



---

Revaluing George Bancroft

Author(s): N. H. Dawes and F. T. Nichols

Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Jun., 1933, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Jun., 1933), pp. 278-293

Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/359126>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*The New England Quarterly, Inc.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The New England Quarterly*

JSTOR

## REVALUING GEORGE BANCROFT

N. H. DAWES AND F. T. NICHOLS

ARE-EXAMINATION of nineteenth-century ideals is now enabling a younger generation to perceive that ancestors exemplify something more than mere conservatism and convention. Depression is not all discouragement the moment one remembers how often giants come out of a nation's "hard times." Of the intellectual and spiritual leaders of the United States, George Bancroft was by no means last or least. Yet the length, the moral emphasis, and the discursive nature of his writings have led professors, and even students, of American history to dismiss Bancroft's monumental work as a notorious example of the evil effects of the "filio-pietistic" attitude. But those who turn to his ten volumes on American history and read them with a memory of the age for which they were written, and in the light of our own, can scarcely fail to be impressed with the success of the author as a pioneer in his profession.

George Bancroft was the first American historian who conscientiously endeavored to make no important statement without reference to an original document. Even so, he did not cumber his pages with footnotes; and trained scholars are still surprised to discover how direct and accurate was Bancroft's information in matters he thought of minor importance. That he did not, as a result, produce a dry, over-documented treatise, is a tribute to his literary powers. Bancroft expressed his thoughts beautifully — whether those thoughts were

right or wrong. His vocabulary was rich and varied; his choice of words was accurate and in good taste; his running-narrative style was lively and entertaining; and, above all, his sense of drama never failed him. Seldom, if ever, does he drop down to mere pedestrian prose; his sentences vibrate with poetic effects which are often delicate and at times sonorous. Each period is perfectly rounded and lends itself to emphasis by the rise and fall of the voice when it is read aloud. Indeed, many portions of his history, standing alone, might pass for an historical address by Webster or Macaulay, for Bancroft could launch forth as artfully as an orator. For instance, stirred by thought of the extension of British civilization into India and North America by 1763, Bancroft writes impulsively:

Go forth, then, language of Milton and Hampden, language of my country, take possession of the North American continent! Gladden the waste places with every tone that has been rightly struck on the English lyre, with every English word that has been spoken well for liberty and for man! Give an echo to the now silent and solitary mountains; gush out with the fountains that as yet sing their anthems all day long without response; fill the valleys with voices of love in its purity, the pledges of friendship in its faithfulness; and as the morning sun drinks the dewdrops from the flowers all the way from the dreary Atlantic to the Peaceful Ocean, meet him with the joyous hum of the early industry of freemen! Utter boldly and spread widely through the world the thoughts of the coming apostles of the people's liberty, till the sound that cheers the desert shall thrill through the heart of humanity, and the lips of the messenger of the people's power, as he stands in beauty upon the mountains, shall proclaim the renovating tidings of equal freedom for the race!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Bancroft, *The History of the United States* (Boston, 1856), IV, 456-457. The selection is, of course, in the very best style of the kind of speech people will no longer sit through.

Bancroft's writing is neither pompous nor heavy after the fashion of John Taylor or John Adams, for there is a certain deftness of expression which lightens and enlivens its composition. The author exercises powers of narration which enable the reader to watch the drama of man's experience proceed like a splendid and inspiring pageant. Bancroft dramatizes his work to an unusual extent. In descriptions of great episodes he always slips into the present tense. Although opinions differ as to the value of the "historical present," it was once thought to aid in a sense of actuality. He did not hesitate, even, to draw on his imagination to supply details missing from a picture, for he possessed in abundance the creative artistry and intellectual courage wanting to many modern historians. One of the most distinctive features of his style is the use of the short, balanced sentence to conclude a passage.

The discoverer of Florida had desired immortality on earth and gained its shadow.<sup>2</sup>

De Soto had crossed a large part of the continent in search of gold, and found nothing so remarkable as his burial place.<sup>3</sup>

[Of Henry Hudson]: Alone of the great mariners of that day, he lies buried in America; the gloomy waste of waters which bears his name is his tomb and his monument.<sup>4</sup>

Often a simple, unadorned phrase or sentence assumes epic quality simply because of its terminal position and dramatic significance. Witness his description of the result of the capitulation at Fort Necessity.

