

WHAT WE OWE TO FRANCIS PARKMAN

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THIS year is to witness the centennial celebration of the birth of Francis Parkman. That writer's enduring fame must rest upon the series of volumes in which he traced the development of European civilization upon the North American continent. But the pursuit of historical study, or indeed of the literary career in any form whatever, was not his only or his earliest love. For a time he dabbled in chemistry with genuine enthusiasm. He took a regular course in Law at Harvard, and his correspondence with one of his class-mates clearly indicates that he had once a serious purpose of depending for his livelihood upon the practice of the legal profession,—a course which, it is quite certain, would have commended itself to the approval of his father. The unfortunate and very serious weakness of his eyes made this impossible, and it was not unnatural that he should be attracted to the pursuit of literature.

Parkman had been brought up among books, and belonged to what Oliver Wendell Holmes used to call "the Brahmin caste" in New England. The *Knickerbocker* magazine opened its columns to his efforts, and one of his earliest—dating from the year next after his graduation at Harvard—was a very spirited poem celebrating the exploits of Rogers and his famous company of rangers in the regions round about the rocky promontory of Ticonderoga. Whether his performance gave promise of success in this most difficult field is a question on which tastes and judgments must necessarily differ. When William Morley Punshon was lecturing in Halifax on Macaulay many years ago, he proposed to test Macaulay's poetic merits by reading one of the most spirited pieces in the *Lays of Ancient Rome*. I have no doubt that most of the audience, when they heard the eloquent stanzas rolling from the lips of one of the greatest English orators of his generation, were convinced that here was indeed poetry of no inferior order. Nor do I doubt that if we had in these days an orator of the elocutionary power and dramatic passion of Morley Punshon to render the verses about the exploits

of Rogers and his companions, we should be convinced in the same way with regard to the claims of Parkman. But I have my own misgivings.

Perhaps what he offered to his readers as poetry—and perhaps what Macaulay offered under the same label—was rather in the nature of rhythmical and versified eloquence. The light that never was on sea or land was not, I fear, vouchsafed to either of these writers. And we have the dictum of a great master in the *Ars Poetica* that no verses should ever be made public until after nine years incubation, nor even then unless they can claim beyond the possibility of challenge a place in the foremost rank. "In certain things a medium is endured." But when we come to the case of the poet, we must accept the dictum of Horace:

*mediocribus esse poetis
Non homines, non di, non concessere columnae.*

Whatever may be considered the merits of these excellent verses printed in the biography by Mr. Charles Haight Farnham, *The New Hampshire Ranger* is, so far as I happen to know, the first and last and only serious poetical effort of Parkman that ever appeared in print. He devoted himself thereafter with zeal and concentration to what became the main purpose of his life, the series of historical treatises on the old French and Indian wars, followed by a later extension of his original programme to cover the struggle between the first colonizers of North America and the men of his own race and nation for the possession of the continent.

Among the multitude whom no man can number of those who have been entertained and instructed by these historical works of Parkman, I greatly doubt if one in a thousand knows of the conditions hardly less than tragic under which they were produced. Perhaps a still smaller proportion of his readers have any adequate idea of the originality of his undertaking, or the very great importance of what he did for the history of the human race. His own father, who was undoubtedly a man of learning and culture, is said by Mr. Wheeler in his memoir to have had no sympathy with his son's aspirations and pursuits, although he never thwarted or opposed them. When *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* appeared in 1851, it was subjected, upon the author's own invitation, to a friendly criticism by Theodore Parker. That critic, if he did not damn it with faint praise, certainly did not recognize it as a work of any exceptional merit, or as done by a master with any very exceptional equipment for his task, or as having any special significance in general history. Yet these are the features in Parkman's work that are emphasized

by Professor Fiske in his introductory essay to the Frontenac edition.

