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FRANCIS PARKMAN'S VIOLETS

The journals of Francis Parkman's expeditions into the American forest were seldom utilized by biographers shortly after his death in 1893, and for nearly a half century some of these journals were lost from sight. In 1940, searching for biographical material, the eventual editor of the journals, Mason Wade, discovered the missing volumes. Beneath the calumet, shield, bows and arrows which came from Parkman's 1846 sojourn among plains Indians and surrounded by volumes of Byron, Cooper, and Scott and pictures of scenes Parkman had visited in his youth, the missing journals were found in the desk of the attic study where, confined by ill health from the life and light of the Boston street below, Parkman had chronicled the struggle between France and England for the conquest of North America.¹

Clearly, the journals were an important find both for the glimpses they give of American society through the eyes of an opinionated young Bostonian and for the record they give of Parkman's methods of historical research. Searches for difficult-to-locate documents and histories and long hours in archives are indicated in them. There is revealed a scholarly, reflective side to the nineteenth-century American historian who more than any other, perhaps, admired and portrayed the man of action, and who injected into his histories elements of personal experience derived from a close knowledge gained from trips into the field: to the forest, to Indian tribes, and to ancient scenes of discovery or battle.

That the historian should be a man of action is a notion that goes back at least as far as Polybius, but with Parkman this injunction became an essentially romantic gesture which nonetheless permitted a considerable variety of expression. In his 1843 notebook, for instance,

an expedition into a New England forest is recorded with this entry: "This delicate little flower, whatever it be, I place here in memory of the grimmest, dismalest den on earth, where it grew among moist precipices and rotting logs."² The editor of the published edition of the journals adds in a footnote that "A flower, resembling a violet, was here pressed in the notebook."³ How romantic a gesture, doubly dramatic! Opposing the delicate blossom amid the rude and decaying woods, it implies the contrast between the active forest explorer and the same man in his scholarly retreat, notebook in hand, reflecting on the flower dried and pressed in its pages.

Parkman's violets appear not only in the impressions recorded in his notebooks, but throughout his volumes on New France and England in America glimpses of the forest historian are preserved on the pages. His practice of placing himself, whenever physically possible, on the site where the history he describes took place is one which only a few twentieth-century historians have found worth emulating, recognizing such sympathetic visitations as among the primary sources from which history can be imaginatively constructed.

Familiar romantic attitudes stand forth in some of the pictures of Parkman which are preserved. In the 1856 and 1866 journal is recorded a visit to the chapel of the Ursuline nuns where he saw the skull of General Montcalm, the French antagonist of one of Parkman's heroes, the British General Wolfe.⁴ Near Lake George we see him in the evening visiting the French graves.⁵ At Fort Ticonderoga he expresses a conventionally recognizable "astonishment at the extent of the ruins" and includes in his description the weeds and vines "clambering over the walls" and also the wish that the "senseless blockheads in the neighborhood" who have "stolen tons and tons of the stone to build walls and homes...meet their reward."⁶ Symbols of advancing time, not utility, appealed to him.

In still another scene, Glen's Falls, New York, the falls described in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Parkman sees nature and civilization in competition. The "noble cataract" has "a huge awkward bridge, thrown directly across it, with the addition of a dam above, and about twenty mills of various kinds." Though the scene provokes his anger, he concludes that the water still "comes down over the marble ledges in foam and fury, and the roar completely drowns the clatter of machinery."⁷ This preference for nature over the works of

industrialized civilization has had some currency since Parkman's time and appears in altered forms in both the histories of Samuel Eliot Morison and Bernard DeVoto. The romance of the graveside, however, seems an enthusiasm of an earlier age, though it makes an appearance as a sort of curiosity in the twentieth-century biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., by Catherine Drinker Bowen, who very practically worked out several pages of material from a drive to Holmes' grave at Arlington with Holmes' coachman.

From visits to other scenes, Parkman was capable of expressions other than the primarily romantic. In attempts to understand better both the Indians and the French missionaries about whom he was to spend his life writing, Parkman lived briefly with both—for several weeks among the plains Indians and for a similar period in a monastery of the Passionist monks in Rome. Writing of this years later, a certain ironic detachment entered into what had no doubt originally been an intense attempt to realize the life of two of the doomed types of mankind pictured in histories. He says, "I was led into a convent by the same motives that two years later led me to become domesticated in the lodges of the Sioux Indians at the Rocky Mountains, with the difference that I much preferred the company of the savages to that of the monks."⁸ Almost echoed here is the ironic equation of Edward Gibbon who in his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* claimed to "have described the triumph of barbarism and religion."

First-hand knowledge of the forest and of the Sioux qualified Parkman for a very practical kind of determination, the judgment and delineation of the characters who people his forest narrative. For instance, a portion of Father Hennepin's notoriously inaccurate account of his experiences as a captive of an upper-Mississippi tribe is certified by Parkman as a narrative which "only could have been written by one well versed in the savage life of this northwestern region."⁹ Elsewhere characters, as it has been noted by many who have commented on Parkman's narratives, are literally placed in scenes, and so vividly portrayed against a backdrop—forest clearing, lake shore, palisaded fort, or bivouac—which comes out of Parkman's personal experience.

