eggleston's life have been drawn from William Peirce Randel, *Edward Eggleston, Author of the Hoosier School-Master* (New York, 1946), and Ralph L. Rusk, "Edward Eggleston," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1943), VI, 52-54.

Hearth and Home, a weekly magazine published in New York. In an attempt to revive the periodical, which had become in Eggleston's own words "anaemic," Eggleston wrote a short story wholly in Hoosier dialect, based partially on his brother's experiences in a backwoods Indiana community. At the suggestion of one of the proprietors, Eggleston expanded the story, which he called "The Hoosier School-Master," into a novel, writing each section from week to week as it appeared in the magazine. The book was completed in ten weeks, but not without a good deal of effort. Eggleston, in later years, wrote that, "Long before these weeks of eager toil were over, it was a question among my friends whether the novel might not write *finis* to me before I should see the end of it."⁵ The story more than fulfilled its purpose. Before the last installment had appeared, the circulation of *Hearth and Home* had increased four or five fold. The popularity of the story went beyond the limited range of the magazine. Country newspapers in the United States and Canada reprinted it in their columns. Not many weeks afterwards it was published in book form and promptly pirated in England. Eggleston's reputation had been made.

After the initial success of *The Hoosier School-Master*, Eggleston devoted his talents almost exclusively to the writing of fiction. Five novels were produced within the next eight years, all set in locales with which Eggleston was intimately familiar, the Ohio Valley and the Minnesota frontier. The earlier novels clearly indicate the haste in which they were written; the latter ones, particularly *Roxy*, published in 1878, illustrate the maturity which Eggleston reached as a writer of fiction. All of them, according to our standards of today, would be considered overly sentimental and archaic. In these early works, however, Eggleston developed his ideas of social history and of "realism" in literature. His work marked the beginning, not only of a social interpretation of history, but also of the literary "realism" of the late nineteenth century.

The ideas expressed by Edward Eggleston in his first novels may be grouped in three general categories. In the first place, Eggleston maintained that history should deal with men and women and with all the aspects of their lives. Society and

⁵ *The Hoosier School-Master* (New York, n.d.), Preface to the Library Edition, 9.

culture are the essence of human history. Secondly, works of fiction should be expressions of this social and cultural history. By being realistic, by dealing with life in all its manifestations as it *really* was, all novels would be but chapters in the history of civilization. Thirdly, in order to reproduce the history of life in all its details, the writer of fiction should write only of that with which he is closely familiar.

Eggleston's preoccupation with social history, as has been indicated, was partially derived from his own personal background. The striking contrasts that resulted from his rapid change of environment impressed upon his mind the diversity of society and culture in the United States as well as the need for recording this diversity. His concern throughout his early novels was with the small details of life, manners, speech, habits, every circumstance that influenced men's lives and their ways of thinking. These details were the "seeds of history"; from them sprang not only the public events with which history had traditionally been concerned, but also the institutions of later time. In his preface to *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, his third novel published in 1873, Eggleston asked, "And what is history worth but for its human interest? The history of Athens is not of value on account of its temples and statues, but on account of its men and women."⁶

The men and women with whom Eggleston was primarily concerned in his early novels were the primitive backwoods people living in the hinterland north of the Ohio River. Eggleston at one point vividly described them as "that curious poor-whitey race which is called 'tar-heel' in northern Carolina, 'sand-hiller' in the southern, 'corn-cracker' in Kentucky, 'yahoo' in Mississippi, and in California 'Pike.' They never continue in one stay, but are the half gypsies of America, seeking by shiftless removals from one region to another to better their wretched fortunes, or, more likely, to gratify a restless love of change and adventure. They are the Hoosiers of the dark regions of Indiana and the Egyptians of southern Illinois. Always in a half-barbarous state, it is among them that lynchings most prevail. Their love of excitement drives them into a daring life and often into crime. From them came the Kentucky frontiersmen, the Texan rangers, the Murrell

⁶ *The Mystery of Metropolisville* (New York, 1873), 12.

