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# *James A. Garfield, Historian*

By  
ALLAN PESKIN\*

As he lay dying, President James Abram Garfield turned to a friend and plaintively asked, "Old Boy! do you think my name will have a place in human history?"<sup>1</sup> The question was characteristic of the man. Few political figures in our nation's past have been as concerned with the study of history as Garfield, and not until Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson would any president display comparable interest in the subject. Wilson, however, was an academic historian with a Ph.D. in History and Government, while Roosevelt had studied at Harvard, then the stronghold of American historians. Garfield was virtually self-taught, but his historical interests were surprisingly broad and he anticipated many of the directions that would be taken later by professional historians.

History was not an important part of the curriculum in either college that Garfield attended in the 1850s. The Western Reserve Eclectic Institute at Hiram, Ohio, did not even offer the subject, and at Williams College in western Massachusetts, the meager history program was clearly an afterthought. This neglect is hardly surprising. Early-nineteenth-century colleges were designed primarily to train ministers of the gospel and their course of study was essentially classical and theological in nature. Such history as the students did read was merely incidental to other purposes: sacred history for its edifying value, and ancient history, in the texts of Caesar, Sallust, and Xenophon, for grammar rather than substance, much as Ovid's handbook of seduction, *The Art of Love*, was presented to medieval nuns to teach them how to conjugate Latin verbs.

Modern history, including American, was not taught at all. If students wanted to read history, novels, or other such vain fripperies, they were expected to do so on their own time, but they could no more expect college credit for such diversions than modern-day students can expect it for watching television.<sup>2</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, history, along with modern languages, science, and literature, was beginning to appear at a few of the more enterprising colleges, but

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<sup>1</sup>D.W. Bliss, "The Story of President Garfield's Illness," *Century Magazine* 25 (1881): 304.

<sup>2</sup>Since writing this, I have been informed that in some of our more advanced colleges credit can, in fact, be obtained for diligent television viewing.

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not at a provincial backwater such as the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute or at a bastion of Old Light Calvinist orthodoxy such as Williams.<sup>3</sup>

Young Garfield keenly felt the lack. Since childhood he had turned to history for relaxation and intellectual stimulation. That childhood had been a deprived one, spent on the Western Reserve of Ohio in rural poverty and isolation. Yet not even the Ohio frontier was completely isolated from books and ideas. Books may have been rare but they were, for that reason, greatly prized. Garfield especially treasured stories of adventure and patriotic accounts of the American Revolution which he committed to memory.<sup>4</sup>

When he grew up, Garfield set aside his boyhood dream of running off to sea when he found an even better way of escaping the drudgery of the farm. A high-minded, somewhat priggish young man, gifted with immense vitality and a phenomenal memory, he and his circle of schoolmates sought in education “the path by which young men and young ladies can rise above the grovelling herd.”<sup>5</sup> Heading his list of New Year’s resolutions for 1854 was the vow, “I must read more history.” Further down on the list, however, and ranked “most important of all,” was a vow “to constantly read God’s divine word.”<sup>6</sup> Garfield had found religion.

Propelled by his newly-won grace, Garfield seemed destined for the ministry. This was precisely the sort of student for whom the nineteenth-century college, and Williams College in particular, had been designed. Even so, Garfield felt the need for more solid fare than the uninspiring curriculum offered. It was in the extracurricular activities—the fraternities, debating teams, and literary societies—that he found the intellectual nourishment he craved.<sup>7</sup> He took part in them all, including the campus magazine, the *Williams Quarterly*. Significantly, he chose “The Province of History” as the subject of one of his contributions to that journal.

In this essay (or more properly, printed oration), Garfield attempted to reconcile his religious commitment with his fascination for a mere secular subject. “Theologians of all ages,” he declared, “have looked out admiringly upon the material universe, and from its inanimate existence, demonstrated the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God; but we know of no one who has demonstrated the same attributes

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York, 1962), 222.

<sup>4</sup>Jonas Mills Bundy, *The Life of James Abram Garfield* (New York, 1880), 13–14.

<sup>5</sup>Garfield to Mary Hubbell, 29 May 1852, James Abram Garfield Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Garfield Papers).

<sup>6</sup>Diary, 1 January 1854, Garfield Papers.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick Rudolph, *Mark Hopkins and the Log: Williams College, 1836–1872* (New Haven, 1956), 73–74.

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from the history of the human race.”<sup>8</sup> In effect, Garfield was turning George Bancroft on his head. Bancroft, the premier American historian of that day, tried to explain the course of American development as the unfolding of God’s providential plan; young Garfield was using history to demonstrate God’s providence.

