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## THEME AND METHOD IN BANCROFT'S *HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES*

RICHARD C. VITZTHUM

GEORGE Bancroft's *History of the United States*, published in ten volumes between 1834 and 1874, maintains a stubborn vitality that, were they alive to see it, would dumbfound turn-of-the-century "scientific" historians like C. F. Adams, C. M. Andrews, and S. G. Fisher, who believed they had once and for all consigned Bancroft and *litterateurs* like him to oblivion. Rediscovered by sympathetic critics in the thirties,<sup>1</sup> the *History* is today enjoying a modest critical boom. An abridged edition has recently been made available,<sup>2</sup> and several students of history have recommended a return to Bancroft's consciously artful and morally committed approach.<sup>3</sup> Bancroft will never, of course, be popular as he was in his own day, when his volumes went into some twenty-five editions and were translated into most European languages. But he will continue to enjoy a following.

Why? The key to the answer lies in the fact that Bancroft, like all historians whose work retains permanent literary interest, constructed the *History* around a core of metaphysical assumptions about the meaning of history which he himself deeply believed and which served to integrate the work's theme and method. Furthermore, comparison of Bancroft's first six volumes<sup>4</sup> with the sources on which they are based indicated

<sup>1</sup> See Watt Stewart, "George Bancroft: Historian of the American Republic," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* XIX, 77-86 (1932), and N. H. Dawes and F. I. Nichols, "Revaluating George Bancroft," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY* VI, 278-293 (1933).

<sup>2</sup> *The History of the United States*, edited by R. B. Nye (Chicago, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> See David Levin, *History as Romantic Art* (Stanford, 1959), 230 and *passim*; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historian As Artist," *Atlantic Monthly* CCXII, 35-41 (July 1963); and Page Smith, *The Historian and History* (New York, 1964), 176-180 and *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the absence of footnotes in volumes VII and VIII and in Bancroft's two major revisions of the *History*, and because the six volumes written before 1858 reveal his primary strategy and tactics for handling sources throughout, I have used the first editions of volumes I through VI as the basis of this

that for Bancroft these assumptions crystallized in a philosophy of history that allowed him maximum artistic freedom within what R. G. Collingwood has contemptuously termed the "scissors and paste" method of composition.<sup>5</sup> As is so often true in his book, Collingwood's discussion of "scissors and paste" history is brilliant, trenchant, and maddeningly incomplete. Asserting that the method dominated all historiography before the twentieth century and all but the best in the twentieth century itself, Collingwood defines it as the historian's conviction that he must follow, religiously, the accounts of the most trustworthy authorities that have come down to him, regularly incorporating the language as well as the substance of these authorities into his own prose.

Bancroft was certainly a "scissors and paste" historian. The *History* echoes source material on almost every page, and in this respect it resembles the work of most other nineteenth-century American historians, among them Francis Parkman and Henry Adams.<sup>6</sup> What distinguishes Bancroft from those who preceded and followed him is that when he rewrote his sources he did not commit himself to them as authorities, as Collingwood claims all "scissors and paste" historians do, but merely capitalized on phrases or ideas in them which in some way supported an interpretation of American history which he had developed well before he began writing his first volume in the early 1830's. This interpretation in its turn he based on

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study. While some historians improve their work through revision, Bancroft did not. Revision tended to carry him further and further away from his evidence, a temptation that he, of all historians, would have been well advised to resist. When he revised, he did not go back and restudy his sources: thus his first editions reflect his fullest immersion in the evidence. For a justification of Bancroft's revisions, see R. J. Oard, *Bancroft and Hildreth: A Critical Evaluation*, an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation presented to St. Louis University in 1961.

<sup>5</sup> *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1965), 257-261 and *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Parkman's and Adams' treatment of sources in their histories, see R. C. Vitzthum, "Henry Adams' Paraphrase of Sources in the *History of the United States*," *American Quarterly* xvii, 81-91 (Spring 1965), and "The Historian as Editor: Francis Parkman's Reconstruction of Sources in *Montcalm and Wolfe*," *Journal of American History* LIII, 471-486 (1966).

a Christian interpretation of the meaning of all history which he absorbed chiefly from his New England past. Understanding the method and art of the *History* requires tracing the chain of thought that links Bancroft's general premises with his reconstruction of particular documents.