In the whole valley of the Mississippi to its head-springs in the Alleghanies, no standard floated but that of France.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bancroft, *History*, I, 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 271.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 57.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 121.

Bancroft, of course, was writing for a public which expected to find poetry and drama, not statistics and "trends," in history. Because the audience wished to see the hand of God, or at least an expression of Manifest Destiny in its records of the past, it was essential for Bancroft, were he to appeal to his readers, to orate with swelling bosom and to whisper softly lines of poetry in his prose. Yet, despite this limitation, he did far more than conform to the tastes and sentiments of his day; he demonstrated the fact that great historical writing must attain to artistry of expression as well as to loftiness of thought.

But it was this very loftiness of thought which made Bancroft liable to the charge of being a "filio-pietistic" monomaniac. Modern historians dismiss his work cursorily because "every volume voted for Andrew Jackson." Yet Bancroft's philosophy transcends patriotism and political allegiance and reaches for the realm of the moral and religious. In every event he perceived the spirit of God moving on the waters. Providence was responsible for every development. It was God who urged Columbus to fare into the unknown waters of the West, and it was He who employed despotic, decadent Spain to help the colonists win their rightful freedom from the harsh and oppressive mother country. Bancroft never missed an opportunity to admire the work which went to the making of America. He wrote with reverence of the long line of American patriots whose first representative was Nathaniel Bacon and whose most perfect prototype was George Washington. The American Revolution, heralded, doubtless, by the singing of the stars, was to Bancroft one of the

most sublime occurrences in history, and its logical fruition the complete triumph of democracy. It is easy to be critical and even supercilious concerning Bancroft's philosophy of history. Yet it would be unjust to leave this subject without some further consideration. History meant more to Bancroft than a mere objective recital of past events; it was an opportunity not only to instruct his readers, but improve them. His pages are all the better for the brooding sense of the tragedy of human experience found in all great works of literature. In going below the surface of events to discern their meaning Bancroft could not escape the perils of constructing a philosophy of history. He worked before the time when it became fashionable to conceal whatever convictions might exist.

His research in the original sources was long and assiduous—a labor all the more creditable if we consider that in his day monographic materials were sadly lacking, and the archives of America and Europe had not been even calendared, much less explored. Despite these handicaps, Bancroft collected and digested endless documents and spent long hours in the Public Record Office, where he could only scratch the surface of the overwhelming mass of material. His "spade-work" among the records of the southern colonies, particularly North Carolina, indebted to him numerous later researchers, who have not always been appreciative of their pioneer. That Bancroft even took the trouble to consult European archives is another indication of his attempt to write history with exactness and breadth. Scholars of to-day with their "calendars," their state and national "records," and their "reprints"—to say

nothing of their "monographs" and "specialists," might well meditate on the difficulty of Bancroft's task. To criticize him for mistaken conclusions and erroneous inferences, in the face of his handicaps, reveals a lack of knowledge which approaches wilful ignorance. We should as reasonably criticize Nebraska for not building her state capitol in 1870.

Bancroft's emphasis and sense of proportion reflect not only himself, but also the age in which he lived. It was not the day of specialization, nor of universal public-school education; accordingly, Bancroft indulged in prolonged digressions upon subjects with which his readers were unfamiliar. He had the time to investigate and his readers the desire to know of such subjects as the origin of slavery in antiquity and European politics from the Renaissance to the mid-eighteenth century. It has been charged that Bancroft included chapters on European conditions in order to "show off" the knowledge which he had acquired at the University of Göttingen. Modern scholars are more sophisticated at this game than was Bancroft, for by documentation, foot-notes, and sly appendices they imply what Bancroft naïvely proclaimed in the actual text of his *History*. He, at least, did not employ his foreign study as an historical aphrodisiac; his work did not reflect that degree of virtuosity which is always marked by a decay of the spontaneous creative faculty. But whether the accusation against Bancroft be true or false (and it admits of no proof or disproof), his inclusion of long surveys of European affairs had the merit of placing America in the main current of world events. And there America belongs.