Referring to predecessors in the portrayal of the wild life of the American forest, Professor Fiske admits the undeniable genius of Fenimore Cooper. But he adds that by common consent Cooper's Indians are now regarded as more or less unreal, and that just such creatures never existed anywhere. When Corneille and Racine put ancient Greeks and Romans on the stage, they dressed these heroes in velvet and lace, flowing wigs and high-buckled shoes, making them talk like Louis XIV's courtiers. The historical sense, Professor Fiske tells us, was lacking in seventeenth century dramatists, and in the next age it was not much better:

When Rousseau had occasion to philosophise about men in a state of nature, he invented "the noble savage," an insufferable creature whom any real savage would loathe and despise.

The secret of Parkman's power is that

His Indians are true to the life. In his pages Pontiac is a man of warm flesh and blood, as much so as Montcalm or Isaac Putnam.

In this respect the brilliant essayist contrasts Parkman with Prescott. In reading Prescott's account of the conquest of Mexico "one feels one's self in the world of the *Arabian Nights*."

His Montezuma is a personality like none that ever existed beneath the moon. This is because Prescott simply followed his Spanish authorities, not only in their statements of physical fact, but in their inevitable misconceptions of the strange Aztec society which they encountered. The Aztecs in his story are unreal, and this false note vitiates it all.

Parkman's superiority in this respect was quite natural. He had been from his very boyhood a lover of the wild wood and a keen observer of the life of the forest. One of his early adventures, involving serious danger and calling for the exercise of the most careful judgment as well as unflinching courage, is recorded in his own words by his biographer. Among the earliest of his published works is *The Oregon Trail*, first printed in the *Knickerbocker* magazine, which records an adventurous journey in the company of his kinsman, Mr. Quincy Shaw. These two courageous travellers in 1846 joined a tribe of roving Sioux Indians at a time when, as Fiske says, to do such a thing was to take their lives in their hands. In his autobiographic letter Parkman refers to the dangerous nature of this expedition. He was at that time an invalid in a very serious sense of the word. But he says: "To have worn the airs of an invalid

would certainly have been an indiscretion; since in that case a horse, a rifle, a pair of pistols and a red shirt might have offered temptations too strong for aboriginal virtue." He was therefore compelled, although suffering from a distressing complication of ailments, to join in the buffalo hunt when he should have been in the hospital, and to march westward with his savage companions when he was unable to lift the saddle to his horse's back. He could not even have held his seat—when mounted by the help of his associates—had it not been for the protection afforded by the pummel and cantle.

The fruits of this expedition were as injurious to his physical health as they were precious in the interest of his chosen task. To this enterprise, in the strenuous manner in which it was conducted, was due—if not the largest share—at least a great one among the causes which made his subsequent life that of a confirmed invalid. But to it we must also attribute the knowledge which made what Fiske considers one of the chief elements if not the greatest element of all in the significance of his historical work. This critic wrote in 1897:

Fifty years ago on our great western plains and among the Rocky Mountains there still prevailed a state of society essentially similar to that which greeted the eyes of Champlain upon the Saint Lawrence and of John Smith upon the Chickahoming. In those days the Oregon trail had changed but little since the memorable journey of Lewis and Clark in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In the chase and in the wigwam, in watching the sorcery of which their religion chiefly consisted, or in listening to the primitive folk-tales by the evening camp fire, Parkman learned to understand the Red man, to interpret his motives and his moods. With his naturalist's keen and accurate eye and his quick poetic apprehension, that youthful experience formed a safe foundation for all his future work. From that time he was fitted to absorb the records and memorials of the early explorers, and to make their strange experiences his own.

Fiske's own original researches in the field of American history have given us a number of very charming volumes, and qualify him to speak with authority upon the work of his predecessor. But one more citation must suffice. I select it because it points out the profound ethnological importance of the subject of this sketch.

There is one thing which lends to Parkman's work a peculiar interest, and will be sure to make it grow with the ages. Not only has he left the truthful record of a vanished age so complete and final that the work will never need to be done again; but if anyone should in future attempt to do it again, he cannot approach the

task with quite such equipment as Parkman's. In an important sense the age of Pontiac is far more remote from us than the age of Clovis or the age of Agamemnon. When barbaric society is overwhelmed by advancing waves of civilization, its vanishing is final, the thread of tradition is cut off for ever with the shears of fate. Where are Montezuma's Aztecs? Their physical offspring still dwell on the tableland of Mexico, and their ancient speech is still heard in the streets; but that old society is as extinct as the trilobites, and has to be painfully studied in fossil fragments of custom and tradition. So with the Red men of the North. It is not true that they are dying out physically, as many people suppose, but their stage of society is fast disappearing, and soon it will have vanished for ever. Soon their race will be swallowed up and forgotten, just as we overlook and ignore to-day the existence of five thousand Iroquois farmers in the State of New York.

