History in the United States, 1800-1860

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Certain basic themes pervade the history written during the early nineteenth century, and these themes reveal many of the fundamental assumptions of that period. At the time men hardly thought of these themes as interpretations, for the word carries an implication of bias or tenuous hypothesis. Often the historian was hardly aware of the themes uniting his work, thinking of them as his techniques for making history interesting, or as incontestable facts. The interpretations which unite a generation of historians are generally more evident to subsequent observers than to the men who make them.

The historians of the early nineteenth century knew, of course, that they began with preconceived ideas; freely they admitted the obvious. "Every man," said one critic, "sits down to study under some mental influence or prepossession which unconsciously directs his attention to those facts, and those relations of facts, that are most in harmony with the idea latent in his mind." "You have but to select such facts as suit you," observed another critic, "and let your theory of history be what it will, you can have no difficulty in providing facts to prove it." The important thing was to begin with "right" assumptions, and since most men could agree on basic principles of morality, progress, patriotism, and the existence of God, these assump-
tions could be generally accepted as desirable unifying themes. Each person, of course, must "judge for himself, to adopt, discriminate and reject" the historian's assumptions, but this was hardly difficult. The critic never begrudged the historian the right to begin with preconceptions, just as he never doubted his own right to judge them.

Basic assumptions about life seemed not only inevitable but positively desirable as a means of finding meaning in history. Although men respected the compiler and were fascinated with detail, the historian's true occupation was more elevated. He had to "digest" the facts into "high-toned philosophical narrative." "With the qualifications of an antiquarian . . . the modern historian must combine those of a philosopher, deducing from the mass of general theorems." Reviewers observed that "the most perfect history when separated from its philosophical accomplishments, is, in reality, but a series of anecdotes." One critic was moved to Old Testament wrath at the idea of facts alone serving as history:

Thou hoary bookworm, whose life is almost worn out in the study of the past, what has it availed thee in the acquisition of true knowledge? Is thy spirit purer, wiser, or happier in the long research? . . . History has been to thee no teacher because thou hast dealt with the letter and not the spirit of her lessons . . . . Thou hast hoarded details . . . . Thou canst rehearse battles and successions,


boundary-lines and eras . . . but the subtle electric current that
floats on it, and with it, has never made itself known to thy mind.4

While critics disliked the interruption in flow that marked
eighteenth-century disquisition, they never maintained that the
facts spoke for themselves. The historian ought to generalize
boldly. All of the “various facts and details” should be gathered,
comprehended, and organized toward some elucidation, how­
ever modest, of “the general destinies of mankind.” History,
argued one critic should be “the product of reflection and
analysis—in which events and their significance . . . are crit­
ically determined, and distinctly and formally interpreted.”
“Large deductions must be made.” “Generalizations . . . alone
offer a rich field for moral, political and social studies.” A good
historian must penetrate the facts “with a burst of interpretive
speculation” to discover the truth in history.5

Essence and Causation

Interpretation is most necessary when facts alone seem in­
adequately revealing. In the twentieth century historians have
been preoccupied with causation, and interpretation has most
often involved emphasis on the facts that reveal the reasons for
change. In the early nineteenth century, however, historians were
less concerned with cause than with describing the inmost
essence of a society in the past, and, as a consequence, inter­
pretation involved particular emphasis on those facts which
best captured this elusive entity—for example, those which

4 L. J. B. C., “History,” Universalist Quarterly and General Review, I
(April, 1844), 165.
5 Anon., “Historical Studies,” Church Review, IV (April, 1851), 10; anon.,
“History and Its Philosophy,” Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, XI (April, 1868),
anon., “Recent Historical Revelations,” Eclectic Magazine, XLIV (July, 1858),
346; anon., “Thoughts on Writing History,” pp. 156–57; also, anon., “Hegel’s
Philosophy of History,” p. 2; anon., “Lord Macaulay As An Historian,”
North American Review, XCIII (October, 1861), 455; Willie, “Use of Imagi­
nation in the Study of History,” North Carolina University Magazine, IX
(May, 1860), 557.
demonstrated American democracy, or Puritan piety, or Spanish pomp. Understanding essence helped explain how change occurred, but the problem of change remained secondary.