Few will deny that Bancroft's emphasis was too purely political, but he wrote at a time when history was looked upon primarily as "past politics." There is much economic and social data in his work, as evidenced by his attempt to chronicle population figures, industrial occupations, the conditions of transportation, and the status of culture. By no stretch of the imagination can he be considered as a social historian; yet his effort to paint a picture of the life of the people approaches in quality the work of his great contemporary, Macaulay, in the famous third chapter. If Bancroft over-stressed the political point of view, it is no less true that he was influenced by his New England environment and heredity. The chapters which treat of New England seem to have a certain warmth and glow which are absent from his more purely objective accounts of other sections. Apparently Bancroft sensed this bias of his mind and made a scrupulous effort to do justice to the Penns, the Cavaliers, and the Westerners. The New England colonies are given no more space than their due, and, despite his deep admiration for the Puritan fathers, Bancroft seemingly went out of his way to berate Cotton Mather for his alleged narrow-mindedness and intolerance.

It is possible that Bancroft's obvious effort to steer a middle course between excessive adulation and unthinking condemnation of New England characters and events was influenced by the fact that by holding local and national offices under Jackson and Van Buren, Bancroft cut himself off from the dominant elements of his society. Both that society and the historian looked upon each other as having strayed from the true path to

salvation, and Bancroft might have felt a thrill of self-justification in acting like a fair-minded judge on the forebears of the New England Whigs. He was deeply conscious of the importance of the West, and in a crude way foreshadowed some of the major theses of the Turner school when he wrote: "The boundless West became the poor man's City of Refuge, where the wilderness guarded his cabin as inviolably as the cliff or the cedar-top holds the eagle's eyrie."<sup>6</sup> He dwells lovingly upon the exploits of the pioneers of the Mississippi Valley and follows with affectionate pen the fate of the tiny settlements which were the foundations of future commonwealths. Admit that Bancroft was influenced by the slavery controversy; that he may have been pompous and even vain on the subject of his European education; that his point of view was too exclusively political; and that he could not escape a too-favorable attitude toward things New England. Who among the historians of modern America could write a history without reference to the "depression"? Who that has wandered through the pleasant places of European universities can fail to feel and reflect their influences? Can the "new historians" logically complain of the "self-confidence" of George Bancroft? Their faults are not his — but are they any the less serious?

Many of Bancroft's conclusions concerning the controverted points of colonial history have been revised. Yet this is not an indication of failure on Bancroft's part, for all the facts were not at his command — nor are they at ours. His interpretation of Indian life is a striking example of his inability to arrive at perdurable

<sup>6</sup> Bancroft, *History*, VI, 33-34.

conclusions merely for want of adequate knowledge. He had no perception of the importance of the "balance of power" among the Indian tribes, and in accusing the Narragansetts of deserting their English allies in the enterprise of crushing the Pequots in 1637, he was unjust. Bancroft was convinced that there was such a phenomenon as the "noble red-man," whose life was devoted to the hunt and the war-path, while his drudge-like squaw did all the work and lived without importance. Had Bancroft arrived at such conclusions with the information which modern archæologists and ethnologists have made available, he could have been condemned, justly and harshly. His justification, or, at least, excuse, lies in the absence of such information as students like Livingston Farrand have unearthed in recent years.

Again, Bancroft conjectured that Cabot's landfall was somewhere in Labrador, for he wrote without the knowledge which Harrisse, Prowse, and Dawson have brought to the attention of modern students. Bancroft had no suspicion that Captain John Smith was, at the least, over-imaginative in his account of the Pocahontas episode; for it was not until the time of Charles Deane that this legend was questioned. Without a *Calendar of State Papers* and the monographs of W. J. Craven and A. P. Newton, he naturally concluded that the dissolution of the Virginia Company was due to the villainy of James I, who was determined to exalt the prerogative and to destroy seditious parliaments. Bancroft likewise read too much into the Maryland toleration act of 1649; the Calvert Papers and the Maryland Records have enabled later historians to perceive both

policy and expediency in what was, nevertheless, a great step forward toward religious liberty.

