from his *History* and tailoring it to the modern demand for economy of time and money. Bancroft labored over half a century writing and rewriting his *History*; now one can read this slim volume in a single day. Russel B. Nye, a happy choice for editor, opens the book with an interesting but all too brief account of Bancroft's life and writings. Eleven pages can hardly do justice to a life which nearly spanned the nineteenth century, a life crammed with study and writing, politics and diplomacy. The editing approaches the miraculous. Only 26 of the original 242 chapters and fewer than 400 of the original 3,500 pages are included; yet the flavor, scope, and proportion of Bancroft's *History* is scrupulously preserved. The editor is also to be commended for the informative headnotes which precede most of the chapters.

Goethe once said that "the greatest man is always linked to his own century through some weakness." Both the strengths and weaknesses of Bancroft are those of nineteenth-century America. His unshakable belief in God, country, and progress made him write history as a morality play where heroes conquered villains in the name of freedom, union, and the United States. Neither Bancroft nor his age heeded the gentle reminder of Thomas Carlyle that "all things have light and shadow." The past must not question the present; it must justify it. Nor did Bancroft doubt that the noble characters and theme of our history demanded noble treatment. His style was the prose genre of his century, stately phrases, balanced sentences, and rhetorical flourishes. His history is less the story of America from Columbus to the Constitution than a portrait of his age.

Today historians only mention Bancroft to scoff at his faith and ridicule his method. They should remember his claim that he tried not to make a statement without the original source; that he ransacked two continents in search of documents; and that contrary to this age of "kept scholars," he spent over $100,000 of his own money on historical materials. Most of all Bancroft should be read to get a prospective on ourselves. Have surer answers been obtained only by asking smaller questions? Is present-day bias less or only more subtle? Is skepticism as much a product of this age as Bancroft's optimism was of his? Will our writings three quarters of a century from now be read like Bancroft's only for the insight they give into our times?

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Although much has been written about American actors and acting, *A History of American Acting* is the first attempt to present an overview of the subject. Thus, it is a welcome and much needed book. The title is misleading, however, for the book is devoted almost entirely to the period 1820-1920. Approximately five pages serve to cover the years before 1820, while only twenty-six are devoted to acting since the First World War. Of these, a mere six are concerned with the legitimate
stage, the others dealing with motion pictures, television, and radio. The latter discussion, along with earlier sections on vaudeville, minstrel shows, burlesque, and circuses, places acting in a broader context than the legitimate theatre but does not compensate the reader for the cursory treatment of both the earlier and later years.

Wilson has discussed practically all the actors of note between 1820 and 1920, about forty of them in detail. Edwin Forrest, as the first native-born actor to win fame, and Minnie Maddern Fiske, as the actress most instrumental in the transition to the modern theatre, are treated at greatest length; and it is they who form the parentheses between which the others are placed.

Wilson is primarily concerned with styles of acting as they developed and persisted through the nineteenth century. To facilitate his study he has grouped actors into schools: heroic, classic, emotional, personality, the comic stage, and heirs to the heroic and classic schools. These groupings emphasize with considerable clarity the similarities and differences among various actors. On the other hand, the scheme has its weaknesses, as a look at the categories will reveal. The "comic stage" is not parallel with the others; furthermore, the actors included under this heading were as varied in their styles as were the serious actors.

The category "heirs of the heroic and classic schools" gives the impression, one that is obviously intentional, that no actor who made his debut after 1875 reached the eminence of his predecessors. Each, with the exception of Mrs. Fiske, is treated as essentially imitative. This idealization of the period 1825-1875 may be justified (although it would be easy to demonstrate that the great actors of that time were also derivative); but it has seemingly blinded Wilson to the considerable merits of later actors, even to the point of ignoring those who appeared after 1920.

While one kind of clarity is attained by grouping actors into stylistic categories, chronology suffers badly as a result. Given the author's basic concern with style, the organization is probably justified; but a reader without some prior knowledge of American theatre history may well become confused by the rapid shifts in time and the inverted time sequence.

As might be expected in a work of its scope, this history is based primarily upon secondary sources, the author adding little to what was already known. His contributions lie in synthesizing a large body of material and in clarifying the relationships among the major nineteenth century actors. These are no small accomplishments.

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