highwaymen, the Arkansas regulators and anti-regulators, the ancient keel-boatmen, the more modern flat-boatmen and raftsmen and roustabouts, and this race furnishes, perhaps more than its share of the road agents that infest the territories. Brave men and generous men are often found among them; but they are never able to rise above Daniel Boones and Simon Kentons."⁷

Although Eggleston's heroes and heroines were not usually drawn from these people, their lives and destinies were inseparably bound with this class of society. Four of these early novels were set in the Ohio River Valley; one, the *Circuit Rider* in pre-War of 1812 Ohio; two, *The End of the World* and *Roxy* in the Indiana of the early 1840's; and another, *The Hoosier School-Master* in Indiana during a slightly later period. The fifth, *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, was set on the Minnesota frontier during the land boom of the latter 1850's. In all these tales, social conditions were given an importance previously unknown in American literature. The life of the people was minutely described in all its aspects. Pages were devoted to their habits, customs, speech—in short, everything that influenced and molded their lives and behaviors. Footnotes were often added further explaining certain unique social institutions; occasionally, entire chapters were added, seemingly unrelated to the course of the story, describing in vivid terms a cornshucking, spellingbee, shiveree or political barbecue. The characters of Eggleston's novels were treated as parts of a study of society and were often pictured as logical results of their own particular environment, a relationship that wasn't "officially" suggested until two decades later when Frederick Jackson Turner read his famous paper on the frontier. After his conversion to historical writing, Eggleston declared that, "I am mainly interested in the evolution of society; . . . in either sort of writing [fiction or history] this interest in the history of life, this tendency to what the Germans call 'culture-history,' is the one distinguishing trait of almost all that I have attempted."⁸

Closely allied with Eggleston's belief that history should deal primarily with people was his idea that all novels should be contributions to this history of civilization. The writer of

⁷ *Roxy* (New York, 1878), 183.

⁸ "Formative Influences," *Forum*, X, 287.

fiction could best accomplish this by writing realistically, by writing of life as it really was lived. Eggleston's conception of the fundamental relationship between literature and history pervaded all his earlier work. "A novel," he wrote, "should be the truest of books. It partakes in a certain sense of the nature of both history and art. It needs to be true to human nature in its permanent and essential qualities, and it should truthfully represent some specific and temporary manifestation of human nature: that is, some form of society."⁹ Only by being realistic, could the novelist fulfill his obligation to tell the truth. "The novelist, like the historian, must set down things as he finds them," Eggleston once wrote and added, "A man who talks in consecrated phrases is yet in the poll-parrot state of mental development."¹⁰ This obligation of the novelist became a high and sacred duty. In one of his prefaces, Eggleston wrote that "no man is worthy to be called a novelist who does not endeavor with his whole soul to produce the higher form of history, by writing truly of men as they are, and dispassionately of those forms of life that come within his scope."¹¹

Eggleston's efforts to write "truly of men as they are" may be traced throughout the novels under consideration. These efforts, however, were not made without the danger of misunderstanding. Eggleston once complained that "whenever one writes with photographic exactness of frontier life he is accused of inventing improbable things."¹² He opened *The Circuit Rider* with the warning that "whatever is incredible in this story is true."¹³ The criticism has often been made of Eggleston that he was never able to get beyond the "accepted dogma" that a novel was a love story. In his defense, Eggleston pointed out that this was in perfect keeping with his beliefs in realistic writing. "It is God," he wrote, "who made love so universal that no picture of human life can be complete where love is left out."¹⁴

⁹ *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 7.

¹⁰ *The End of the World* (New York, 1872), 230.

¹¹ *The Circuit Rider* (New York, 1931), vii.

¹² "The Gunpowder Plot," *Duffels* (New York, 1893), 91.

¹³ *The Circuit Rider*, v.

¹⁴ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land, The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950), 233; *The Circuit Rider*, vii. In the *Mystery of Metropolisville*, Eggleston wrote that "it has been objected that I have copied life too closely," 7.