On the other hand, there are some erroneous theses which flow, not from want of available information, but from the author's prejudices and prior assumptions. His faith in democracy blinded him to the deeper currents of colonial society, which appeared to him pre-eminently equalitarian and democratic. Thus he failed to perceive that aristocracy was the key-note in politics, religion, education, business, and society. In his admiration for the more acceptable qualities of the Puritans he characterized the foundation of New Haven as a fulfillment of the spirit of humanity, when all the evidence, even in the author's time, proved that Davenport and Eaton were believers in a theocracy more narrow and intolerant than that of Massachusetts Bay. As a staunch anti-slavery advocate Bancroft missed no opportunity to strike a blow against African servitude. He categorically denied the existence of slavery among the Indians and, without the slightest factual justification, ascribed the African slave trade not only to the rapacity of English merchants but also to a desire on the part of English officials "to weaken the power of colonial resistance" by balancing blacks against whites<sup>7</sup>—a clear example of what the psychologists call "transference." Bancroft lustily applauded the efforts of the Southerners to restrict the slave-trade, without recognizing how greatly the desired prohibition was inspired by self-interest, particularly in Virginia. Thus, many of his inferences and conclusions as to slavery were drawn out of thin air and prove only his own partialities.

<sup>7</sup> Bancroft, *History*, IV, 135.

In the same manner his love of Teutonic culture, especially that of Prussia, caused him unwittingly to fabricate the myth that Frederick the Great was a staunch supporter of the colonies in their rebellion against England. Assuming that Frederick was the true, unselfish friend of the American patriots, Bancroft greatly magnified the importance of Frederick's picayune support of the colonies and minimized to the vanishing-point his selfish motives for hostility to England. The author's opinions concerning the American Revolution, as a whole, caused him to commit almost unforgivable errors in his contentions that the navigation acts were tyrannical in intent, and pernicious in effect; that unquestionably the dominion of Parliament did not extend over the colonies; and that the Revolution itself was acclaimed by a people at one with itself in its desire to attain complete independence. Had Bancroft consulted certain writings of James Otis, Daniel Leonard, and John Dickinson, his point of view must necessarily have undergone a great change. His passion for equality, his deep-seated admiration for the Puritan fathers, his abiding hostility to slavery, and his whole-hearted, unconditional approval of the American Revolution led him into error; yet his mistakes are ever those of a truly patriotic Machiavelli, and not those of an over-scrupulous Guicciardini.

In several capacities and on many points Bancroft wrote history which has endured the test of time. He was never so prepossessed with the magnificence of his central theme that he did not take cognizance of the more obscure factors which inevitably conditioned it. There is ample evidence that he appreciated the im-

portance of the modifying effect of geographic conditions upon men and their institutions. Bancroft did not romance concerning the early explorers nor did he glory in the exploits of the intrepid Elizabethan "sea-dogs." He saw more than "sea-spray and powder-smoke" in their deeds, for he frankly acknowledged that the exigencies of storm, and reef, of cold, hunger, and thirst were far more terrible to the early mariners than were visions of horrid monsters breathing death and destruction. To Bancroft, Drake was not the embodiment of the knight-errant but rather one whose exploits injured commerce and debauched the minds of the sailors with a passion for sudden acquisitions.<sup>8</sup> In speaking of Las Casas, that pseudo-visionary who has been called the "William Lloyd Garrison of the sixteenth century" by historians of lesser calibre than Bancroft, he stated in no uncertain terms that the saintly bishop's proposal to substitute African for American slavery was not a solution but an aggravation of the evil.<sup>9</sup> The author's conception of the character and purposes of the Puritans was essentially sound, for he neither condemned them totally for their apparent harshness and intolerance, nor indulged in a blind worship of their more admirable qualities. There was enough of the Puritan in him to appreciate how completely Quaker nudists could baffle Puritan moralists and drive them, in sheer desperation, to the use of the whip and the cord. Bancroft's conjecture about the Hennepin enigma was surprisingly correct. Somewhat baldly he asserted that Father Hennepin was in the pay of William III — a view which Verner W. Crane in his admirable study,

<sup>8</sup> Bancroft, *History*, 1, 87.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 171.

*The Southern Frontier*, has not found occasion substantially to alter. Credit belongs to Bancroft for having ventured a shrewd conjecture which shows that he possessed the capacity for critical guess-work.