The test of such an assertion, of course, must come from the histories themselves. One such scene in *LaSalle and the Discovery of the Great West* which presents the village of the Illinois tribe includes also a note

at the end of the chapter which explains how, working from documents and maps, Parkman guessed that the probable location of the village and a nearby French outpost was along the Big Vermilion River near the town of Utica. Journeying there in 1867, he viewed the hills, looking for land forms to match those he had gleaned from the accounts of French explorers. In the evening at the local Utica inn, matching the knowledge gained from his day's reconnaissance with ancient accounts, he surprised a gathering of local farmers with information about the Illinois village, which they knew only as a field which annually gave up human bones with spring plowing, and "Starved Rock", a local feature Parkman described accurately, though he did not examine it until the following day, confirming through the farmer's answers that he had discovered the location of the French fort called St. Louis, dating from 1682.¹⁰

The result in Parkman's narrative of LaSalle is this description which blends his reconnaissance along the Big Vermilion with his sojourn among the Sioux from over twenty years earlier:

Go to the banks of the Illinois where it flows by the village of Utica, and stand on the meadow that borders it on the north. In front glides the river, a musket-shot in width; and from the farther bank rises, with gradual slope, a range of wooded hills that hide from sight the vast prairie behind them. A mile or more on your left these gentle acclivities end abruptly in the lofty front of the great cliff, called by the French the Rock of St. Louis, looking boldly out from the forests that environ it; and, three miles distant on your right, you discern a gap in the steep bluffs that here bound the valley, marking the mouth of the river Vermilion, called Aramoni by the French. Now stand in fancy on this same spot in the early autumn of the year 1680. You are in the midst of the great town of the Illinois,—hundreds of matcovered lodges, and thousands of congregated savages. Enter one of their dwellings: they will not think you an intruder. Some friendly squaw will lay a mat for you by the fire; you may seat yourself upon it, smoke your pipe, and study the lodge and its inmates by the light that streams through the holes at the top. Three or four fires smoke and smoulder on the ground down the middle of the long arched structure; and, as to each fire there are two families, the place is somewhat crowded when all are present. But now there is breathing room, for many are in the fields. A squaw sits weaving a mat of rushes; a warrior, naked except his mocassins, and tattooed with fantastic devices, binds a stone arrow-head to its shaft, with the fresh sinews of a buffalo. Some lie asleep, some sit staring in vacancy, some are eating, some are squatted in lazy chat around a fire. The smoke brings water to your eyes; the fleas annoy you; small unkempt children, naked as young puppies, crawl about your knees and will not be repelled. You have seen enough. You rise and go out again into the sunlight. It is, if not a peaceful, at least a languid

scene. A few voices break the stillness, mingled with the joyous chirping of crickets from the grass. Young men lie flat on their faces, basking in the sun. A group of their elders are smoking around a buffalo-skin on which they have just been playing a game of chance with cherry-stones. A lover and his mistress, perhaps, sit together under a shed of bark, without uttering a word. Not far off is the graveyard, where lie the dead of the village, some buried in the earth, some wrapped in skins and laid aloft of scaffolds, above the reach of wolves. In the cornfields around, you see squaws at their labor, and children driving off intruding birds; and your eye ranges over the meadows beyond, spangled with the yellow blossoms of the resin-weed and the Rudbeckia, or over the bordering hills still green with the foliage of summer.¹¹

Set in contrast here is the scene as it appeared to Parkman with one that, as Parkman says, "one may safely affirm, was the aspect of the Illinois village at noon of the tenth of September."¹² And the scene effects a double contrast overall, for placed in the context of the narrative it is the calm before the storm, an interlude describing the domestic tranquility of a village about to be wiped out by warring Iroquois. A hint of Parkman's life-long interest in horticulture, even, is given in his mention of the meadow weeds. In Parkman's injunctions to the reader to "Go to the banks of the Illinois", to "enter one of their dwellings", and then once in the dwelling the annoying smoke and fleas and the "unkempt children" who "crawl about your knees and will not be repelled", causing you to have seen enough and "rise and go out again into the sunlight":—these addresses present Parkman himself, or at least the role he conceived for himself. In the one scene he stands in the village as a French explorer and in the other as the historian who has located the historical site, also a discoverer, but of a different kind, and less, perhaps, the man of action.

Bernard DeVoto observed that Parkman's inner longing for heroic action and undaunted achievement found its identification most fully in the character of General Wolfe, whose "famous remark that he would rather have written Gray's 'Elegy' than take Quebec" was followed in *Montcalm and Wolfe* by Parkman's statement that "'None were there to tell him that the hero is greater than the poet.'" DeVoto adds to this a judgment of his own, paying tribute not to the Parkman of the forest expedition but the Parkman of the attic study on Chestnut Street. "None could tell Parkman," DeVoto says, "that Wolfe is remembered not because he took Quebec but because Parkman wrote about his taking it."¹³

Samuel Eliot Morison has paid Parkman a different kind of tribute. In 1916 he conceived the idea of writing a history of Columbus using Parkman's methods of "field work, combined with historical imagination and a lively narrative style."¹⁴ He subsequently arranged a voyage to the West Indies, and in 1939, the Harvard Columbus Expedition, made up of a three-masted schooner and a ketch, which followed as nearly as practical the route of Columbus, checking winds, tides, and landfalls. Not surprisingly an identification, a sort of symbiotic relationship between Morison and the great explorer emerges from the pages of *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, where an historian's experience replaces armchair navigation. But in tracing Columbus' path there was a double identification, for Morison was following in the footsteps of the historian his grandfather knew, Francis Parkman.

Footnotes

1. Mason Wade, ed., *The Journals of Francis Parkman* (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1947), I, pp. xvii-xviii.
2. *Journals*, I, pp. 92-93.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
4. *Journals*, II, p. 517.
5. *Journals*, I, p. 48.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
8. "A Convent in Rome,," *Harper's*, 81 (August 1890), p. 450.
9. *LaSalle and the Discovery of the Great West* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1907), p. 231.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-224.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
13. Review of *The Parkman Reader*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison, in *New England Quarterly*, 28 (June 1955), pp. 266-267.
14. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1942) p. xvi.