That Eggleston considered his works of fiction as chapters in a history of American life becomes more evident with a study of his early novels. Scattered references are made throughout his stories to their function as history. In the *Mystery of Metropolisville*, he justified a failure to embellish a situation with the words, "As an authentic historian, I am bound to limit myself to the simple fact."¹⁵ Eggleston even goes so far as to document certain incidents. Although he repeatedly acknowledged debts to "local tradition," his purpose, he wrote, was to present our forefathers, "not as they seem in patriotic orations and reverent family traditions, but as they appear to a student of the writings and prints of their own age."¹⁶ In *The Circuit Rider*, Eggleston observed that "Every history has one quality in common with eternity. Begin where you will, there is always a beginning back of the beginning. And, for that matter, there is always a shadowy ending beyond the ending. Only because we may not always begin, like Knickerbocker, at the foundation of the world, is it that we get courage to break somewhere into the interlaced web of human histories—of loves and marriages, of births and deaths, of hopes and fears, of successes and disappointments, of gettings and havings, and spendings and losings. Yet, break in where we may, there is always just a little behind the beginning, something that needs to be told."¹⁷ One literary critic declared that when Eggleston's novels should cease to entertain as fiction, they would teach as history.¹⁸

In keeping with his ideas that history should concern itself with the small details of life and living and that literature should truthfully depict these details, Eggleston devoted a great deal of space in his stories to a minute description of the social *milieu* in which his characters acted. This devotion to detail led him on at least one occasion to apologize to the reader. Again in *The Circuit Rider*, Eggleston wrote, "The tale I have to tell will seem strange to those who know little of the social life of the West at the beginning of this century. These

¹⁵ *The Circuit Rider*, 58; *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 98.

¹⁶ Examples of Eggleston's references to "local tradition" may be found in *The Circuit Rider*, 138, 219, 285; "The Redemptioner," *Duffels*, 27.

¹⁷ *The Circuit Rider*, 30.

¹⁸ Meredith Nicholson, "Edward Eggleston," *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston, 1857-), XC (1902), 804.

sharp contrasts of corn shuckings and camp meetings, of wild revels followed by wild revivals; these contacts of highwayman and preacher; this *mélange* of picturesque simplicity, grotesque humor and savage ferocity, of abandoned wickedness and austere piety, can hardly seem real to those who know the country now. But the books of biography and reminiscence which preserve the memory of that time more than justify what is marvelous in these pages."¹⁹ To insure the accuracy of the details he described, Eggleston often drew the characters and events of his stories from his own life. The incidents of his first novel, *The Hoosier School-Master*, while not strictly autobiographical, were drawn from life, being partially based upon his brother's experiences as a schoolmaster in a backwoods Indiana community. Many of the characters were drawn rather closely from actual personages Eggleston had known in his youth. Several retained the same names in the story that they bore in real life, a source of never ending embarrassment to Eggleston. In this tale, the reader, as one contemporary critic pointed out, becomes acquainted "with the rudeness and ugliness of the intermediate West, after the days of pioneering, and before the days of civilization,—the West of horse-thief gangs and of mobs, of protracted meetings and of extended sprees, of ignorance drawn slowly through religious fervors towards the desire of knowledge and decency in this world." Its significance in the over-all pattern of American literature was recognized at once, "[The story] is chiefly noticeable . . . as a picture of manners hitherto strange to literature, and the characters are interesting as part of the picture of manners, rather than as persons whose fate greatly concerns us."²⁰ Crude though it was, Eggleston's first novel portrayed the life of the Hoosiers with undisputed authenticity.

Eggleston's second novel, *The End of the World*, derived its theme from the Millerite frenzy during the early 1840's, the climax of the story occurring on the day in 1843 which the Millerites had announced as the end of the world. Although less autobiographical than some of Eggleston's other works, the scenes and events that form the background for the story were drawn from Eggleston's own experience. The story was

¹⁹ *The Circuit Rider*, v.

