Claude G. Bowers, Historian

Oliver Knight*

I

What baseball was to other boys, history was to Claude Gernade Bowers. His was the good fortune to live where a boy could indulg a fondness for letters—in quiet, friendly, cultured Indianapolis during the 1890’s. Authors, orators, and statesmen enriched the atmosphere; scholars stocked the public library with good books; and encouragement was given to independent scholarship. An undersized schoolboy, Bowers was a constant visitor to the public library, a young scholar who dared engage the full works of Jefferson and Hamilton. Day after day he read near one of the large windows, vicariously experiencing history, politics, and public affairs. In each field he was to have moments of glory of his own.

II

Bowers’ interest in history germinated early. Born in Hamilton County, Indiana, on November 20, 1878, he spent his childhood in Whitestown and Indianapolis. As the only child of a merchant, he was thrown much upon himself for companionship and substituted books for playmates. At the age of ten, history became his favorite reading when he chanced upon a standard history of the United States; at the age of twelve, a corollary interest was awakened by a biography of Calhoun. Seeing the biography in a store display, he begged his mother to buy it. She refused at first, thinking it beyond his years, but relented and purchased her son’s first biography under the persuasion of Samuel M. Ralston.

Democratic governor, senator, and presidential timber, Ralston was among the men of affairs who influenced the

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2 Claude G. Bowers to Oliver Knight, New York, April 23, 1954.

3 Ibid. Bowers says Ralston could have had the Democratic nomination of 1924 in five hours, but his health would not allow him to accept.
atmosphere in which Bowers matured. Others of the company the youth could meet during a stroll: Benjamin Harrison, lately President of the United States; James Whitcomb Riley; General Lew Wallace; Booth Tarkington; and Albert J. Beveridge, the "brilliant young orator" who was Bowers' boyhood idol. They encouraged letters and oratory, and Bowers absorbed both.

Literature was a compelling interest in high school. Eschewing sports and hobbies, he spent much time in the Indianapolis Public Library where he could choose from 1,700 titles of history and 5,200 of biography. His reading included the biographies of American and English statesmen from Jefferson to Conkling and from Pitt to Gladstone. Inspired by the biography of Lord Henry Brougham, he and a friend decided they would imitate the *Edinburgh Review*. Soliciting articles from literary men across the nation, they soon had enough to fill a magazine for a year, and happily took the manuscripts to a printer. When the printer told them how much it would cost to publish their material, Bowers says, it "scared us stiff." Forthwith they returned the manuscripts, ending their literary venture.

Bowers also had a strong interest in political oratory. A partisan from the cradle, as he facetiously remarks, he came from families of unequivocal politics. His paternal grandfather had been a confirmed Democrat; his maternal grandfather, an original Republican who fell at Missionary Ridge. The maternal line had the greater influence, for he reached the threshold of maturity thinking he was a political kinsman of Alexander Hamilton. Planning a discussion of Hamilton for the state high school oratorical contest of 1898, he read the statesman's complete works. To his dismay, he discovered he could never agree with him on fundamentals. It was then too late to choose and prepare a new topic. Rather than submerge his own principles, he confined the discussion to Hamilton's role in the ratification of the Constitution. The

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5 Marian McFadden, Director of the Indianapolis Public Library, to Knight, Indianapolis, May 13, 1954.
6 Bowers to Knight, New York, April 23, 1954.
8 Bowers to Knight, New York, April 23, 1954.
presentation lacked neither in research nor in the telling, for he won the state contest.

Yet he wandered in a political no-man's land. Trying to reorient himself, he carefully read the works of Jefferson, becoming a devoted Democrat and ardent Jeffersonian in the process.

III

While he was certain about his politics, young Bowers was uncertain about a career when he graduated from Shortridge High School in 1898. Because his father had died and left him without resources, college training appeared hopeless. However, financial assistance was proffered by Addison C. Harris, an attorney who once was minister to Austria. Harris also promised a position in his law firm after college, but in exchange he wanted Bowers' promise to stay out of politics. Though the offer assured a comfortable start in life, Bowers refused to mortgage his future. Independently he began reading law in the rooms of Burke and Warrum, studying history in the public library, and preparing for politics.

During the two years succeeding graduation, the champion orator emerged as a budding spokesman for the Democratic party. By addressing a state Democratic banquet and writing his first articles for an obscure magazine, he came under the notice of Samuel E. Morss, editor of the Indianapolis Sentinel. Morss sent for and talked with the young man. Later, in 1900, the chief editorial writer—Jacob Piatt Dunn, who was also an Indiana historian—employed him as an editorial writer for the Sentinel, which had been the party's organ since 1841.9

Bowers was delighted with the opportunity of the editorial page. Without a scintilla of guidance or training, he relied upon his great store of reading—especially of eighteenth and nineteenth century oratory—in developing a method and style of his own. Neither then nor subsequently was he a reporter.10 After two years in this occupation, he returned briefly to the study of law.