Controlling all of Bancroft's thinking, like an anchor set against the winds of nineteenth-century skepticism, was a deep Christian faith. Dividing all human history into two eras, the pre-Christian and post-Christian, Bancroft attributed to Christ the "mighty deeds which divide the new civilization from the old."<sup>7</sup> Although vague on precisely what the original sin was that Christ redeemed man from, Bancroft implies that even if it was only the fact of being created, and hence of being separated from the Creator, it produced a situation sufficiently unsatisfactory, at least to the Father, to require the sacrifice of the Son. God's purposes in sending Jesus to redeem man were, according to Bancroft, clear—first, to reunite men with Himself and, second, to draw men closer to one another: "The reciprocal relation between God and humanity constitutes the UNITY of the race. The more complete recognition of that unity is the first great promise which we receive from the future. . . . Everything tends to that consummation."<sup>8</sup> The guarantee for this "consummation" is the fact that, as Bancroft again and again repeats in all his writings, God has predestined it through ineluctable moral laws that operate with full force in the physical universe. "I know," he says, "that there is a pride which calls this fatalism, and which rebels at the thought that the Father of life should control what he has made. . . . [Yet] the glory of God is not contingent on man's good will, but all existence subserves his purposes."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* (Boston, 1834-1874), VIII, 116. J. W. Rathbun, "George Bancroft on Man and History," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters* XLIII, 64 (1954), asserts, incorrectly, that for Bancroft the "great dividing line between the past and the present growth toward liberty was drawn by the principles of the Reformation."

<sup>8</sup> *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York, 1855), 506-507.

<sup>9</sup> *Miscellanies*, 490.

Thus for Bancroft history was a drama halved by the Incarnation and utterly dominated by Divine Providence. Far from radical in its philosophy, the *History* is based on ontological and teleological assumptions which eighteenth-century historians like Hume, Gibbon, and Voltaire had discarded before Bancroft was born, but which had been the stock in trade of Christian historians for the fifteen hundred years preceding the Enlightenment. Collingwood has characterized the history written on these assumptions as "providential, apocalyptic, and periodized" in nature—history that, like Bancroft's, ascribes "events not to the wisdom of their human agents but to the workings of *Providence* preordaining their course"; that "divides history at the birth of Christ into two parts, each having a peculiar and unique character of its own"; and that "tends to subdivide it again: and thus to distinguish other events, not so important as the birth of Christ but important in their way, which make everything after them different in quality from what went before."<sup>10</sup>

Although by 1800 Enlightenment skeptics had seriously discredited such assumptions in Europe, they had not much affected the insulated intellectual life of New England, which in the early 1800's still drew much of its nourishment from Jonathan Edwards. Bancroft's philosophy of history was, by his own admission, deeply tinged with Edwardsean theology. Throughout his life he asserted that "Edwards' was his creed";<sup>11</sup> and in Volume IV of the *History* he summarizes the intellect of New England in 1750 by paraphrasing Edwards, revealing in the process how close were the similarities between his own and Edwards' philosophies:

The glory of God includes the redemption and glory of humanity. From the moment of creation to the final judgment it is all one

<sup>10</sup> *The Idea of History*, 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> R. B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York, 1944), 28. Nye stresses the inconsistency between this assertion and what he implies were Bancroft's real convictions, saying that Bancroft clung to the statement "no matter how difficult its reconciliation with his changing beliefs." In contrast, Bancroft's basic beliefs, always essentially Edwardsean, simply matured and deepened, fundamentally unchanged, after 1817.

work. . . . Scorning the thought of free agency as breaking the universe of action into countless fragments, the greatest number in New England held that every volition, even of the humblest of the people, is obedient to the fixed decrees of Providence, and participates in eternity. . . . Action, therefore, as flowing from an energetic, right, and lovely will, was the ideal of New England. . . . It saw in every one the divine and the human nature.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, according to Bancroft, Edwards had taught New England to understand God primarily as Love rather than as Wrath and to see Him as the source of “happiness, of human perfectibility, and of human liberty.”<sup>13</sup> Bancroft’s central ideas—his faith in progress superintended by a benevolent deity, his concept of national rather than individual redemption, and his view of history as the gradual unfolding of divine decree—were rooted in the tradition of which Edwards is for Bancroft the chief spokesman.