²⁰ [William Dean Howells], "Recent Literature," *Atlantic Monthly*, XXIX (1872), 363.

prefaced with some remarks of Principal Shairp [*sic*] regarding Wordsworth which echoed Eggleston's own sentiments, "He believed that in country people, what is permanent in human nature, the essential feelings and passions of mankind, exist in greater simplicity and strength."²¹ The book was dedicated to his brother, George Cary Eggleston, "a manly man and a brotherly brother," who had shared with Eggleston "a happy life in the shadow of just such hills as those among which the events of this story took place."²² The religious fervor of the time and the prejudice against foreigners among certain Indiana communities were effectively described as the background for the principal characters. Critics of Eggleston's own day praised the story as "a genuine picture of a type of life, as peculiar and as piquant as that of rural New England, and much less known." Eggleston's "thorough realization of the people he has set out to describe" and the convincing reality of his characters were especially commended. One reviewer optimistically predicted that *The End of the World* would realize a sale "exceeding that of any other American novel, excepting perhaps some of Mrs. Stowe's."²³

Perhaps one of the most autobiographical of Eggleston's early novels is his third, *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, published in 1873. The story is set on the frontier of Minnesota Territory in 1856 and describes the rise and decline of a typical frontier town, Metropolisville, in simple but realistic terms. "The village grew, as hundreds of other frontier villages had grown, in the flush times; it died as so many others died, of the financial crash which was the inevitable sequel and retribution of speculative madness. Its history resembles the history of other Western towns of the sort so strongly, that I should not take the trouble to write about it, nor ask you to take the trouble to read it, if the history of the town did not involve also the history of certain human lives. . . ."²⁴

Albert Charlton, the hero of the story, was drawn from both Eggleston himself and his brother George. Charlton, like Eggleston, observed a rigorous daily schedule, enjoyed mathe-

²¹ *The End of the World*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Scribner's Monthly* (22 vols., New York, 1850-1881), V (1872-1873), 270; [William Dean Howells], "Recent Literature," *Atlantic Monthly*, XXX (1872), 746-747.

²⁴ *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 11-12.

matics and surveying, but considered it futile to attend college and arrived in Minnesota in 1856 on the steamboat "Ben Bolt." George Gray, the Hoosier poet who experimented with dialect poems and contemplated joining in the slavery struggle in Kansas, also was modeled in part after the author. Many other parallels may be found. Metropolisville was copied from Cannon City, Minnesota, where Eggleston lived for a time. Faribault, the county seat of Rice County, became Perritaut, the seat of Wheat County, in Eggleston's book. Crystal Lake became Diamond Lake, the Cannon River became the Big Gun River and Red Wing was renamed Red Owl Landing. Eggleston painted a convincing and detailed picture of frontier life which he summed up in his "Words Afterwards." "Metropolisville is only a memory now. The collapse of the land-bubble and the opening of railroads destroyed it. Most of the buildings were removed to a neighboring railway station. Not only has Metropolisville gone, but the unsettled state of society in which it grew has likewise disappeared—the land-sharks, the claim speculators, the town-proprietors, the trappers, and the stage-drivers have emigrated or have undergone metamorphosis. The wild excitement of '56 is a tradition hardly credible to those who did not feel its fever. But the most evanescent things may impress themselves on human beings, and in the results which they thus produce become immortal. There is a last page to all our works, but to the history of the ever-unfolding human spirit no one will ever write THE END."²⁵ In spite of its graphic picture of the boisterous frontier land boom, *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, the only one of the early stories to be set outside the Ohio Valley, was considered by many critics disappointing as a novel.²⁶

The Circuit Rider, Eggleston's fourth novel, appeared in 1874. Although it was his fourth novel in four years, the book did not show, as did his previous novels, the evident haste with which it was written. Again highly autobiographical, the story was based on the author's own background as a Methodist circuit rider in southern Indiana. Dedicated to "my Comrades of Other Years, The brave and self-sacrificing men with whom I had the honor to be associated in a frontier minstry," the book

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 320.