Now the study of comparative ethnology has begun to teach us that the Red Indian is one of the most interesting of men. He represents a stage of evolution through which civilized men have passed,—a stage far more ancient and primitive than that which is depicted in the *Odyssey*, or in the *Book of Genesis*. When Champlain and Frontenac met the feathered chieftains of the St. Lawrence, they talked with men of the Stone Age face to face. Phases of life that had vanished from Europe long before Rome was built survived in America long enough to be seen and studied by modern men. Behind Mr. Parkman's picturesqueness, therefore, there lies a significance far more profound than one at first would suspect. He has portrayed for us a wondrous and for ever fascinating stage in the evolution of humanity. We may well thank Heaven for sending us such a scholar, such an artist, such a genius before it was too late. As we look at the changes wrought in the last fifty years, we realize that already the opportunities by which he profited in youth are in a large measure lost. He came not a moment too soon to catch the fleeting light and fix it upon his immortal canvas.

With completion of *The Oregon Trail* and *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, the productive capacity of the author seemed absolutely to break down. He had married in 1850, and it was with the help of his wife and her sister that he had succeeded in publishing his *Conspiracy of Pontiac*. His marriage was a happy one, though not wholly free from the trials of *res angusta domi*. When at the death of his father he came into the possession of money, he secured a few acres on the shore of Jamaica pond, where he continued to live for the remainder of his days. His first great bereavement befell him in the death of his son in 1857, and that of his wife followed the next year. His two remaining children, who were girls, were taken in charge by his sister-in-law, Miss Bigelow, in her own home. What with the bereavement he had suffered, a state of nerves resulting in insomnia, the infirm condition of his general health intensified

by the rigours of his pilgrimage in the western wilderness, his physical condition became very serious.

Shortly after the death of his wife, Parkman went abroad. Some of the most eminent physicians in Paris warned him against insanity. Returning to Boston without any improvement he joined the family of his mother and sisters in winter, and they in turn passed the summer with him on the shore of Jamaica pond. He had then reached probably the worst passage in his life. The condition of his brain made the least effort at literary work suicidal, and the prospect of failure to achieve his literary ambitions certainly did not conduce to his physical restoration. Yet one hears of no piteous complaints. Parkman did not wear his heart on his sleeve, nor weary his family with weak and vain laments. His wife, if she kept a journal, never had occasion to make a record such as that of Jane Welsh Carlyle—"The bread sours on his stomach, O Heavens!" Her husband did not merely bear his maladies with patience. He triumphed over them by such an utterly inexhaustible patience as we have been told on high authority is the principal element of genius. And he employed in entertaining and useful pursuits which actually added to the sum of human knowledge those years which for any less resolute and heroic man would have been a time of despondency and pessimism and gloom.

"Seeing the temple of fame closed against him"—to use the words of his biographer—"he turned to Nature for consolation." In terms more simple and direct, he took up gardening and devoted to his new vocation the same zealous industry with which he had thus far prosecuted his career as an author. His biographer considers it noteworthy that two of Parkman's predecessors in the domain of historical research and exposition had turned to gardening and had become celebrated as growers of roses. There was a contemporary, the late John Burroughs, who has narrated in a very delightful and philosophical essay how when the enemy came upon him with the suggestion that life was not worth living, when he discovered that he was losing interest in things and his life began to stagnate, he put the adversary to flight by exchanging the pen-holder for the crowbar and the hoe-handle, clearing up and fencing a ten-acre field. Judging from these illustrations we may confidently re-affirm the truth conveyed in Wordsworth's assurance that Nature never did betray the heart that loved her, or in the more ornate lines at the opening of Bryant's *Thanatopsis*.