It was an ambitious goal, and the college boy clearly lacked the knowledge and the tools to accomplish it. He offered no concrete examples or illustrations to demonstrate his thesis. Instead, he relied upon elegant rhetorical figures and insistent exhortation. To him “history” was an abstraction rather than a discipline. Yet it was an abstraction for which he had an instinctive, though as yet untutored, understanding. History, he insisted, “is not a multitude of isolated facts; it is a severe logic” which must be studied in relation to some broad scheme of overarching significance. The only such scheme he then acknowledged was found in God’s revelation, and he consequently rejected the then-popular idea of progress. Such an optimistic, secular explanation of human development was inadequate, he argued, because it failed to take into account mankind’s innately sinful nature.<sup>9</sup>

As he matured, Garfield’s religious fervor grew less intense. Although he did become an ordained minister upon graduation, he combined the pulpit with a teaching career, becoming president of the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute. His interest in history, however, remained undimmed and it is significant that among the innovations he introduced in order to make his little college more attractive to a wider constituency was a course in American history, taught by himself.<sup>10</sup> Later, he would suggest that such a course should be a requirement for a college degree, and he even considered introducing a bill in Congress to make American history a compulsory study.<sup>11</sup>

Within a half-dozen years after graduating from college, Garfield would be making history rather than teaching it. The Civil War swept him out of the academy and into public life. As a general in the Union Army, he participated in Western campaigns, culminating with the Battle of Chickamauga. Using his military reputation as political capital, he successfully ran for Congress, where he rose to a position of leadership in the Republican party. His seventeen-year tenure in the House of Representatives was ended only by his elevation to the presi-

<sup>8</sup>James A. Garfield, “The Province of History,” *Williams Quarterly* 3 (June 1856): 359.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*: 358–63.

<sup>10</sup>Diary, 20 January *et seq.* 1858; Garfield Papers.

<sup>11</sup>James Abram Garfield, *The Works of James Abram Garfield*, ed. Burke Aaron Hinsdale, 2 vols. (Boston, 1883), 1: 271–73; *Congressional Globe*, 39th Congress, 1st session, 2350.

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dency in 1881. Yet not even the press of public business could divert him from his preoccupation with history. Whenever he began any new activity, he invariably prepared himself by studying the past. When he entered the army, he read the works of Frederick the Great, which he found so fascinating that he translated and edited a selection of them with an eye to publication.<sup>12</sup>

He adopted the same procedure in his congressional career. Assigned to the Ways and Means Committee, which dealt with taxation and financial matters, he laid out for himself a comprehensive course of study, beginning with the history of English finance during the Napoleonic era and continuing through the American Revolution and the Jacksonian period. His copious notes amounted virtually to a financial history of the first half of the nineteenth century. Only when this spadework had been accomplished did he feel qualified to enter into the debates himself.<sup>13</sup> Appointed chairman of the Census Committee, he immediately busied himself with a study of censuses throughout the ages. The result was a paper considered worthy of being presented before the American Social Science Association, a forerunner of the American Historical Association. The assembled savants, who evidently had not expected a politician to be anything but superficial, were reported to be surprised and delighted at the extent of Garfield's scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

They need not have been surprised. Garfield was a genuine intellectual, a man who felt more at home with ideas than with the rough-and-tumble of politics. "Not a week passes," he confessed, "in which I do not long to be out of the dust and smoke of political life and engaged again in study and teaching."<sup>15</sup> No matter how busy his public life kept him, he always tried to devote some of his energy to an intellectual project so as to keep his mind refreshed and diverted.<sup>16</sup> These projects were invariably high-minded and serious. Garfield's idea of relaxation was to translate Goethe into English or to conduct a lengthy correspondence with his friend Burke Hinsdale on the doctrine of Neoplatonism in the Byzantine Empire. During the years 1872 to 1877, when he was involved in arduous congressional and political duties as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and as leading Republican spokesman, his diary mentions 188 books, or an

<sup>12</sup>Garfield to J.H. Rhodes, 24 December 1862; to B.A. Hinsdale, 6 January 1863; to his wife, 6 and 9 January 1863, all in the Garfield Papers.

<sup>13</sup>"Notes for a Biographer," Garfield Papers.

<sup>14</sup>*New York Times*, 8 December 1869. The speech can be found in Garfield, *Works*, 1: 452-76.

<sup>15</sup>Garfield to Andrew White, 6 August 1868, Garfield Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Garfield to C.L. Wayland, 27 October 1879, unidentified scrapbook clipping, Garfield Papers.