²⁶ "Recent Novels," *The Nation* (New York, 1865-), XVI (1873), 404.

described an age when "in many households, the old customs still held sway; the wool was carded, spun, dyed, woven, cut and made up in the house; the corn-shucking, wood-chopping, quilting, apple-peeling and country 'hoe-down' had not yet fallen into disuse." The circuit rider was the central figure on the frontier during this age. "More than any one else, the early circuit preachers brought order out of this chaos. In no other class was the real heroic element so finely displayed. How do I remember the forms and weather-beaten visages of the old preachers, whose constitutions had conquered starvation and exposure—who had survived swamps, alligators, Indians, highway robbers and bilious fevers! How was my boyish soul tickled with their anecdotes of rude experience—how was my imagination wrought upon by the recital of their hairbreadth escapes! How was my heart set afire by their contagious religious enthusiasm, so that at eighteen years of age I bestrode the saddle-bags myself and laid upon a feeble frame the heavy burden of emulating their toils! Surely I have a right to celebrate them, since they came so near being the death of me."²⁷

The purpose of the story was to indicate the impact of Methodism on the frontier during the early part of the nineteenth century. For specific incidents in the novel, Eggleston borrowed from the autobiography of one of the early circuit riders, Jacob Young. Morton Goodwin, the hero of the story, is clearly modeled after Young. The conflict between the civilizing forces of Methodism and the characteristic frontier tendencies was presented against a true reproduction of life in the Ohio Valley. "The story," according to one reviewer, "is clearly made up, in great part, of veritable personages and of incidents that are historical."²⁸

Eggleston's fifth novel, and the last to be considered here, was *Roxy*, which appeared in 1878. Again Eggleston drew heavily on his own background. The story is set in a small Swiss-American community on the banks of the Ohio River, obviously modeled after Eggleston's own birthplace, and is centered about the vicissitudes of Mark Bonamy, an aspiring politician and husband of Roxy. The action of the tale takes place during the early 1840's; the story opens with a vivid de-

²⁷ *The Circuit Rider*, v-vi.

²⁸ *Scribner's Monthly*, VIII (1874), 375.

scription of the political campaign in 1840, when "the Whig leaders . . . roasted beeves in order to persuade the independent voters to listen to arguments on the tariff; they washed down abstruse reasonings about the United States Bank with hard cider; and by good feeling persuaded the citizens to believe in internal improvement."²⁹ Frontier religion is again introduced when Mark is seized with the fervor of Methodism and determines to carry the gospel to the Republic of Texas. The story is one of Eggleston's best, if not the best. There are relatively few instances where Eggleston made side remarks to the reader, indicating a certain maturity which the author had reached as a writer.

Eggleston wrote three more novels in addition to the five considered, but all of them were produced after 1880, when he shifted his point of interest from fiction to history. *The Hoosier School-Boy*, published in 1883, was written as a companion piece to *The Hoosier School-Master* and may properly be classified as a juvenile book. The scene was the same as in Eggleston's first novel, but more attention was given to the crude educational system then in vogue. In 1888, Eggleston published *The Graysons*, noted chiefly for its description of Abraham Lincoln as a young lawyer. In this story, which was based wholly on popular tradition, Eggleston departed from his customary search for historical veracity. "To have investigated the accuracy of my version of the anecdote," Eggleston wrote in his preface, "would have been, indeed, to fly in the face and eyes of providence."³⁰ *The Graysons* closed Eggleston's cycle of stories of life in the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. Eggleston's last novel, *The Faith Doctor*, was published in 1891 and satirized the fad toward Christian Science in New York during the latter nineteenth century.

A third idea introduced and expressed by Edward Eggleston in his early novels, vital to the first two, has, to some degree, been alluded to already. In order to be effective in his portrayal of the history of life and of manners, the novelist should write only of that with which he is familiar. Eggleston was partially influenced to this point of view by a translation of Hippolyte Taine's *Art in the Netherlands*, in which Taine maintained that the Dutch painters produced nothing of value

²⁹ *Roxy*, 10.