Whether Parkman regarded his new enterprise as a vocation or as an avocation, certain it is that he achieved in it a notable success. In 1860 or 1861 Mr. Francis Lee, when enlisting for the

war, entrusted to him as the most competent person a lot of plants and bulbs he had received from Japan and had partially brought to flowering. Among them was the *lilium auratum*. "This stroke of fortune thus placed in Parkman's hands new and interesting materials, stimulated his ambition to further study, and laid the foundation of his fame as a horticulturist." He cultivated a variety of flowers, but devoted himself chiefly to the growing of roses and the hybridization of lilies. It was said that he had at one time a thousand varieties of roses in his garden. But his most important contribution to horticulture is considered by his biographer to have been the magnificent *lilium Parkmanni*, which he sold in 1876 to an English florist for a large sum. He appears to have anticipated Burbank in the bringing out of new varieties, and several instances are cited in his biography. In the prosecution of this work he employed a competent gardener and assistant. But when he was himself able to work, he would go at a rapid gait from place to place, and sit down on a stool carried for the purpose. He would then do some of the lighter work, such as sowing seeds, planting borders, weeding and cultivating. He often cut the grass of the borders when sitting in his wheel chair, and used the rake or hoe under these inconvenient conditions. The writer is tempted to chronicle at large his successes in this temporary digression from the line of his predestined career.

He suffered fourteen years of interruption of his chosen work. Of this lost period the only substantial literary remains that survive are a novel entitled *Vassall Morton*, published in 1856, and *The Book of Roses*, published ten years later, which owes its origin to the knowledge and experience acquired during the years of defeat and gloom. After the lapse of this long interval he was able to resume, though under a fearful handicap, the task to which he had dedicated his life. *The Book of Roses* was a practical treatise of which his biographer, writing in 1900, says that it still holds its position as the best guide to the cultivation of that particular flower, adding that about the same period Parkman wrote a valuable paper on the hybridization of lilies.

Resuming his appointed literary task, he began his two-volume treatise on *The Pioneers of France in the New World*. Theodore Parker had said somewhat patronisingly about his entire book that some passages in it were very well written, that in general the style was good—simple, natural and easy—but that there was a general lack of severity of style for which the great master of Roman history was so remarkable. Some passages reminded Parker of "Melville and Headley, whom you would not like to be like." Parker found a lack,

too, of "what is characteristic," pointing out that in the description of places the author did not tell what kind of trees there were, "only trees, leaving us to guess whether they were pines or palms, bushes or tall trees." And this critic felt that the picture of Pontiac was not adequate to his important place in the history. Perhaps the criticism is warranted. But it is singular that one whose own style is so elegant and full of charm as that of Fiske failed to discover these defects, and contrasted Parkman's Pontiac with Prescott's Montezuma, the former a man of warm flesh and blood, while the latter was a graven image that could be displayed and even worshipped without violation of the Mosaic commandment.

It would have been small marvel if style had been entirely wanting to the work of Parkman, when we consider the difficulties under which the greater portion of his immense labour was accomplished. The weakness of his eyes obliged him to acquire his knowledge through a different organ, and his reader was not always of the highest qualifications. Imagine the plight of an author who has to gather the meaning of a French authority from the lips of a Boston school girl unacquainted with any language but her own, and who is then compelled to dictate his work to an amanuensis or at times to write by means of a curiously constructed frame-work, with cross-bars to guide his hand along the interstices between the bars, pausing at intervals of five minutes to rest his brain, and frequently having to content himself with a half-hour's work per day. Style, forsooth! It is small reason for surprise if there were some truth in Theodore Parker's suspicion when he says "Some passages are left too imperfect. It seems as if you got vexed with the thing, and struck out a little recklessly, to hit or miss as it might happen. The style of the book often indicates haste—as do almost all American books—like everything else we do." We may confidently say that the charge of undue haste is wholly without justification. The author could not have hurried his performance, had he been ever so much inclined to do so. But, in any case, his search for the original authorities was thorough, not merely patient and laborious, but marked by the skill and resource of the trained detective, and when necessary it was prosecuted with the strategy of the consummate diplomatist.