Historians recognized well enough their concern with essence. This mysterious spirit deep within a society was related to what German Romantic historians called the *Zeitgeist*, though the term was not used in English until Matthew Arnold introduced it in 1884. Americans spoke variously of “the spirit of an age,” “the real character of a people,” “the current . . . of public feeling,” “the principle which vibrates through a nation’s pulse,” and “the informing spirit which gives life to the whole.” Using terms that sounded like those of Arnold Toynbee a century later, writers tried to define society’s essence: “In the history of every people who have become distinguished in the annals of the earth is found the manifestation of some predominant thought. This gives vitality to a people, stimulates their energies and makes them great.” The reviewer instructed historians to “deduce that great sentiment which it is the mission of a people to express and illustrate.”

The probing for essence usually led historians to treat each country separately in order to determine their distinguishing characteristics. Historians writing about Europe moved easily from the idea of essence to consideration of national character and race; and historians writing about America stopped barely short of race as they offered full descriptions of the type of people who lived in Massachusetts, New York, or Virginia. Similarly,

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writers dwelled on the particular spirit of each period, for example, the spirit of the Roman republic, of early American settlement, or of the Revolution.

Men tended to think of political, economic, ideological, and social factors not as causes of change, but as elements of the ever-flowing Zeitgeist. In discussing the movement for American independence, historians found that the facts "explained" the movement fully enough. Oppression, in a word, evident in a multitude of well-described incidents, stimulated a latent American spirit of independence. The historian's interpretive skill was necessary in analyzing that spirit. "The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people," wrote John Adams, who was always threatening to become a historian. It was the historian's duty, he believed, to describe the Revolution's essence—its "principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections." Similarly, the fall of Rome, the rise of Spain, or the coming of industrialization were to be described rather than explained; such events were evident in a changing psyche of the people, probably inspired by God, and probably illustrative of progress. The Zeitgeist was the cause, and it was tautological to look for the cause of the cause. Although historians spoke of causation, they usually related it to essence. "The historian must give us causes, connections, and consequences of events," said one critic, "by defining the invisible actuating spirit" of the age. The historian "unfolds the causes," said another, when he "collects in one grand coup-d'oeil, all those characteristic qualities, moral, intellectual, and physical, which constitute the national being." Causation as a key to understanding the past is largely a

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post-Darwinism concept. After Saint Augustine, men assumed that God was cause and that what happened in history was the will of God. Medieval and Reformation historians, such men as Cotton Mather in America, related the changes which God had decreed for society but did not consider why they occurred, except within the realm of theology. History was often neglected, therefore, because it could say little that theology could not explain better. The historians of the Renaissance, tentatively, and those of the eighteenth century, more confidently, substituted a combination of fortuity and human reason to explain change. To Voltaire and Gibbon, and to David Ramsay and Thomas Hutchinson in America, changes occurred for the better when men acted rationally and for the worse when they acted irrationally. The Romantic historians shifted the emphasis to morality; change was for the better when men acted morally. Still, they took cause almost for granted, to be observed rather than analyzed. Only in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as men began to disagree over moral interpretations and as Darwinism focused attention on the process of development, did thorough analysis of causative factors become the major task of the historian.

**Morality**

Early nineteenth-century American historical thought, like most other thought of the era, was permeated with moral consciousness. The Romantic movement in America, for all its insistence upon freedom from restraint, revived and intensified the Puritanical virtues. Transcendentalism emphasized self-control and rectitude; the fundamentalist revival stressed personal ethics; and popular literature was filled with didactic lessons about individual conduct and moral obligation. For the historian, an important means of grasping truth was having the right moral feeling, an important purpose of history was the promotion of morality, and the most pervasive single assumption was the existence of moral law.