Furthermore, like Edwards and the New England historians who antedated him, Bancroft contends that certain men and women are destined to play unusually important parts in the temporal unfolding of God’s plan. While eschewing the Calvinist doctrine that these people constitute an Elect saved only by God’s grace from the damnation all men merit, Bancroft nonetheless tends to employ the hagiographical method which, as Peter Gay points out, led Cotton Mather in the *Magnalia* to “dissolve history into biography.”<sup>14</sup> Bancroft too wrote a history of saints, though he redefined sainthood to include “those who have studied the well-being of their fellow-men, and in their generation have assisted to raise the world from the actual toward the ideal.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Bancroft shared with puritan writers the belief that the study and writing of history was an act of worship. It is well known that writers like William Bradford and Mather con-

<sup>12</sup> *History*, IV, 157-158.

<sup>13</sup> *History*, IV, 155.

<sup>14</sup> *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (Berkeley, 1966), 62.

<sup>15</sup> *Miscellanies*, 488.

sciously set out to glorify God by recording His favor to the saints of New England. In the introduction to Volume I of the *History*, Bancroft hints at a similarly devotional aim when he says he will “follow the steps, by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory.”<sup>16</sup> Again, writing to his wife from Paris in 1847, he remarks, “Each page of history may begin and end with Great is God and marvellous are his doings among the children of men.”<sup>17</sup> But he endorsed the idea most enthusiastically in an oration in 1854: “At the foot of every page in the annals of nations, may be written, ‘God reigns.’ . . . If you will but listen reverently, you may hear the receding centuries as they roll into the dim distances of departed time, perpetually chanting ‘TE DEUM LAUDAMUS,’ with all the choral voices of the countless congregations of the ages.”<sup>18</sup> It may be superfluous to add that on this point he seems rather more emphatic than his puritan predecessors.

To be sure, Bancroft's interpretation of history differed in important ways from that of Edwards. Yet it also seems plain that these points of difference are explicable in terms of ideas that Bancroft could have absorbed almost entirely from the intellectual climate of nineteenth-century New England, even without the reinforcement they received from his study in Germany.<sup>19</sup> Most important, perhaps, was his disavowal, along

<sup>16</sup> *History*, I, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Bancroft, as quoted in M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (New York, 1908), II, 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Miscellanies*, 491-492.

<sup>19</sup> It is commonly argued that during his study in Germany between 1818 and 1822 Bancroft underwent a quasi-transcendental conversion that changed the course of his life and thought. Nye interprets Bancroft's German experience in this way, claiming, for example, that having been “saturated in idealistic and transcendental philosophy since 1817,” Bancroft “had become acquainted with the essentials of New England transcendentalism before they had left the shores of Europe to take on an American coloring.” (*Brahmin Rebel*, 101.) Rathbun, while qualifying Nye's interpretation in some ways, nevertheless reinforces its main point by arguing that “when Bancroft was in Germany the concept of organicism literally permeated the intellectual atmosphere. . . . In point of time, Bancroft was among the first Americans to receive the new Doctrine.” (“Bancroft on Man and History,” 54.) F. L. Burwick has carried this line of thought to its logical extreme by distinguishing between the Göttingen

with many New England thinkers early in the century, of the heavily Lockean bias in Edwards' epistemology.<sup>20</sup> In place of Edwards' stress on the primacy of biblical revelation as the source of moral knowledge, Bancroft set forth the idea that every man has by nature the ability to intuit God's law: "We have not merely the senses opening to us the external world, but an internal sense, which places us in connection with the world of intelligence and the decrees of God."<sup>21</sup> In this and other ways he reflected the influence of liberal Unitarian ministers like his father, Aaron Bancroft, who in 1786 established one of the first Unitarian congregations in New England.

So much for Bancroft's general view of history. Straight from the deep New England currents it embodied flowed his interpretation of American history, which by the early 1830's had settled into channels that were never to change thereafter. It can be roughly summarized as follows.