But it is quite possible that the friendly criticisms by the great Boston preacher on style were not without result. If Parkman in his description of forests had failed to specify the trees, no such complaint can be made of his picture of the autumn scenery that greeted the eyes of Champlain when he set sail on 18th September, 1608,

leaving the illustrious explorer with twenty-eight men to hold Quebec through the winter:

Three weeks later, and shores and hills glowed with gay prognostics of early desolation, the yellow and scarlet of the maple, the deep purple of the ash, the garnet hue of young oaks, the crimson of the tupela at the water's edge, and the golden plumage of beech saplings in the fissures of the cliff. It was a short-lived beauty. The forest dropped its festal robes. Shrivelled and faded, they rustled to the earth. The crystal air and laughing sun of October passed away, and November sank upon the shivering waste, chill and sombre as the tomb.

One other excerpt may be quoted, because it gives in swift and sweeping generalization so vivid and perfect a panorama of the period delineated more at large in the author's writings:

The French dominion is a memory of the past; and when we invoke its departed shades, they rise upon us from their graves in strange, romantic guise. Again their ghostly camp fires seem to burn, and the fitful light is cast around on lord and vassal and black-robed priest, mingled with wild forms of savage warriors knit in close fellowship on the same stern errand. A boundless vision grows upon us, an untamed continent, vast wastes of forest verdure, mountains silent in primeval sleep, river, lake and glimmering pool, wilderness oceans mingling with the sky. Such was the domain which France conquered for civilization. Plumed helmets gleamed in the shade of its forests, priestly vestments in its dens and fastnesses of ancient barbarism. Men steeped in antique learning, pale with the close breath of the cloister, here spent the noon and evening of their lives, ruled savage hordes with a mild parental sway, and stood serene before the direst shapes of death. Men of courtly nurture, heirs to the polish of a far-reaching ancestry, here with their dauntless hardihood put to shame the boldest sons of toil.

Thus wrote the great word-artist of the earlier period to which his researches were directed. And in later volumes we have a no less interesting panorama of later times.

Something should be said, too, about Parkman as a man and a citizen. Among the things I like to know about one in whom I take any particular interest is the answer he makes to what the late Goldwin Smith called "the riddle of existence." Referring to Matthew Arnold, Gladstone once said that the eminent critic combined a fervent zeal for the Christian religion with a faculty for presenting it in such a form as to be recognizable by neither friend nor foe. Parkman made no pretence whatever to any belief in Christianity in any of its multiple forms. At a later date he made a fuller statement, in which he said:

It seems to me that the world has outgrown the dogmatic part of Christianity which has certainly been the source of misery enough in the past—especially the doctrine of Exclusive Salvation which is the main source of persecution. But when one compares Christianity on its ethical side with all other religious systems, with the partial exception of Buddhism, one cannot but feel that whether we believe in its supernatural origin or not, it is to be accepted with a reverent gratitude as a vast boon to mankind.

One of his daughters, in some verses written in his honour, described him as “a passionate Puritan”—a term which his biographer considers happily descriptive. But I think we get a truer idea of his religious attitude from his other daughter whose account of him as a “reverent agnostic” met with his own approval. He pronounced the *Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* “as good a philosophy of life as you can get.” For one reason or other, he seems to have been distinctly averse to the profession of his father. In his old age, writing of a boy who had been named after him, he said: “I hope the youngster will do honour to the name. He should be brought up to some respectable calling, and not allowed to be a minister.” His biographer seems to think that this remark was made jocosely, but proceeds to marshal the proof that the aversion was deeply fixed and permanent.