Writers and critics of the Romantic period noted that "moral enthusiasm" distinguished the writings of their own generation.
from the history written before and after. On the one hand the
writings of Voltaire and Gibbon were "lacking [in] moral sen-
tsitivity," and "nowhere warmed by a generous moral sentiment." On the other hand young writers like Richard Hildreth in the
1850's were condemned for "moral indifferency," and the ab­sence "of an elevated standard of right." 12 Bancroft, Prescott,
Sparks, Motley, and Parker all wrote explicitly about the need
for ethical standards in historical writing. "The moral character
of events," said one reviewer is "the only standard by which the
events of history can be judged." 13

The men of the time defined standards of personal morality
as simply "the feelings and opinions which the vast majority
. . . hold sacred," the standard written in "the depths" of each
man's consciousness. 14 The particular virtues were evident in
the stereotypic Romantic hero: he was marked by strength of
will and character, self-reliance, integrity, piety, plain living,
industry, practicality, temperance, courage, and patriotism.
These were virtues of early nineteenth-century America, so taken
for granted as to be beyond dispute. The other end of the scale
was equally plain: it consisted of pride, pomp, deceit, luxury,
materialism, atheism, slothfulness, sensuousness, dissipation, and
effeminacy. These characteristics appeared explicitly when men
talked of the lessons history was supposed to inculcate.

The emphasis on morality, with the implication of absolute
right and wrong, came logically to rest in the concept of history
as a court of justice. Here was the final bar on earth where
deeds and men received their just reward or condemnation.
"The province of history is to establish a tribunal," said a critic,
"where princes and private men 'alike may be tried and judged

12 William Hickling Prescott, "Historical Composition," North American
Review, XXIX (October, 1829), 310-13; review, North American Review,
LXXXVIII (April, 1859), 462; Samuel G. Goodrich, History of All Nations
. . . (2 vols.; Cincinnati, 1852), I, 10.
13 See David Levin, History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley,
and Parkman (Stanford, 1959), pp. 24-27 and ff.; Michael Kraus, The Writing
of American History (Norman, Okla, 1953), pp. 147-48; review, North Ameri­
can Review, LXX (January, 1850), 299.
14 Anon., "Buckle's History of Civilization," North American Review,
XCIII (October, 1861), 559; Levin, History as Romantic Art, p. 29.
after death.” “It is her business,” said another, “to pass sentence... like a merciful, but righteous judge.”  

One writer believed that “Judgement in a historian is better than a facility in aggregating facts.” The historian-judge needed a keen moral sense and a rigid impartiality. “His sensibility to every moral sentiment, not only detects what is good or bad in human conduct, but is accompanied with an immediate approbation of the one, and abhorrence of the other.” Even if the judge made mistakes, “still it is better [that] the moral nature should act imperfectly than be set aside.”

The act of judging forced the historian to interpret in moral terms which gave unity and meaning to his writing. Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that only by measuring deeds against a moral standard did one learn from the past. The historian must “not suffer himself to be bullied by kings and empires,” he said, “and not deny his conviction that he is the court... If England or Egypt have anything to say to him he will try the case, if not let them forever be silent.” If moral judgment could be perfect, then the historian “would be the truest preacher, and... would sound forth with irresistible effect the lessons of duty.”

Judging men and events of the past gave men a comforting sense of correcting injustice and provided an important justification for the study of history. It was pleasant to play God and satisfying to believe that justice might finally be done on earth. The historian was “the great earthly judge, reprobating the inequities of the past.” The public “eagerly awaited” the his-

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torian’s verdict, “zealous to atone” for past neglect or misjudgment. Presumably, the future historian would also pass judgment, so that any good man could rest assured that posterity if not his contemporaries would cast opprobrium on his enemies and do justice to his memory.19