Despite the fact that Christ redeemed man and revealed to him the central democratic truth that all men have equal value on earth as well as in heaven, the medieval Church developed a hierarchical, authoritarian priesthood and encouraged feudalism, a totally undemocratic and hence anti-Christian system. During the Reformation, however, men like Luther and Calvin reasserted true Christianity by proclaiming religious equality and by insisting that the Bible contained all knowledge requisite to salvation and that every man could know God directly and personally, without the mediation of an au-

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and Berlin influences and concluding that Bancroft imbibed his central ideas from three Göttingen scholars, Heeren, Eichorn, and Blumenbach. "The Göttingen Influence on George Bancroft's Ideas of Humanity," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* XI, 194-212 (1966). The weight of evidence from his letters, articles, orations, and, most important, the *History* itself demonstrates, however, that while in Germany and afterwards Bancroft held tightly to the tenets of the New England religious tradition in which he grew up and reached maturity.

<sup>20</sup> See Cameron Thompson, "John Locke and New England Transcendentalism," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY* XXXV, 435-457 (1962), an excellent analysis of the Transcendental revolt against the Lockean sensationalism that dominated American Calvinism before 1800.

<sup>21</sup> *Miscellanies*, 409.



thoritarian Church. Although they had thus forever destroyed the religious foundations of feudalism, the institution itself staggered on, even to Bancroft's own day. Because of her separation from Rome in the sixteenth century and the moral superiority of her Teutonic, freedom-loving people, England had realized greater progress towards liberty and equality than priest-ridden, despotic nations like Spain and France; yet in the seventeenth century England herself was so feudalistic as to have forced large numbers of her most morally advanced citizens to flee to North America, where they planted imperishable seeds of religious and political liberty. In the eighteenth century these colonists became convinced that if they were to realize their democratic visions they would have to separate from the mother country, and in the Revolutionary War they won for themselves and all mankind the independence which it was their destiny to translate into the finest and purest democracy the world had ever known. Now they bore the lamp of freedom that would light the world, leading it toward an inevitable democratic paradise, the final Kingdom of God on earth. Before the example of America all forms of tyranny would evaporate, and the mission of Christ and the will of Providence would be fulfilled.

Within this interpretive framework Bancroft, of course, details many cause-and-effect relationships that reveal the favoring hand of Providence. Especially important is the phenomenon of the hero who, like John Smith or George Washington, appears at precisely the right moment to focus or implement an idea crucial to subsequent progress. Also noteworthy is the conflict between France and England for control of North America, which is viewed by Bancroft as determining once and for all that the rotten institutions of France would never take root in the Edenic soil of the New World.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>22</sup> For discussions of Bancroft's view that men would regain a prelapsarian innocence in America, see R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago, 1955), 159-173, and Merrill Lewis, "Organic Metaphor and Edenic Myth in George Bancroft's *History of the United States*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* xxvi, 587-592 (1965).

Bancroft explores the spirit unique to each of the colonies in order to assess their contributions to the struggle for freedom: Connecticut, for instance, originated as a model of democratic liberty, while on the other hand Virginia developed its love of liberty slowly, imbibing it from the streams and forests of the Old Dominion. Of no interest whatsoever to Bancroft is mere historical contingency or chance. His goal is always to find for every event a meaning consistent with his grand design.

How then could he, as he did, insist that history, rightly understood, was an empirical science? His argument can be summarized from key passages sprinkled throughout the *History*. According to Bancroft, the historian approaches a historical subject the way an astronomer views an unknown constellation or a botanist a new species of plant. Like them, he needs first to observe his subject as accurately as he can, using "instruments that may unfold" it "without color and without distortion."<sup>23</sup> His primary instrument is "unwearied"<sup>24</sup> research, based on "the principle of historical scepticism,"<sup>25</sup> which entails exhaustive reading and comparison of all the available documents. After completing this step, he extracts from his study, first, "facts faithfully ascertained," second, "chronological sequence, which can best exhibit the simultaneous action of general causes,"<sup>26</sup> and, finally and most important, "the vestiges of moral law [in] the practice of nations in every age."<sup>27</sup> By following this method, the historian "proves experimentally the reality of justice, and confirms by induction the intuitions of reason."<sup>28</sup> Facts thus verified and set in chronological order will demonstrate, as Bancroft again and again asserts, "the superintending providence of God."<sup>29</sup> But the historian must free himself from the "arrogance" that pre-

<sup>23</sup> *History*, III, 397.

<sup>24</sup> *History*, III, 397.