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9 Ibid.; Bowers to Knight, New York, June 1, 1954.
10 Bowers to Knight, New York, April 23, 1954. His first assignment was far from ordinary—a commentary on William Jennings Bryan's speech accepting the presidential nomination of 1900, which was delivered in Indianapolis.
Trying journalism once more, he went to Terre Haute where he wrote editorials for the *Terre Haute Evening Gazette* and the *Terre Haute Star* from 1903 to 1906. A well-stocked mind, fluent tongue, and devotion to party earned him status in the new community. Delivering a Jackson Day speech, he impressed Terre Haute as he had earlier impressed Indianapolis. Within fifteen months after his arrival as an unknown newspaperman, he was nominated unanimously for Congress at the age of twenty-six.

Knowing that 1904 would be a landslide year for Theodore Roosevelt, and lesser Republicans along with him, Bowers was reluctant to run. But politicians persuaded him he would obligate the party if he would campaign, because a good congressional candidate would help the local ticket. With that prospect, he accepted the nomination. For seven weeks he spoke twice daily throughout the seven-county district and wrote editorials at night by lamplight in country hotels. Though defeated, he at least had the satisfaction of having run far ahead of the ticket. Two years later the party repaid its obligation. In 1906, a more auspicious year for Democrats, he was again nominated unanimously for Congress, but he lost by a narrow margin.

Nevertheless, he secured a political position the same year, beginning an eleven-year absence from the editorial room. Because of party considerations, he accepted appointment on the Terre Haute Board of Public Improvements, serving from 1906 to 1911. From first to last he was unhappy in local politics.

An opportunity to escape the narrow municipal field came in 1911—the same year that he married Sybil McCaslin, who was to bear his only child, Patricia. John W. Kern defeated Albert J. Beveridge for the United States Senate in 1910, and offered Bowers a position as his secretary. Planning to spend one year with Kern for the experience and then resign, Bowers found himself trapped by political circumstances. Kern became Democratic leader of the Senate during the first Wilson administration, and was absent from the office for days at a time because of caucuses, conferences, and floor strategy. Upon Bowers fell the full burden of routine work, literally making him *ex officio* senator from Indiana. Feeling resignation would be desertion, he remained

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with Kern for six years. In Washington he gained experience that would broaden the insight and political instinct he was to bring to historical writing.\(^{12}\)

But at the moment he was unhappy in the thought that even in Washington he was wasting time. Fed by the grand designs of the great writers of England and America, his talent demanded expression, and his restlessness yearned for an outlet.

Voracious reading led to a book on British address,\(^{13}\) which aroused his interest in John Philpot Curran. Curious to know whether Ireland produced other speakers whose art went beyond the endowment of the Blarney Stone, he studied Henry Grattan, Edward Plunkett, Henry Flood, Daniel O'Connell, Thomas Meagher, Isaac Butt, and Charles Parnell. Through the study he became known to Irish partisans in Washington. Invited to address a Robert Emmett meeting in the National Theatre along with Champ Clark, he was introduced to an Irish audience that took him for its own. For the next ten years he was booked a year in advance for a St. Patrick's Day speech.\(^{14}\)

Using his knowledge of Irish orators, studying Irish histories, and searching Dublin newspapers in the Library of Congress, he started a book. At night in Senator Kern's office he wrote his first volume—*Irish Orators*, published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1916, in the author's thirty-eighth year. Publication coincided with the Easter Week rebellion in Ireland, which in turn helped draw attention to the new book.\(^{15}\)

At the same time, Bowers found his way back to a newspaper. After Kern was defeated for re-election in 1916, his secretary returned to Indiana as editor of the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette from 1917 to 1923. There Bowers devoted careful attention to the editorials which were to interest the editors of the New York World. Yet he felt compelled to write something more than transient newspaper pieces.\(^{16}\)

Turning to biography upon Kern’s death, he wrote the *Life of John Worth Kern*, published in 1918 by Hollenbeck

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Chauncey A. Goodrich, *Select British Eloquence* (New York, 1853).

\(^{14}\) Bowers to Knight, April 23, 1954.

\(^{15}\) Bowers to Knight, New York, April 13, 1955.