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average of a book every two weeks. Much of this reading was weighty stuff and a large portion of it was history.<sup>17</sup>

Such taste in reading matter was not uncommon for that time. The middle years of the nineteenth century were perhaps the high tide of historical writing, at least insofar as its popularity with the reading public was concerned. The historian for a time enjoyed the heady status of culture hero. This was the age of the gentleman-historian: George Bancroft and John L. Motley could easily parlay their literary reputations into political and diplomatic careers, while, conversely, James Ford Rhodes could move, with equal ease, from a business career to the writing of history without being considered odd. History was, by and large, a branch of literature rather than of scholarship. These gifted amateurs chose vast subjects for their canvases—the conquest of Mexico, the rise of the Dutch Republic, the struggle of France and England for empire—and they painted dramatic portraits with vivid colors and broad brushstrokes. Their goals were to instruct and to entertain and they succeeded, but at the risk of superficiality and of turning the past into a pageant or a morality play. For them, as Richard Hofstadter has pointed out, “the purpose of historical writing was to establish an imaginative relation with the past, not to analyze but to re-create it. . . . A social texture was present, but it served mainly as a kind of background or setting for the decisive confrontations.”<sup>18</sup>

For Garfield who, as a friend perceptively observed, had the sort of mind which “was never satisfied until he could reduce facts to order,”<sup>19</sup> this sort of history was not fully satisfying. Neither antiquarianism nor narrative, no matter how grand the scale, struck him as sufficient. Instead, he looked for large patterns of historical development. This quest led him down paths of historical inquiry which would not be fully explored for generations to come and which the historians of his own day scarcely recognized. In particular, Garfield anticipated both a new method—quantification—and a new field—social history.

Garfield’s fascination with quantifiable data was surprising, considering that his formal education had all but neglected mathematics. Yet his passion for statistics was so intense that he was accused of having “gone mad” on the subject. It was charged that “he would have the Congress and the officers of all Departments of the Government constantly running up and down the country gathering statistics.”<sup>20</sup> There

<sup>17</sup>See index entry “Books” in volumes 2 and 3 of *The Diary of James Abram Garfield*, ed. Harry James Brown and Frederick D. Williams, 3 vols. to date (East Lansing, Mich., 1967–).

<sup>18</sup>Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968), 13.

<sup>19</sup>Burke Aaron Hinsdale, *President Garfield and Education* (Boston, 1882), 85.

<sup>20</sup>J.F. Farnsworth, in *Cong. Globe*, 41st Cong., 2nd sess., 1491.

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was some truth to this. Garfield did propose the establishment of a “Bureau of Statistics” in the Treasury Department, and when he was chairman of the House Committee on the Census he overloaded the schedule with questions designed to uncover all sorts of miscellaneous statistical data.<sup>21</sup> Some thought these questions trivial but Garfield defended their utility. “This is the age of statistics. . . .” he insisted. “When we propose to legislate for great masses of people, we must first study the great facts relating to the people—their number, strength, length of life, intelligence, morality, occupations, industry and wealth.”<sup>22</sup>

These “great facts” had a further application: “The developments of statistics are causing history to be rewritten,” Garfield declared.

Till recently, the historian studied nations in the aggregate, and gave us only the story of princes, dynasties, sieges and battles. Of the people themselves—the great social body, with life, growth, forces, elements, and laws of its own—he told us nothing. Now, statistical inquiry leads him into the hovels, homes, workshops, mines, fields, prisons, hospitals, and all other places where human nature displays its weaknesses and its strength. In these explorations he discovers the seeds of national growth and decay, and thus becomes the prophet of his generation.<sup>23</sup>

In this remarkable statement, Garfield was being a bit of a prophet himself. Historians of the 1870s were not, in fact, writing the sort of history which Garfield here advocated nor would they for many years to come. He was describing history not as it was written then but the way he would like it to be.

In yet another respect Garfield divined in advance some of the questions which would later engage the attention of professional historians. In Garfield’s day American historians had their eyes firmly fixed on the East. Garfield was born and bred in the West and his vision encompassed his native region. In 1873 he delivered a long and learned speech on the settlement of the Northwest Territory to the members of the newly founded Geauga County Historical Society. He concluded with a plea for the collection and preservation of the raw materials for a history of the region—family records, journals, correspondence, church records, land warrants, and pioneer artifacts.<sup>24</sup> Not until 1885 would the infant American Historical Association formally resolve to encourage the cultivation of Western history by much the same methods that Garfield had advocated twelve years earlier.