³⁰ *The Graysons* (New York, 1901), Preface.

as long as they sought their style and subject-matter in Italy instead of making use of the opportunities, crude though they might be, that were at hand. It was Eggleston's firm conviction that "whether in the graphic or in the literary art no man can do his best work unless he chooses for his subject a life which he thoroughly knows."⁸¹ In later years, Eggleston declared that in writing novels illustrative of life "in the great interior valley, I was only drawing on the resources which the very peculiar circumstances of my life had put at my disposal."⁸² To him there was "no provincial life richer in material if only one knew how to get at it."⁸³ In defense of his "provincial" themes, Eggleston once wrote, "the great heroes, the world's demigods, grew in just such rough social states as that of Ohio in the early part of this century. There is nothing more important for an over-refined generation than to understand that it has not a monopoly of the great qualities of humanity, and that it must not only tolerate rude folk, but sometimes admire in them traits that have grown scarce as refinement has increased."⁸⁴ Only by setting his story in an environment with which he was thoroughly familiar, could the novelist make of his novel "the truest of books." By urging this new faith on the American literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, Eggleston blazed the trail for the so-called "local colorists."

Eggleston's preoccupation with matters of dialect and folk speech stemmed in part from his conviction that literature should be "provincial." Speech, to Eggleston, was a vital part of social history and consequently of literature. In this respect, he received much encouragement from James Russell Lowell, to whom he dedicated *The Hoosier School-Master*, whose *Biglow Papers* was a pioneer in the use of local dialect. Eggleston's uses of local dialect were often footnoted in his novels and long notes were added explaining the "orthography" of certain words. More than once, he wished that "Webster's 'American Dictionary of the English Language' had not been made wholly in New England, [so that] it would

⁸¹ George Cary Eggleston, *The First of the Hoosiers, Reminiscences of Edward Eggleston* (Philadelphia, 1903), 14.

⁸² "Formative Influences," *Forum*, X, 290.

⁸³ *The End of the World*, 7.

⁸⁴ *The Circuit Rider*, 21.

not have lacked so many words that do duty as native-born or naturalized citizens in large sections of the United States."³⁵ Eggleston's interest in dialect and folk speech amounted to a thorough absorption and to him must go some recognition as an American philologist.³⁶

Concomitant with Eggleston's view that literature should deal with "provincial" themes, were his efforts to develop a characteristic national literature free from foreign influences. The present task of American literature, he wrote, "is to represent the forms and spirit of our own life, and thus free ourselves from habitual imitation of that which is foreign." Thus he attempted to make his novels of value as chapters in the history of civilization in America. Although, he wrote, it may be urged that this is not the highest function of literature, "it is just now the most necessary function of this kind of literature."³⁷ The chief hope for a national American literature, which to Eggleston meant a reflection of "the life of our country, its ideas, inspirations, and its aspirations," lay in the sectional reproduction of American life to which Eggleston has set himself.³⁸ In the especially prepared preface to the Library Edition of *The Hoosier School-Master*, Eggleston declared, "The taking up of life in this regional way has made our literature really national by the only process possible. The Federal nation has at length manifested a consciousness of the continental diversity of its forms of life. The 'great American novel,' for which prophetic critics yearned so fondly twenty years ago, is appearing in sections."³⁹ By pioneering in the field of "provincial realism," Eggleston brought the section to the attention of the literary world years before Frederick Jackson Turner urged its importance on the historical world.

Eggleston's transition to the writing of formal history was only natural. He had actually been writing social history

³⁵ *The End of the World*, 293.

³⁶ For a discussion of Eggleston's interest in this field, see John M. Haller, "Edward Eggleston, Linguist," *Philological Quarterly* (Iowa City, 1922-), XXIV (1945), 175-186.

³⁷ *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 7.

³⁸ Benjamin T. Spencer, "The New Realism and a National Literature," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* (New York, 1884-), LVI (1941), 1122. This article is an excellent discussion of Eggleston's work in relation to the larger "realistic" school of the latter nineteenth century.