\(^{16}\) “Personal Glimpses of Our New Ambassadors,” *Literary Digest*, June 24, 1933.
Press, Indianapolis. After Kern he thought of writing history. Feeling that most historians had been unjust to Jackson's Kitchen Cabinet, he consulted Beveridge, who remained a personal friend despite political differences. In Beveridge's suggestion that he survey the party conflicts of the Jackson period he found his literary challenge. When at last he had completed a two-volume work, *Party Battles of the Jackson Period*, he submitted the manuscript to Houghton Mifflin, who were to be his publishers until 1950. In seeking an appraisal of the manuscript, the publisher sent it to William E. Dodd, himself a Jeffersonian, who was then teaching history at the University of Chicago. Dodd recommended publication and became one of the author's strongest champions. Before publishing the book, Houghton Mifflin insisted that it be pared to one volume, despite the strong objections of Dodd, who felt the work deserved the broader canvas of two volumes.

The unabashed partisanship, flowing style, and extensive research of *Party Battles* drew national recognition and enthusiastic reviews in 1922. In the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, a professional journal, Dodd wrote that "few historians could have written so good and true a narrative of the Jackson epoch as has this layman."

With *Party Battles* Bowers embarked upon a career as an historian of crisis, choosing his themes from the "critical periods" of history: the triumph of democracy over aristocracy in the Jackson period, the epochal conflict of Jefferson and Hamilton, the retrograde decade after the Civil War, the election and administrations of Jefferson, and an act from the French drama of 1789.

Coincidentally, he was elevated in his profession. Editors of the *New York Evening World*, watching American newspapers for signs of a superior writer, found Bowers and transplanted him to New York in 1923. Once more he was in his element—a political crusader writing for a crusading newspaper.

Even on the comfortable eminence of the *World*, however, he could not and would not lose the compulsion to write

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17 Bowers to Knight, New York, April 23, 1954.
18 X (1923-1924), 80-82.
Each noon he left his office to spend the lunch hour doing research in the New York Public Library. Using his intimate knowledge of the works of Jefferson and Hamilton, he explored their era in detail.

The result was one of his favorite books—*Jefferson and Hamilton, The Struggle for Democracy in America* (1925). While he had seemed self-conscious in a new discipline with *Party Battles*, his handling of *Jefferson and Hamilton* was comfortable and confident. Conceiving that both men had been essential in creating the nation and that enemies and idolaters had created myths about each, he sought to tell the story of their struggle “with complete justice to both.”

His two-dimensional writing re-created the figures of the era and the era itself.

Scholars recognized it as a significant study by a man who was at home in the period and knew his characters down to their slightest peccadilloes. Samuel Flagg Bemis judged that Bowers had surpassed James Parton—the biographer of Jefferson—in both knowledge and accuracy, and incidentally, called on him three years later to help write the chapters on William M. Evarts in the seventh volume of *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy*. Nathaniel W. Stephenson found it “a brilliant, confident book that bowls over the general reader, and leaves him gasping with delight.” J. Fred Rippy thought the characters were overdrawn and the period overdramatized in an otherwise “great book.”

After thirty years, twenty-nine printings, and two translations, *Jefferson and Hamilton* is respected still. Historians in 1952 placed it on the list of preferred American biography from 1920 to 1950. Even as recently as May, 1954, the reviewer of a new book on the same period mentioned it as a

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monument in the field. The University of Virginia, which owed its founding to Thomas Jefferson, rewarded Bowers with the Jefferson Medal at Monticello in 1926.

Despite full-time participation in a competitive profession that leaves little energy for other writing, Bowers was indefatigable in writing books of fresh appeal; indeed, his total production has exceeded that of many professional historians whose academic assignments theoretically allow time for research. In 1927 he edited the *Diary of Elbridge Gerry, Jr.*, mildly received as a welcome but minor addition to historical literature. Then he mined the ever-rich Civil War and Reconstruction period.

Combining careful scholarship with a revisionist viewpoint toward Reconstruction, he fashioned *The Tragic Era, The Revolution after Lincoln* (1929). Recasting familiar characters in new roles of hero and villain, he rode the riptide of the iconoclastic twenties and caught the public fancy. His sometimes enraged tale of Reconstruction commanded a Literary Guild sale of 100,000 copies, three other editions, and the scrutiny of scholars.