In the 1890s another devotee of Western history, Frederick Jackson Turner, would conclude that this approach was inadequate and

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., 3693–96. For Garfield’s work on the census, see Allan Peskin, *Garfield* (Kent, Ohio, 1978), 306–8.

<sup>22</sup>Garfield, *Works*, 1: 445.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*: 454–55.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 2: 70–92.

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would deplore the resolution of the AHA as “mere antiquarianism.”<sup>25</sup> Instead, he would devote his attention to an investigation of the origins and development of American social and political institutions. Rejecting the theories which traced those institutions eastward across the Atlantic, Turner would conclude that they were the spontaneous, indigenous creation of the American wilderness. Yet, even here, Garfield had preceded him. “Whence came the immortal truths of the Declaration?” he asked in 1876.

To me this was for years the riddle of our history. I had searched long and patiently through the books of the *doctrinaires* to find the germs from which the Declaration of Independence sprang. I found hints in Locke, in Hobbes, in Rousseau, and in Fenelon; but they were only the hints of dreamers and philosophers. The great doctrines of the Declaration germinated in the hearts of our fathers, and were developed under the new influence of this wilderness world, by the same subtle mystery which brings forth the rose from the germ of the rose-tree. Unconsciously to themselves the great truths were growing under the new conditions until, like the century-plant, they blossomed into the matchless beauty of the Declaration of Independence. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Such theoretical speculations were intriguing, but to Garfield history was also an intensely practical subject. He had long since abandoned his adolescent urge to reconcile God’s ways to man through history. Now he was an empiricist. History and society, he insisted, were organic unities “whose elements and forces conform to laws as constant and pervasive as those which govern the material universe; and . . . the study of these laws will enable man to ameliorate his condition.”<sup>27</sup> Steeped in the study of the past, Garfield could bring his historical perspective to bear on the problems of his own times.

The tension between the North and the South, for example, could best be understood, so Garfield argued, by comparing the history of the two regions. As he saw it, the historical development of the South had been defective, causing that region to stagnate, because of slavery, at the feudal level while the rest of the nation moved on to a more complex “modern” form of social organization. The racial problem, consequently, was only one manifestation of a deep-rooted cultural antagonism and could not be resolved until the entire South was transformed from a feudal to a capitalistic society.<sup>28</sup> The Southern policy which he would advocate in Congress and attempt to pursue during his brief presidency, followed logically from this historical analysis, demonstrating that to Garfield history was not an academic diver-

<sup>25</sup>Harvey Wish, *The American Historian: A Social-Intellectual History of the Writing of the American Past* (New York, 1960), 184.

<sup>26</sup>Garfield, *Works*, 2:359.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:453.

<sup>28</sup>Garfield to B.A. Hinsdale, 30 December 1880, Garfield Papers.



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sion but a highly practical tool to be used in the formulation of state policy.<sup>29</sup>

His historical bent gave Garfield a vision larger than that of most of his contemporaries. While the minds of most nineteenth-century Americans were focused on the winning of the West, Garfield discerned that urbanization was the most important long-range social trend of his day.<sup>30</sup> While others were still refighting the sectional battles of the previous generation, Garfield realized that the United States had entered a new phase of its development, which he thought should be called “the business era.”<sup>31</sup> As early as 1868 he had used the term “industrial revolution” to characterize the key economic transformation of modern times<sup>32</sup>—sixteen years before the phrase was in general use.<sup>33</sup>

Anticipating yet another phrase which would later be popular, Garfield compared the great corporations which grew out of that industrialization to the “robber barons” of medieval times:

... the analogy between the industrial condition of society at the present time and the feudalism of the Middle Ages is both striking and instructive. . . . The modern barons, more powerful than their military prototypes, own our greatest highway [the railroad], and levy tribute at will upon all our vast industries. And, as the old feudalism was finally controlled and subordinated only by the combined efforts of the kings and the people of the free cities and towns, so our modern [industrial] feudalism can be subordinated to the public good only by the great body of the people acting through their governments by wise and just laws.<sup>34</sup>

While others were just beginning to regard with apprehension the first stirrings of organized labor, Garfield looked beyond the current strife to labor’s ultimate victory. How, he wondered, would the working classes be able to cope with their soon-to-be-won leisure? Would it not lead to social decay as in ancient Rome? Garfield’s favorite historian, Lord Macaulay, was not encouraging on this question, but

<sup>29</sup>See Allan Peskin, “President Garfield and the Southern Question,” *Southern Quarterly* 16 (July 1978): 375–86.