<sup>25</sup> *History*, I, v.

<sup>26</sup> *History*, VI, x.

<sup>27</sup> *History*, VIII, 117.

<sup>28</sup> *History*, VIII, 117.

<sup>29</sup> *History*, III, 398.

sumes "to know intuitively, without observation, the tendency of the ages."<sup>30</sup>

In all of this Bancroft refers to the historian's general, preliminary study, undertaken well before he begins to consider the problems of writing a narrative that will incorporate particular documents. The empiricism he recommends is restricted, in other words, to that somewhat narrow range of possibilities lying between his own *a priori* Christian interpretation of all history and the body of evidence concerning a specific period like colonial America which he imagines lying unread and unsifted, as when he first approached it. The yardstick against which he measures these documents is not the one normally used for the purposes of empirical testing, namely the tough reality of human experience itself, but rather a perfect, supernatural moral law or idea that manifests itself indirectly but implacably in history. For Bancroft, historical statements have validity only insofar as they conform to this divine law; yet at the same time he argues that in order to comprehend the full grandeur of the law the historian must know the whole pattern of historical causes and effects through which it reveals itself. Having grasped the broad threads of historical development suggested by his sources as a whole, he then works these threads backwards into the fabric of supernatural predestination. It is in perceiving them in his sources that he behaves empirically or inductively, like a scientist observing natural phenomena.

The fruit of all these convictions was a series of ten volumes whose tone is one of moral infallibility. In all the volumes of the *History* a speaking voice stands between the reader and the past, telling him emphatically what it means, how it should be judged, how much it is worth. The omniscience of this speaking voice is not merely conventional, in the sense that the historian's device of casting himself in the role of the chief narrator of his history is conventional; Bancroft's speaker knows not merely what did happen but what should have happened.

<sup>30</sup> *History*, III, 397.

He is an artistic as well as moral autocrat. Everything—character, scene, event—is first molded to his philosophy and then passed on, purified of every foreign particle, to a reader whom he always imagines as passively awaiting instruction and inspiration.

Such moral certitude, or more accurately arrogance, audible throughout the work, is not merely an indulgence Bancroft allows himself in intrusions distinct from the narrative, but is instead the basic tone that governs his use of source material. We have already seen that his claims of having followed a scientific method meant something to him that they would not to modern historians; and despite his employment of an elaborate footnote apparatus in the first six volumes and his insistence throughout that he has been objective, the fact remains that in actual practice he uses documents as a kind of miscellaneous grape-shot with which he defends the generalizations he formed before he began paying close attention to the evidence. The omniscient narrator of the *History* merely fits useful ideas and phrases from the sources into his own interpretive context. His disregard for the context in which they originally appeared is often complete.

In his preface to the first volume Bancroft says, “I have endeavored to impart originality to my narrative, by deriving it entirely from writings and sources, which were the contemporaries of the events that are described.”<sup>31</sup> Actually, the *History* is based as often on secondary as on primary sources, belying Bancroft’s claim here that he chiefly used primaries. Much more meaningful is his assertion that he strove for “originality.” To Bancroft, history achieved “originality” when it explained, not merely recounted, particulars: the more it was merely a record or chronicle of an unjudged past, the less its value. And in saying he “derived” his narrative from source material, he means he has raised it to the level of philosophy.

All of his techniques of source assimilation serve this end. Thus proof, in the modern sense, is of little importance to him,

<sup>31</sup> *History*, I, v.

and the only points at which he uses his sources to "prove" a point are those relatively rare ones where he corrects grossly fallacious statements of fact in prior histories. For the most part, even when he virtually copies his sources, he strives to make a maximum rhetorical impact on the reader's emotions. Sometimes he capitalizes on the felicity of an earlier writer's phrasing, sometimes on his moral vigor, sometimes on any other aspect of what he said that might in some way contribute to the *History's* argumentative thrust.