³⁹ *The Hoosier School-Master*, Preface to the Library Edition, 6-7.

since the appearance of his first novel in 1871; he merely turned to what he called a more ambitious form. In 1880, he wrote his brother George that he intended to spend the next ten years of his life writing a "History of Life in the United States." "After all [he wrote] this work will not differ in essentials from what I have been doing hitherto. The historical form is more ambitious—or perhaps you will say more pretentious—but, as I look back over my work in fiction, I begin to see clearly that every chapter of it was inspired by the same purpose that actuates me now. My interest in my work has been that of a student intent upon tracing the forces of life in America to their origins, and showing how men and women lived and thought and felt, under conditions that existed before those of to-day came into being. So that I am not making a new departure now or entering a new field. I have been writing history all the time in my novels. I am going now to write the same kind of history, in a somewhat different form."⁴⁰ Eggleston formed a grandiose scheme for a series of volumes "not a history of the United States . . . but a history of life there, the life of the people, the sources of their ideas and habits, the course of their development from beginnings."⁴¹ His own background, so advantageous in the writing of his fiction, was to serve him well in his historical work. Francis Parkman was reported to have told him on one occasion, "You are the only man in America that can write a history of life in the United States; you are the only man who has seen so many forms of our life."⁴² Eggleston declared that he was prepared to devote ten years of his life to the task, if necessary.

Eggleston's task proved to require much more time than that which he originally allotted. The first volume in the projected series was not published until 1897. Eggleston's purpose in this volume, the full title of which is *The Beginners of a Nation, A History of the Source and Rise of the Earliest English Settlements in America with Special Reference to the Life and Character of the People*,⁴³ was not different from that which he had hoped to achieve in his early novels. "It has been my

⁴⁰ George Cary Eggleston, *The First of the Hoosiers*, 105.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴² "Edward Eggleston: An Interview," *Outlook*, LV, 432.

⁴³ (New York, 1897).

aim [he wrote] 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.”⁴⁴

This first volume was well received by the historical profession. Herbert Levi Osgood, a foremost colonial historian at Columbia University, in reviewing Eggleston's book, wrote, “The author has put ancestor-worship, sectionalism and partisanship beneath his feet.” In history, as in his fiction, “his treatment of men and events is realistic. He has striven to know and to depict men as they were.”⁴⁵ Recognition in the historical field came relatively fast. In December, 1897, Eggleston was elected Second Vice-President of the American Historical Association and two years later became its President. His second volume in the series on American life, *The Transit of Civilization from England to America in the Seventeenth Century*,⁴⁶ was published in 1901, shortly before Eggleston's death. The book reflected the author's waning health and was not received with the same enthusiasm as his first volume.⁴⁷

Edward Eggleston's influence in the development of social history in the United States was a great one. His success, however, was the logical result of his literary endeavors during the decade of the seventies. By breaking with the older, traditional forms of literary expression; by attempting to write “realistically,” of people as they really had been; by emphasizing the “small” details of their lives, the influences of

⁴⁴ *The Beginners of a Nation*, vii.

⁴⁵ Herbert Levi Osgood, Review of *The Beginners of a Nation*, in the *American Historical Review* (New York, 1895-), II (1896-1897), 530.

⁴⁶ (New York, 1901).

⁴⁷ An excellent discussion of Eggleston's historical work may be found in Charles Hirschfeld, “Edward Eggleston: Pioneer in Social History,” Eric Goldman (ed.), *Historiography and Urbanization: Essays in American History in Honor of W. Stull Holt* (Baltimore, 1941), 189-210. A less penetrating discussion may be found in James A. Rawley, “Edward Eggleston: Historian,” *Indiana Magazine of History* (Bloomington, 1905-), XL (1944), 341-352.

custom, habit, manners, speech; and by urging that writers should describe only that with which they were thoroughly familiar, Eggleston left a debt to the world of letters that can hardly be exaggerated. The first novels of Edward Eggleston stand today as one of the first expressions of the "new history," as forerunners of the "new realism" of American literature, and as a pioneer effort in the new school of "local colorists." In this many-fold capacity, Eggleston's novels occupy a position of prime significance in American historiography and literature.