Preferring to recognize Bowers as the foremost American practitioner of something called personal history, but not as a professional historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., found the book admirable. Nathaniel W. Stephenson was disappointed by the tone of *The Tragic Era* after the promise of *Jefferson and Hamilton*. He said it was “an historical misfortune” that so capable a man should be “an historian turned advocate.” Nevertheless, he hesitated to protest all the conclusions, because much in the book was sound, and he recognized that the collection of additional dispassionate data might in time establish the Bowers interpretation. Other critics found it “an unforgettable record of an unforgivable period;”

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24 *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XVI (1929-1930), 561-564.
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a failure to make out a case for Johnson's acquittal; and a success, where academic historians had failed, in reaching the public.26

Despite the success of the two books, Bowers has bitter memories from Jefferson and Hamilton and The Tragic Era. He received information that each book in its year was chosen for the Pulitzer Prize by a committee of historians who were overruled by men whose political beliefs, he feels, were antagonistic to his.27

In 1932 he paid tribute to the man who held his esteem from boyhood and whose friendship weathered the fortunes of politics that placed the two men on opposite sides of the fence. Albert J. Beveridge had been something of an idol in earlier years, and his career as United States Senator from Indiana further won the admiration of Bowers. Devoting himself to a scholarly biographical study, Bowers produced Beveridge and the Progressive Era, another Literary Guild selection. Building upon extensive documentary materials, he told the story from Beveridge's viewpoint—the viewpoint of a Republican. By thus laying aside his own partisanship, which had been honestly exhibited in earlier books, Bowers stepped into a new literary milieu. Unable to brandish the bull-whip of political attack, he restricted himself to portraying Beveridge as orator, statesman, and biographer against the background of his times. The greater reserve of Beveridge and the Progressive Era forced a sacrifice of a good part of the indignation and zest that marked the earlier books, but through it another side of Bowers' talent was displayed. It was the work of a historian able to subordinate his own political prejudice in making a systematic examination of a historical subject. The book fully justified the serious attention it received,28 since the author could analyze his subject against a broad spectrum of knowledge and experience.

Respected in two professions and treated kindly by literary critics, Bowers had reached a high point in his literary

27 Bowers to Knight, New York, April 23, 1954.
career by 1932. Yet great adventure still lay ahead for the storekeeper’s boy from Indiana.

IV

Besides fighting the political battles of an age gone by, Bowers fought the party battles of his own age. In the Democratic state convention of 1918—where his old friend Senator Samuel M. Ralston started an abortive third-term movement for Woodrow Wilson—he was chairman of the platform committee. To him came an emissary from the President, bearing three or four resolutions dealing with postwar measures, which Wilson wanted adopted, their White House origin secret—a difficult assignment, to be sure, but Bowers carried it off. For the 1920 Democratic state convention he delivered the keynote speech.

As an orator he was in frequent demand. Drawing upon his wide knowledge for something to say and upon his artistry with words to say it effectively, he made audiences forget he was a “homely little runt.” He worked the same magic in the keynote address at the National Democratic Jackson Day banquet in 1928. When Bowers finished speaking, he received the compliment supreme from Will Rogers who rose and said: “There isn’t any use of me or anybody else sayin’ anything more. That little fellow stole the show!”

The Jackson Day speech was but a prelude to a greater oration. Needing a man who could whip them into a frenzy of party devotion, the Democrats called on him for the keynote speech at the national convention in Houston in 1928. The shy little man who blanched at the thought of social appearances walked onto a platform and electrified an audience of thousands. Drawing the campaign line between Hamiltonian privilege and Jeffersonian democracy, he cried: “We battle for the honor of the nation besmirched and be-

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29 New York Times, June 20, 1918.
30 Bowers to Knight, New York, April 23, 1934.
31 “Personal Glimpses,” Literary Digest, June 24, 1933.
33 The full text of the address appears on p. 8 of the New York Times, June 27, 1928.
dragged by the most brazen carnival of corruption that ever blackened the reputation of a decent and self-respecting people."\(^{25}\)

After the triumph he sat in a hotel room with a stack of congratulatory telegrams. One from the West Coast read: "A fine speech but not one bit better than in Richmond thirty years ago."\(^{26}\) A Hoosier had remembered the 1898 triumph of a schoolboy orator.

V

The demise of the *World* made Bowers available for a political appointment when Franklin D. Roosevelt swept into office, and three decades of party service strengthened his claim to preferment. Sure he would receive appointment, his friends expected him to choose a position compatible with his plain Hoosier likings. But he surprised them: he sailed for Spain as ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary.

Because Spain was a quiet place on the diplomatic map in 1933, some thought Madrid would be restful. Too, the Spanish experiment with a republic might provide new insight for the student of the early American republic. But any hope of rest was shattered by the Civil War which began in 1936. When the unrest and violence commanded the concern of other governments, Bowers walked the streets of Madrid in old clothes and slouch hat. Returning to the embassy, he placed a direct call to Secretary of State Cordell Hull with a personal report on what the people of the streets were saying. During six years in Madrid he established a reputation as "a careful, painstaking executive," and was a consistent supporter of the Loyalists, whose government he saw as a democracy opposing Axis totalitarianism.\(^{37}\) When the Loyalists were defeated, he was transferred.