Parkman's temperament was without the least sentimentality, and I am not sure that it was not for that reason more or less defective. I doubt if to his nature, which was essentially aristocratic, the claims of the negro slave made any distinct appeal. Of course he was loyal to the cause of Union throughout the long-drawn agony of the Civil War, but “the Anti-Slavery Question was not a burning one with him.” Long after the war was over, however, he wrote: “Some half century ago a few devoted men began what seemed a desperate crusade against a tremendous national evil. American slavery has now passed into history. It died a death of violence, to our shame be it said; for the nation had not virtue, temperance or wisdom enough to abolish it peacefully and harmlessly.” Amid the post-war confusions and corruptions he conceived a profound disgust for the noisome political creatures who thrived in such an opportunity. I should judge him to have been at this time largely of the faith of Godkin's *New York Nation*. He had scant hope, if any at all, in democracy, and his views on the political doctrines of Jefferson were the same as those expressed by Macaulay in his famous letter to an American correspondent.

Parkman wrote a paper in 1879 exposing the evils of universal suffrage, a system which he thought all the more to be feared because of “the muddy tide of ignorance” rolled in upon the country through

its then unrestricted immigration. He disbelieved in woman suffrage, although he was deeply interested in such education for women as would make them adequate to the mothering of an educated people. As to reform movements in general, he would probably have concurred in the opinion of James Russell Lowell that all reformers are bores. In temperance matters he condemned "a Prohibition which does not prohibit, which in large communities does not prevent or even diminish drunkenness, but which is the fruitful parent of meanness, fraud, lying, and contempt of law." He did not believe in William Penn's policy for the Indians, and for the Indians of his own day his proposals were not pacifist: "The man best fitted to deal with Indians of hostile disposition is an honest, judicious and determined soldier."

On the subject of war his views resembled more nearly those of von Moltke than those of the present-day lovers of peace, though he would never have deceived himself with von Moltke's preposterous commendation of the battlefield as a prophylactic against materialism. He describes in *The Oregon Trail* a siesta that he was enjoying by the side of a deep, clear pool formed by the water of a spring. A shoal of little fishes of about a pin's length were playing in it, sporting together as it seemed very amicably, but on closer observation Parkman saw that they were engaged in cannibal warfare among themselves. Now and then one of the smallest would fall a victim, and immediately disappear down the maw of his conqueror, until a goggle-eyed monster would slowly emerge from under the shelving bank and the small fry would scatter in a panic at the appearance of overwhelming force:—"Soft-hearted philanthropists, thought I, may sigh long for their peaceful millennium; for from minnows to men, life is incessant war."

His misgivings for his own country were deep and painful. In his paper on universal suffrage Parkman pictures the American nation as "subject to the tyrant of organized ignorance, led by unscrupulous craft, and marching—amid the applause of fools—under the flag of equal rights." It may be a consolation for us to turn from this dismal forecast to his appraisal of the worth of our own motherland. In doing so we shall discover a wide departure from the hostile feelings with which he had begun his literary career. In the only serious poem which Parkman ever wrote, he makes the singer look forward with proud anticipation to the day when the Briton shall cease to lord it over the happy fields of New England:

Brave Briton, I could ever be
A comrade by thy side,
Around the merry camp-fire
Or in the battle's tide.

But I cannot brook thy haughty brow,
Thy bearing proud and high,
Thou'lt make a cold, disdainful friend,
But a gallant enemy!
I have dreamed it and I know it,
The day is coming yet
When axe and rifle-butt shall clash
With British bayonet.

And when that bloody morning comes,
Right welcome shall it be.

Such were the words which in 1845 the author put into the mouth of his pre-revolutionary minstrel. Perhaps they did not even then express his own actual feelings. Their significance may be wholly exhausted when we regard them in their proper light as a dramatic presentment. However that may be, it is pleasant to turn to his article in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* of 1863, where—speaking of England—he says:

Through centuries of striving she has advanced from stage to stage of progress, deliberate and calm, never breaking with her past, but making each past gain the basis of a new success, enlarging popular liberties, while bating nothing of that height and force of individual development which is the brain and heart of civilization.

The contrast here drawn by Parkman between his own country and its motherland suggests the question whether, if he were now living, he would or would not see a like contrast presented by those two great democracies at the present hour. The question is worth asking. But, in view of the recent experiences of Lord Birkenhead, the publicist who values his good name and his peace of mind will be slow to answer it.