The type of paraphrasing most often found in the *History* is that in which Bancroft reconstructs existing narratives of action. While it is hard to distinguish between "pure" narrative and the writer's moral judgment in even the most neutral narrative prose, in Bancroft's *History* such discrimination is impossible. Whenever Bancroft narrates an action he judges it as well, so that the explicit judgments he either borrows from others or formulates himself permeate his paraphrase. Moreover, he values the particulars of an action far less than its meaning: although the *History* is basically a narrative, its narrative elements are inevitably focussed on the moral significance Bancroft feels is warranted by the action at any given point. He tends in fact to expend most of his literary energy in setting tone or mood, thereby generalizing the action, since in generalizing he can more easily express his own interpretation and the emotion proper to it than when he is wrestling with minutiae. The result is that relatively little of the action in the *History* is memorable. We recall instead Bancroft's interpretation and feeling and the broad historical developments he recounts, an effect he almost certainly calculated. Ultimately, of course, his aim is to make every action conform to the values of his own philosophy of history.

If a source narrates an event from a point of view consistent in some way with Bancroft's own, it is likely to get generous treatment in the *History*. Samuel Penhallow's history of New England's wars with the Indians, subtitled "A Narrative of their continued Perfidy and Cruelty," serves as the model for

Bancroft's account of several Indian raids in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Because Bancroft shared Penhallow's outrage at these attacks on their New England ancestors and his outrage at New France for having supported them, he allowed much of Penhallow's most emotionally charged language to stand in his own version. Compare their accounts of depredations by the Abenaki tribe in 1703.

## SOURCE:

. . . [W]ithin six weeks after, the whole Eastern country was in a conflagration, no house standing nor garrison unattacked. August 10th, at nine in the morning, they began their bloody tragedy, being about five hundred Indians of all sorts, with a number of French; who divided themselves into several companies, and made a descent on the several inhabitants from Casco to Wells, at one and the same time, sparing none of every age or sex.

As the milk white brows of the grave and ancient had no respect shown; so neither had the mournful cries of tender infants the least pity; for they triumphed at their misery, and applauded such as the skilfullest artists, who were most dexterous in contriving the greatest tortures.<sup>32</sup>

Although he has reorganized some of Penhallow's phrases and, characteristically, omitted some specific detail, Bancroft has retained his tone. Every element in the paraphrase is

## BANCROFT:

Yet within six weeks, the whole country from Casco to Wells was in a conflagration. On one and the same day, the several parties of the Indians, with the French, burst upon every house or garrison in that region, sparing, says the faithful chronicler, 'neither the milk-white brows of the ancient, nor the mournful cries of tender infants.' Cruelty became an art, and honor was awarded to the most skilful contriver of tortures.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *History*, III, 212.

<sup>33</sup> "The History of the Wars of New England with the Eastern Indians," *Collections of the New Hampshire Historical Society*, I, 23 (1824).

designed to make the reader sympathize with the victims. The quotation, rewritten as was conventional in Bancroft's day for maximum effect,<sup>34</sup> relieves Bancroft's narrative of responsibility for, even as it capitalizes on, Penhallow's flagrant sentimentality; the image of the attackers "bursting" forth heightens their ferocity and barbarousness; and styling Penhallow "the faithful chronicler" implies that his word is final.

Yet Bancroft's major French source, Charlevoix's *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France*, offers a radically different interpretation of the affair, dismissing it as rather unproductive in comparison with the brilliant victories the French and Indians had gained at other times during the war.<sup>35</sup> Although elsewhere Bancroft apostrophizes Charlevoix as "the admirable Charlevoix, best of early writers on American history,"<sup>36</sup> and "the honest Charlevoix"<sup>37</sup>—using, that is, precisely the kind of encomium he here gives Penhallow—he leaves no doubt that on this matter of New England Indians Charlevoix has forfeited all moral—and hence historical—validity. Sneering at him as the "Jesuit historian of France," Bancroft excoriates his "pride" in France's influence over the Indians, attributing his interpretation to "self-love," which "has but one root with a thousand branches."<sup>38</sup>

Whether or not Bancroft's handling of the episode is wrong-headed is beside the point. What is important is to see that it emanated from moral convictions that gave him the courage to contradict and even to disregard points of view that he held to be vicious. Thoughtful historians in our own day know that there is at least as much blindness and irresponsibility in too great a concern for the minutiae of historical evidence and for compromising among conflicting interpretations as in too

<sup>34</sup> George H. Callcott, "The Sacred Quotation Mark," *The Historian*, xxi, 409-420 (1959), analyzes the attack of the scientific historians both on this practice of the romantic historians and on their alleged plagiarism of sources.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre de Charlevoix, *Histoire et Description Générale de la Nouvelle France* (Paris, 1774), III, 428-429 and *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> *History*, III, 342.