From 1939 to 1953 he was ambassador to Chile. In Santiago the seasoned American politician recognized and appreciated the political maturity and intelligence of the Chileans.\(^{38}\) Terminating a twenty-year diplomatic career in 1953


at the age of seventy-five, he retired with an editorial tribute from the *New York Times* in these words: "Claude G. Bowers . . . was nearly as well known as the Chilean President himself. It is in no small measure due to Ambassador Bowers that our relations with Chile have been among the best we have enjoyed with any nation. . . . he was rarely without a cigar—and never without a long-range grasp of political realities and a deep-seated sense of humor."  

During his twenty years as an ambassador, Bowers kept in close and constant touch with the situation at home through correspondence with party leaders, including President Roosevelt. His personal relationship with Roosevelt began in 1925 when the future chief executive wrote a review of *Jefferson and Hamilton* for the *New York World*. Bowers was a guest in the Roosevelt home before Roosevelt became governor of New York. Roosevelt asked Bowers to make the nominating speech in 1932, but the latter's personal situation forced him to decline, and he voted for Al Smith. However, the Roosevelt-Bowers relationship remained close. The President personally requested Bowers to conduct a cross-country speaking tour in 1936 (to which Bowers had previously objected, thinking it was not proper for a diplomat to do so), but the Spanish Civil War forestalled it. In 1940, Bowers—again on the ground of propriety—declined an invitation to make six campaign speeches. During his years abroad, Bowers remained in correspondence with Roosevelt, and the last letter he received from the President was dated and signed on the morning of the President's last day. Bowers agreed with the drastic measures taken by the New Deal to revive the nation's economy, knowing that Roosevelt thought he was saving the capitalistic system in the United States, with which Bowers also agreed. Likewise, Bowers says that he has maintained cordial relations with Harry S. Truman. Looking back now, Bowers can sum up his reactions to the New Deal-Fair Deal as a feeling that it was a time of revolutionary movements and inescapable changes which made the New Deal-Fair Deal programs necessary. For him, it was a choice between reform and revolution.  

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40 Bowers to Knight, New York, November 25, 1955.
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VI

As ambassador Claude Bowers could no more lay aside historical writing than he could as a newspaperman. During twenty years abroad he wrote five books and several articles. He wrote because he felt he should, and for a pleasant change from ambassadorial care. While in Spain he wrote Jefferson in Power (1936) and The Spanish Adventures of Washington Irving (1940), both published by Houghton Mifflin; in Chile he wrote The Young Jefferson, 1743-1789 (1945) and Pierre Vergniaud: Voice of the French Revolution (1950), published by Houghton Mifflin and Macmillan, respectively.

Admittedly partisan, Jefferson in Power is his more mature work; it discusses two administrations and the last years of a great life. Bringing to full fruition a breath-taking power to animate a period, its people, and its spirit, Bowers concentrated on the political contests and their implications for America. A fairly popular book which went through five printings, it drew the usual commendations. A member of the House of Commons wrote the London Times that: “The fascinating books of Claude G. Bowers... have destroyed the illusion that American History is necessarily dull.”

Amid the scenes of another literary diplomat, Bowers traced the travels of, and sought to visualize, Washington Irving in Spain. Encountering numerous difficulties in the search for the materials that revivify a man and his time, he nonetheless found enough to guide him in restoring Irving’s years in Spain. He told the story of The Spanish Adventures of Washington Irving for his own pleasure, originally intending Spanish publication only. But the book came out in this country, too, where it was received somewhat coldly by reviewers who pedantically criticized it for not contributing anything new. The Spanish edition, however, was received enthusiastically by reviewers who knew he had re-created an atmosphere and long-forgotten people, and it had a large sale in South America.

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41 Ibid., April 23, 1954.
43 Bowers to Knight, New York, June 1, 1954.
Young Jefferson, the skimpiest of the political books, completed a Jefferson trilogy. Like Beveridge and Washington Irving before it, Young Jefferson was more restrained, less fiery, perhaps more scholarly. Again the work suffered by comparison with the earlier Bowers. Yet it was generally received with favor by scholarly reviewers, who nonetheless thought it still fashionable in the forties to invoke the Menckenistic reservations of the twenties. Referring to "plushy prose," Richard Hofstadter decreed that "within the limits of his particular medium, which is long on romance and the merely personal, and somewhat short on sharp historical insight, Mr. Bowers has, however, done a fairly good job." Conversely, Howard Fast thought the Jefferson trilogy "makes one of the most thoughtful and profound investigations of our history ever undertaken by one man." Looking at the three works in whole, Carl Bridenbaugh found them "most influential in shifting popular conceptions concerning the founding of the Republic." With much to criticize in detail, Bridenbaugh decided the trilogy in general was of "prime value," although he suggested, "Perhaps someone could edit Mr. Bowers for us."44