<sup>30</sup>*Cong. Globe*, 41st Cong., 2nd sess., 9 December 1869, 52.

<sup>31</sup>Speech at Painesville, Ohio, 13 August 1874, unmarked scrapbook clipping, Garfield Papers.

<sup>32</sup>Garfield, *Works*, 1:314.

<sup>33</sup>Although the phrase “industrial revolution” is generally attributed to Arnold Toynbee and the posthumous publication in 1884 of his *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England*, its use was actually quite widespread long before that date. Paul Mantoux, in a footnote on page 25 of *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, [1927]), cites as examples of its earlier appearance passages in Karl Marx (1867), Friedrich Engels (1856), and John Stuart Mill (1848). Garfield was familiar with the writings of Mill.

<sup>34</sup>Garfield, *Works*, 2:66.

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Garfield was a student of history, not its slave, and he argued that in America social mobility and universal education would save American society from repeating the mistakes of the past.<sup>35</sup>

Fortified by his study of history, Garfield came to the presidency well equipped to understand the problems of the nation he had been chosen to lead. John Hay, Abraham Lincoln's private secretary and himself a historian of distinction, thought that Garfield had entered the presidential office with better training and stronger mental endowments than any president since John Quincy Adams.<sup>36</sup> That this promise was never fulfilled was due in part to Garfield's limited conception of presidential power,<sup>37</sup> in part to his involvement in time-consuming patronage squabbles and, of course, to his tragically brief tenure of office.

What Garfield planned to do while president remains largely an enigma. Oddly enough, he seems to have given more thought to what he might do with his life after his presidential term would be over. He was not yet fifty when elected and the height of his ambition had already been reached. What then? "I shall leave the presidency," he reflected, "still a young man, with no future before me, to become a political reminiscence—a squeezed lemon to be thrown away."<sup>38</sup> In a similar situation, Franklin Pierce had once complained that God Almighty had permitted no torture so cruel as the life of an ex-president: "there is nothing left for him," Pierce concluded, "but to get drunk."<sup>39</sup>

Prohibited by temperament and conviction from pursuing that consolation, Garfield proposed to devote his retirement years to the life of the mind. A friend once told him, "you missed becoming a great historian by devoting your life to the good of your country in other directions."<sup>40</sup> Few compliments could have pleased Garfield more, for he had secretly harbored that ambition for many years. "I have often thought I would love to do some historical work," he had said after being inspired by reading Francis Parkman.<sup>41</sup>

Garfield had some specific projects in mind. One would have anticipated by almost half a century some of the questions raised by the famed ancient historian Michael Rostovtzeff. "If I had the time," Garfield said, "I would like to write a book on the distribution of wealth among the Romans. It must be that the enormous wealth of a small

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*: 54, 61; Diary, 3 April 1880, Garfield Papers.

<sup>36</sup>John Hay to Garfield, 6 and 31 December 1880, Garfield Papers.

<sup>37</sup>See Allan Peskin, "President Garfield and the Rating Game: An Evaluation of a Brief Administration," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 76 (Winter 1977): 93–102.

<sup>38</sup>A.F. Rockwell, "From Mentor to Elberon," *Century Magazine* 25 (1881): 435.

<sup>39</sup>James G. Blaine to Whitelaw Reid, 10 December 1879, Reid Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>40</sup>J.Q. Smith to Garfield, 1 July 1877, Garfield Papers.

<sup>41</sup>Diary, 17 November 1873, Garfield Papers.

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class left the multitude extremely poor. I would be glad to know what was the character of a distribution that produced such results.”<sup>42</sup> This would have been an ambitious undertaking but one not beyond Garfield’s capacity, for he possessed the combination of classical learning and economic theory necessary to accomplish it.

There was another scholarly project which was even closer to Garfield’s heart: a history of the Western Reserve of Ohio. This was the region which had nurtured him and which he had represented in Congress for over seventeen years, and he understood it as well as any man. No comprehensive history of the Western Reserve had yet been written, but Garfield thought that “the history of its settlement, its spirit, character, and the opinions of its people would make . . . a work of peculiar interest.” If he could only find the leisure, he told a friend, he would like to write it himself.<sup>43</sup>

Nothing, of course, came of these plans. After only 120 days in office, Garfield was assassinated by a religious fanatic, Charles Julius Guiteau. With these pistol shots the United States lost not only a president but a promising historian as well.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 21 July 1873, Garfield Papers.

<sup>43</sup>Garfield to B.A. Hinsdale, 11 April 1872, Garfield Papers.