<sup>37</sup> *History*, III, 293.

<sup>38</sup> *History*, III, 187.

little. If Bancroft errs, he does so in the latter direction, for the sake of moral and artistic coherence.

Yet sometimes he paraphrases the narrative of writers with whom he violently disagrees even more closely than he does Penhallow's. Thomas Hutchinson, the last royal governor of Massachusetts, wrote the final portion of his *History of Massachusetts Bay* after he had been driven into exile in the 1770's; and as Hutchinson's narrative moves from the period of early colonization toward the period in which he himself played a major role, it becomes increasingly hostile towards the Revolution. Bancroft, in his early volumes, treats Hutchinson's work sympathetically, often and warmly paraphrasing it. But by Volume IV he has begun to repudiate Hutchinson for his loyalty to the Crown, and by Volume VI Hutchinson has degenerated into an egoist whose "love of money" is his "ruling passion"; he is "cowardly and mean"; and he engages in "fawning treachery."<sup>39</sup>

At the moment in 1769 when Hutchinson becomes Governor and so in Bancroft's view embarks on the most immoral part of his career, Bancroft borrows a striking passage from his *Massachusetts Bay*. By way of exonerating his predecessor in the governorship, Sir Francis Bernard, Hutchinson condemns the proceedings of the rebellious Boston merchants, "proceedings," he says, "tending to, and actually producing, great disorder, and an unjust invasion of property, in defiance of the laws," and goes on to describe, bitterly, a public humiliation Bernard had to endure:

Instead of the marks of respect commonly shewn, in a greater or less degree, to governors, upon their leaving the province there were many marks of publick joy in the town of Boston. The bells were rung, guns were fired from Mr. Hancock's wharf, liberty trees were covered with flags, and in the evening a great bonfire was made upon Fort Hill.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *History*, vi, 304.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* (London, 1764-1828), III, 253-254.



Bancroft sees Bernard's recall altogether differently. To him it evidenced that "Boston was advancing steadily towards Republicanism,"<sup>41</sup> and that Bernard, whom he characterizes as "a quarrelsome disputant, rather than a statesman," whose "avarice was insatiable and restless,"<sup>42</sup> had at last reaped the reward of his many antidemocratic sins. Consequently, even while following Hutchinson's description almost verbatim, he reverses its tone and uses it to portray the noble joy of the Boston patriots at being freed from Bernard's tyranny—a joy, of course, the reader is meant to share:

As he departed from Boston, the bells were rung, and cannon fired from the wharves; Liberty Tree was gay with flags; and at night a great bonfire was kindled upon Fort Hill.<sup>43</sup>

With several substitutions Bancroft erases all signs of Hutchinson's disgust: "Hancock's wharf" becomes "the wharves," suggesting the universality of the demonstration; Liberty Tree is not "covered" but "gay" with flags; and the bonfire is "kindled," a verb that connotes spontaneity and vigor, as well as a certain refinement. Again, a source has provided Bancroft with a useful verbal shell into which he pours his own meaning. Moreover, it is not impossible that here, as at other points in the *History*, Bancroft may have been enjoying a private joke at the expense of what he considered a morally misguided authority: in a curious way he has forced Hutchinson to testify against himself.

A final example of Bancroft's method will suggest its flexibility better, perhaps, than either of those already presented. The most creative, original, and complex paraphrasing in the *History* is apt to be found whenever Bancroft approaches one of his heroes. To Bancroft, the most impressive virtue a hero could possess was the ability to intuit the future meaning of a seemingly insignificant event or object. The hero penetrated

<sup>41</sup> *History*, VI, 292.

<sup>42</sup> *History*, VI, 291.

<sup>43</sup> *History*, VI, 291.

mere mundane appearance and read, as it were, the seeds of time, first perceiving the providential intention that would reveal itself in subsequent history and then bending all his efforts to realize it. As is so often the case with Bancroft's ideas, this one was part of his New England legacy, having its roots in the Unitarian revolt against orthodox Calvinism at the turn of the century. While similar in some ways to the "sixth sense" the Calvinists believed a sinner received along with saving grace, the insightfulness, or, as Bancroft often terms it, the "imagination," of the *History's* heroes was the result not of a distinct conversion experience but of a graciousness which the Unitarians maintained was inherent in all men and which, according to Bancroft, in a few burned uncommonly bright, usually from birth. Williams, Penn, Franklin, Washington, and Pitt were among the most important of those who Bancroft believed possessed this almost prophetic vision.