Pierre Vergniaud was the realization of an ambition inspired by boyhood reading. Bowers capitalized upon research in the French archives, where his daughter Patricia helped, in writing the biography of the French revolutionary. Appearing under the Macmillan imprint in 1950, Vergniaud was carefully, lengthily, and fondly done. But most American reviewers gave it something distinctly less than rave notices. However, Bowers says, "The intelligent reviews of Vergniaud were all highly complimentary. The review in the London Times was brilliant, and more than favorable. Andre Maurois, the brilliant French biographer, reviewed it for the New York Times. Most of the American reviewers did not even know that I had found very important manuscript material that had evaded the notice of even the French historians. The London Times makes much of this new material."45 From French University of New York and the Society for the Study of the French Revolution he received a citation

45 Bowers to Knight, New York, June 1, 1954.
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for the biography, presented in absentia at Finch Junior College.46

Bowers' later works show a decided change in style. Where the first several moved with the impassioned pleading of an advocate at the bar, his later ones moved at a new pace—slower, more circumspect, more judicious. An analysis of the cause of the change must await a definitive biography, but several speculations suggest themselves now: His writing may have been affected by a diplomat's habit of thought, more judicious than the partisan habit of an editorial writer. Or he may have had less time to assimilate his material. Or he may have been working with materials from a less familiar setting.

His latest book, My Mission to Spain: Watching the Rehearsal for World War II, was published in June, 1954. Written first in Madrid and rewritten twice in Santiago, it draws upon his official dispatches, diary, travels, and observations during a six-year period. It is a climactic achievement of a notable career: a historian who left the study to help make the history of his times.

VII

Claude Bowers approached his work in the spirit of a crusader. Intensely devoted to liberty and popular sovereignty, he early interpreted American history as a contest between privilege and democracy. Representing the distortions of Federalist and Republican historians, he presented a fresh picture with fully digested material in becoming the outstanding historian of Democratic presidents. With the singleness of purpose of a debater in rebuttal, he sought to redress the balance in favor of Jefferson, Jackson, and Johnson.

Looking at Jefferson, on whom he has done his best work, he found the philosopher of Monticello had made perhaps his greatest contribution to democracy in fighting the Alien and Sedition Laws.47 Through eight years in the White House, he thought, Jefferson charted the democratic course for America, acquired without blood the empire of Louisiana, sponsored the nation's first scientific expedition, blazed a

trail through the wilderness to the sea, opened the Mississippi Valley to enterprise, preserved freedom of the press, staunchly defended free discussion, purged the judiciary of abhorrent evils, abolished sinecures, and introduced business methods in government. Moreover, he believed, the Jeffersonians won office by appealing to the economic and political interests of the people, not to their passions.48

The accession of Andrew Jackson he viewed as overturning the aristocrats and intellectuals as the source of political power, replacing them with the articulate people. Recognizing that party politics in the modern sense began with Jackson, he conceded and defended the origin of the spoils system as being so adaptable to party rank and file that politicians of all parties have used it.49

In the Bowers perspective, prejudice against Andrew Johnson had fed on enormous falsehoods. After examining the details of Johnson's life, he concluded that Johnson had not been a traitor to the Republican party, because he had always been a Democrat; that he held steadfastly to his view of the purposes of the Civil War; and that he certainly was not a drunkard.50

Presenting a revised view at a time other historians also were revising the Reconstruction story, Bowers was not content merely to state the facts as he saw them. On the contrary, he called earlier historians to account, reserving special sarcasm and ridicule for John B. McMaster and Henry Adams.51 Carrying his resentment into his own day, he wrote in a book review that some American leaders were supposed to be sacred from candid analysis, but they all happened to be Federalist or Republican.52

He did not always regard Federalists and Republicans as sinister villains, however. He respected Hamilton's political genius and statesmanship; indeed, he said Hamilton's distrust of democracy is easier to understand than Jefferson's faith. Even the Federalist party he could view as the most brilliant and most attractive, in terms of leadership, that

48 Bowers, Jefferson in Power (Boston, 1936), 502-503.
49 Bowers, Party Battles of the Jackson Period (Boston, 1922), 31, 67-68.
50 Bowers, The Tragic Era, the Revolution after Lincoln (Boston, 1929), 24, 38.
52 Bowers in Saturday Review of Literature, February 21, 1931.
America has known. Although he abhorred their machinations, he yet described the Federalist leaders as "men of wonderful charm" who lost power because they did not understand the spirit of their times, did not seek contact with the common man, and set themselves against the current of democracy.53