One constantly encounters statements in Bancroft which appear so excellent in their lucidity and so genuinely modern in their tenor that it is almost unbelievable that they were written almost a century ago. His analysis of the Revolution of 1688, which he terms the "aristocratic revolution," has not been essentially improved upon by later historians: "Its purpose was the security of property and existing franchises, and not the abolition of privilege, or the equalization of power."<sup>10</sup> Bancroft's description of the colonial credit system is clear, concise, and free from technical jargon<sup>11</sup>—an account which would have delighted Republicans and horrified Democrats in 1896—because of its frank criticism of inflation.

Naturally Bancroft's account of the French and Indian Wars, as a whole, lacked the wealth of detail, the first-hand touch later to be imparted to this subject by the matchless Parkman. But Bancroft's delineations of battles and criticisms of leaders are, for the most part, sound. Loudon, Grant, and Abercrombie are roundly scolded by the dapper little "Prussian drill-sergeant" who was impatient at the interminable delays and the lack of orderly military tactics. He supplied his readers with excellent steel engravings which depict the most important military operations of the wars. Despite the minor inaccuracies in some of these maps, they enable the student to visualize the stirring events which

<sup>10</sup> Bancroft, *History*, III, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 389.

the author's pen so ably chronicles. Although Bancroft was totally unsympathetic toward Braddock's character (an ephemeral subject if ever there was one!) and although he was ignorant of the true nature of the opening phase of the engagement of July 9, 1755, at least he did not indulge in the ridiculous hyperbole of Carlyle's asinine belief that Braddock blundered headlong into an ambush. Bancroft, moreover, discerned that "The combat was obstinate, and continued for two hours with scarcely any change in the disposition of either side. Had the regulars shown courage the issue would not have been doubtful."<sup>12</sup> There is no maligning of the unfortunate Braddock; the cowardly Dunbar is justly rebuked; and in spite of the over-emphasis on the rôle of the youthful Washington, the description of the battle is excellent, especially when it is remembered that Winthrop Sargent and Francis Parkman had not yet published their contributions to our knowledge.

With justice one can criticize adversely much of Bancroft's work. That the first four volumes should extend over a period of two hundred and seventy-one years, while the last six are devoted to but nineteen years, is evidence that the author lacked a proper sense of proportion. There is not a steady progression of events in that the subject matter frequently does not conform to strict chronology. His chapter on Indian life, for instance, appears in the third of his volumes rather than the first. Sometimes his passion for generalization, over-simplification, and moralizing is irritating to the extreme and tempts the reader to throw down his work in disgust. In his later volumes Bancroft employed

<sup>12</sup> Bancroft, *History*, IV, 189.

direct quotation much too frequently and is often to be suspected of having chosen unrepresentative samples for the express purpose of proving his point.

George Bancroft's *History* lacked the pagan splendor of Prescott, the blood and iron, and fire of Motley, and the exquisite beauty of expression which was peculiar to Parkman; but Bancroft was the historian of America as no other man ever was, or probably will be. His life forms a remarkable parallel with that of Macaulay. In their common devotion to the muse of history and in their active adherence to what has been considered as the more liberal of the two parties in England and America, these two scholars (who were also men of the world) are strikingly similar. Like his great contemporary, Bancroft did not bring his history down to a time within the memory of living man, yet his volumes not only constituted the task of a life-time, but showed excellent scholarship, comprising, as well, a statement of faith. Their author lived long enough to witness a reaction against monopolies, land-stealing, corruption, and grinding oppression by the predatory interests. As vague and unsatisfactory as it was, the Sherman anti-trust law, passed one year before Bancroft's death, was a harbinger that the historian's youthful confidence in his country was to be re-asserted in the new search for social justice.

We can only wonder what were the thoughts of this spruce old man of eighty as he rode his young, blooded, Kentucky horse along the Virginia bank of the Potomac for more than thirty-six miles in a single day, or strolled among the perfect roses of his garden at Newport. Yet Americans should be thankful that their country raised

up at least one historian of polymathic mind whose vision extended over continents and centuries. Dollar-conscious and despairing, they might well find solace and comfort in the words with which Bancroft prefaced his last volume:

It is good to look away from the strifes of the present hour, to the great days when our country had for its statesmen Washington and John Adams, Jefferson and Hamilton, Franklin and Jay, and their compeers. The study of those times will teach lessons of moderation, and of unselfish patriotism.