So too many lesser men; and in an arresting passage Bancroft attributes the virtue to the French explorer Jacques Cartier. In 1535, having explored the Saint Lawrence River as far westward as the site of Montreal, Cartier set out with some natives to climb the mountain that dominates the present city. Here are the anonymous eyewitness's and Bancroft's descriptions of the climb.

## SOURCE:

When wee were out of the Towne, diverse of the men and women followed us, and brought us to the toppe of the foresaid mountaine, which wee named Mount Roiall, it is about a league from the Towne. When as we were on the toppe of it, we might discerne and plainly see thirtie leagues about. On the Northside of it there are many hilles to be seene running West and East, and as many more on the South,

## BANCROFT:

The town lay at the foot of a hill, which he climbed, As he reached the summit, he was moved to admiration by the prospect before him of woods, and water and mountains. Imagination presented it as the future emporium of inland commerce, and the metropolis of a prosperous province; filled with bright anticipations, he called the hill Mont-Real, and time, that has transferred the

amongst the betweene the which name to the island, is realizing  
 the Countrey is as faire and as his visions.<sup>44</sup>  
 pleasant as possibly can be seene,  
 being leuell, smooth, and very  
 plaine, fit to be husbanded and  
 tilled: and in the midst of these  
 fieldes we saw the river further  
 up a great way then where we  
 had left our boates, where was  
 the greatest and the swiftest fall  
 of water that any where hath  
 beene seene, and as great, wide,  
 and large as our sight might dis-  
 cerne, going Southwest along  
 three faire and round mountains  
 that wee sawe, as we judged  
 about fifteen leagues from us.<sup>45</sup>

In comparing the original with Bancroft's version we should bear in mind two points. First, like most official eyewitness reports of voyages of discovery, Cartier's was designed to justify the expense of the expedition and to solicit future commissions, a fact that accounts for some of the enthusiasm of its description of the countryside. Second, the report was not written by Cartier himself but by a subordinate who never identifies himself and who never once in the "Narration" attempts to move inside Cartier's mind. Nothing daunted, Bancroft has transformed it into an account of an almost mystical experience on the part of Cartier himself.

Cartier's "visions" are partly a literary device intended both to arouse the reader's interest and to define the inner meaning of Cartier's whole enterprise, partly a serious example of heroism. The fact that they may never have occurred did not trouble Bancroft, since in his eyes a historian was primarily an artist and a philosopher, only secondarily a recorder of data.

<sup>44</sup> *History*, I, 24.

<sup>45</sup> "A Shorte and Briefe Narration," *Hakluyt's Collection of the Early Voyages, Travels, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London, 1809-1812), III, 273-274.

If his art and philosophy frequently thrust him into the twilight area between history and fiction, as they seem to have here, it was in his view so much the better. For him sources were means to an end, not ends in themselves. Besides, we have no way of knowing whether his interpretation of Cartier's experience on the mountaintop is inaccurate—the source does, after all, contain elements that support it. If Cartier did not respond in this way at such a pregnant moment, we seem to hear Bancroft saying, he should have. Imagination, art—the very will of God—demanded it.

Bancroft will continue to be read for the sweep, intensity, and coherence of his art, an art that saturates virtually every line of the *History* with an all-encompassing moral vision. While there is no doubt that his affair with Clio verges on licentiousness whenever he paraphrases source documents and at many points in the *History* becomes frankly scandalous, there is also no doubt that the *History's* unity of thought and feeling is a direct result of that same licentiousness. Without the curiously arrogant tradition of New England historical speculation behind him, supporting his own moral certitudes about the destiny of America and offering him a rationale for his faith that God governs history, it is doubtful Bancroft could have freed himself from the tyranny of his Authorities. By following the method but not the intention of “scissors and paste” history, he devised a literary vehicle that permitted him maximum maneuverability as an historian. The *History* is at many points indefensible; yet without it American historical literature would be the poorer.