In Jefferson and Hamilton, he portrayed the various characters in appropriate light and shadow. Even of Jefferson he could say that he used an "alibi created after the crime" in explaining he had been deceived by Hamilton in the exchange of votes on assumption of state debts and location of the national capital.54 But in later works many of the grays gave way to sharp black and white. He flailed Chief Justice John Marshall for appearing at a dinner with Burr just before he was to preside at the latter's trial. But he had no criticism for President Johnson who appeared at a reception given by Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase on the eve of the impeachment trial.55

VIII

The Bowers manner—vivid, picturesque, sweeping—commanded a popular following. Mirroring his absorption of historic address, the sentences are fulsome, evocative, and emotional on occasion. Rhythmically, they resemble the cadence of Macaulay, a kindred spirit in aim and interests. Borrowing also from the lexicon of the editorial writer, he employs repetition and innuendo to emphasize Henry Adams' "quaint" interpretation of history, and to suggest turpitude in the making of John Marshall's "midnight judges."56

Insistent upon restoring a period, he incorporates an unrivalled description of time, place, and man. Early in a book he records the tone and feel of the times—the houses, people, diversions, morals, and food. Seeking an accurate picturization, he minutely attends detail: for instance, Hamilton's "almost effeminate mahogany desk with the women's faces carved on the legs."57 Vitalizing the men in the steel engrav-
nings, he shapes trivial detail into vivid descriptions, essays sometimes forming entire chapters which he calls portraits—"Andrew Johnson: A Portrait," "Hamilton: A Portrait."

Some of the portraits stand alone as monuments of the essayist's art. In a portrait he explores every facet of a man's character—background, intellectual endowment, dress, habits, sincerity, and other attributes. Yet he does so in a refreshing, matter-of-fact manner, shunning the gobbledygook of psychological analysis. What he intends is a re-creation of each man—"warts and all." Shown both in repose and disheveled in the sweat of conflict, the figures of American history lose their austerity and remoteness. Under Bowers' hand they emerge as ordinary beings who "lived in houses, danced, gambled and drank, flattered and flirted, gossiped and lied, in a Washington of unpaved streets and sticky black mud, made their way to night conferences through dark, treacherous thoroughfares, and played their brilliant parts in a bedraggled, village-like capital... peculiarly crude and filled with grotesque incongruities." 68

His conception of history embracing both Emerson (history is biography) and Belloc (history is melodrama), Bowers never loses his sense of the dramatic. Using the novelist's third person point of view, he establishes contact with the reader who is conducted to legislative gallery and racetrack to see the men of history at work and play. A true narrator, he never loses the thread of the story, never leaves impact to chance. The reader also feels the presence of the author as a convivial guide.

Bowers' pages are enlivened by his own expressionisms and sardonic humor. For example: "Here let us enter and pay our respects to His Excellency Robert K. Scott of Ohio, by the grace of bayonets Governor of South Carolina." Of Schuyler Colfax: "In speech he was the master of the obvious." Of Thaddeus Stevens: "There was a suggestion of cruelty in his wit and something clammy in his humor—like a surgeon joking at his job."59 Picturesque language restores the spirit of the moment. For example: "the bung was knocked out of the barrel of illiterate oratory in the beer saloons." Of Washington entering the presidency: "To the

58 Bowers, Party Battles, viii.
59 Bowers, Tragic Era, 75, 85, 349.
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masses he was the maker of a nation; to the world of fashion he was the creator of a court."

His books are organized with precision. Opening with a brief, concise, and pungent preface, he announces his purpose and partiality. Better than most, he knows the work that is expected of a preface, and he makes it a succinct, interesting essay. The book proper is built around topical chapters, following a general but not always specific chronological progression—in this, his greatest weakness is that dates are not always indicated. The chapters are composed of a series of descriptions of men or events in close focus—almost an episodic treatment—set apart by Roman numerals. Beaded on narrative string, the vignettes often are literary gems, such as the description of John Randolph, the boy who looked like an old man. Still, there are occasional frailties in his style. Enthusiasm leads to overstatement and romanticism on occasion, as when he has William B. Giles setting forth on a trip with his Negro slave, "no doubt kicking, cursing, and loving him all the way." Sometimes the reader reacts negatively to the frequent parallels of American developments and episodes of the French Revolution. The only serious complaint against The Tragic Era, in a criticism written for the American Historical Review, was the strident style and continuous indictment.

However, no critic can gainsay that Bowers achieves the purpose announced in the preface. Here he has a distinct advantage over the historian who presents facts with finality but neglects to let the reader know what beliefs he holds. Thus one is forced to read such a historian carefully and warily. But, forewarned by knowledge of Bowers' sentiments and reassured by many direct quotations in the text, one can read him in relaxed comfort.

IX

Bowers' methods are those of a careful scholar and literary artist who taxes himself with exhaustive demands. Starting a new book, he avoids exercise and diversion of

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60 Bowers, Jefferson and Hamilton, 7, 207.
63 Lingley, American Historical Review, XXXV, 382-383.
every sort. First he reads everything available on the subject, completing all notes before ever fashioning a line.64 Research is more than gathering and assessing the significance of facts; he does not cease until able to visualize his subjects. Nor is he content to create a mental picture of them with their materials alone. No, he even wants to know the kind of wine and brand of snuff preferred by their associates.65 He enjoys writing history more than he enjoys any of his numerous other activities. For him, writing is relaxation, but it is hard work, too. He writes each book at least three times—the first draft rapidly, the second for proportion, the third for publication.66

He is a synthetist, not content to add a brick and splotch of mortar, but desirous of erecting a noble literary edifice. In re-creating a period, he must work on a broad canvas, pulling together a composite picture from biographies, autobiographies, diaries, correspondence, newspapers, memoirs, congressional debates, contemporary pamphlets, and magazines. While the original material of the monographic historian is conspicuous by its brevity in the Bowers bibliography, one notices the works consulted emphasize published personal papers. However, original material was used without stint in The Tragic Era and Pierre Vergniaud. Bowers has high respect for newspapers as source material, but he uses them in their best adaptation—for descriptions and as an indication of the rumors, anger, and feeling of the age. For he feels that actual historic truth is no more important than what participants believed was the truth.67

His books are well documented. Sometimes he will show the reader how he critically evaluates sources. In describing Jefferson's person, he notes that the report of a woman without objectionable prejudice is preferable to that of an embittered enemy. Again, in describing public men of the 1830's, he notes that the remarks of Miss Harriet Martineau and Mrs. Margaret Bayard Smith are in harmony.68

64 Bowers to Knight, New York, May 11, 1954.
65 Bowers, The Spanish Adventures of Washington Irving (Boston, 1940), xvi.
66 Bowers to Knight, New York, May 11, 1954.
68 Bowers, Jefferson in Power, 32-33; Bowers, Party Battles, 24n.
Now living in New York City where his life follows the pattern of fifty years—writing, lecturing, and speaking—Bowers refuses to closet himself from the main currents of life. With Polybius, he feels the historian should be a man of action. Further, he thinks a man actively engaged in the affairs of today is better able to understand the affairs of yesterday. He has observed that historians of the cloister, finding a document issued by a public man in explanation of conduct, are apt to consider it as final authority. Actually, he says, the man of affairs, politician, or journalist knows these documents often are camouflage. Bowers wants to see the letters exchanged at the time the document was prepared as well as the memoirs of after years. While his critique has some merit, it does not give proper weight to the historian's internal criticism.

Summing up his work to date: Bowers thinks Party Battles and Jefferson and Hamilton introduced a new method that has been adopted rather widely. Prior to his work, he finds, most books on Jefferson were hostile; since his work, later writers have treated Jefferson with greater respect. Likewise, he thinks The Tragic Era helped change northern opinion of Reconstruction. He disavows an original intent to defend Johnson, but in writing honest history he found—and, to his satisfaction, proved—that Johnson was a great man, a courageous defender of the Constitution. Since The Tragic Era, he believes, historians have treated Johnson more respectfully. However, a contrary opinion must be noted: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., denies that the Johnson of Bowers is essentially different from the Johnson of Dunning, Rhodes, and Oberholtzer. One critic said Bowers is in rebellion “against the sort of historical writing that merely analyzes, merely understands. . . and his own aim is to arrive at an imaginative understanding.” Some few commentators have challenged his interpretations and conclusions, but none his accuracy or choice of sources.

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69 Bowers to Knight, New York, April 23, 1954.
70 Ibid.
71 Schlesinger, New Republic, October 9, 1929.
In evaluating the work of Claude Bowers, one cannot ignore his popular standing. Whereas eighteen of the sixty best histories of 1920-1950 average about seven thousand sales each, Bowers averaged about thirty-two thousand sales with each of the eight books published by Houghton Mifflin between 1922 and 1945—from *Party Battles* through *Young Jefferson*. If the contrast means anything, it means the American public is interested in and wants to read history, provided the historian troubles himself to write for them as well as for his colleagues.

Bowers took that trouble. He found and used the formula for the compound of accurate history and entertaining narrative in fifteen books and at least nine articles—“history as it should be written.”

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74 Mrs. Rogers to Knight, New York, May 11 and 21, 1954.
75 Nicholas Roosevelt in *New York Tribune*, December 3, 1922.