Although historians considered principles absolute for their own time, they generally acknowledged that historical understanding if not simple fairness required the judgment of a past society by its own standards. Critics noted that “the thought of a people or of an age must furnish the standard by which that people or age is to be judged”; “the standard of right in the nineteenth century is very different from what was acknowledged in the twelfth.” One reviewer maintained that “the most distinct and impressive teaching of history is, that not every opinion which springs up and has currency in a particular age, is true for all time.” 20

In practice, this moral enthusiasm caused almost every person and deed to undergo the historians' careful evaluation. In schoolbooks, popular literature, and scholarly books, characters and their actions were explicitly judged by an adjective or an essay. For the ablest literary artists, men like Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman, the good or evil characters of major protagonists became unifying themes of the entire work. Generally, a man's character was rather definitely fixed according to the cause to which he was committed. For an Indian fighting Europeans, a Spaniard fighting Englishmen or Dutchmen, or an Englishman fighting Americans, extraordinary action was necessary to transform inherent moral defect into a forgivable error.
of judgment. Antiquarians were usually hard pressed to find moral defects in any of the founding fathers.

Progress

Progress was another of the deeply pervasive assumptions of the early nineteenth century, though it too was often confused and even contradicted by its own corollaries. Men were torn between Thoreau's glorification of the simple life and Whitman's glorification of the age of steam, and it was difficult to reconcile the two. Along with progress, new ideas developed about the state of nature, the evolution from savagery to civilization, the guiding hand of God, free will, the nature of evil residing in corrupt institutions, and the greatness of the United States as the capstone of human history.

With regard to progress itself, virtually every historian accepted both the word and the principle as beyond dispute. Based on the eighteenth-century assumption that reason led to social improvement and buttressed by Transcendental faith in human aspiration, progress provided the underlying theme of human development. It was more certain than any series of historical facts; instead of facts establishing the existence of progress, progress established the accuracy of particular facts. "Man was made for progress," said the Transcendentalist philosopher, Orestes Brownson. "The historian should always assume man's progressiveness as his point of departure, and judge all the facts and events he encounters according to their bearing on this great theme." 21 Bancroft, given to analysis of his assumptions, wrote of The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race, explaining that the existence of human reason proved its necessity, every page of history proved its reality, and the existence of man's spiritual nature guaranteed its continuance. 22 Motley, Prescott, and Hildreth also wrote

22 (New York, 1854); Russel B. Nye, George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel (New York, 1945), pp. 96, 189, 196–98.
explicitly of progress as the central theme of history. Schoolbooks spoke of the “all-embracing” and “basic law” of human progress “from the lowly and desponding vale of struggle and obscurity, to the already lofty heights of wealth, of happiness, and of power.”

Men found it easy to define progress simply as the evolution of purer concepts of morality, religion, government, and science. The Greeks conquered barbarism, the Romans developed law, the Christians gave the world true religion, Spain created the modern national state, the German reformation provided moral regeneration, England built civil institutions, and America gave the world democracy. Sometimes historians called this the progress of philosophy from ignorance to truth; sometimes it was called the progress of civilization from barbarism to enlightenment. Within the frame of reference of recent American history, men saw progress in terms of the development of sentiment for independence, the purification of democracy, and, perhaps, the growth of abolitionist sentiment. Men noted that progress moved from east to west. The image of spiral progress provided a ready explanation of the temporary setbacks of righteous and progressive principles.

American historians never accepted the Garden of Eden or the idyllic state of nature as a historical phenomenon. Although schoolbooks usually began dutifully with the biblical account of creation, real history began after the Fall, as men struggled upward from barbarism to civilization. This struggle was most clear in the clash of paganism and Christianity. Although Europeans like Rousseau and Chateaubriand in their glorification of


24 See, Levin, History as Romantic Art, pp. 27–36.
the simple life had implied that the pristine German or Indian tribesman was superior to civilized man, Americans were too close to Indian wars for such a view. Americans saw progress from savagery to refinement, from primitive confusion to civilized harmony with nature. "Some traditions begin with a golden age of innocence and happiness; others with a state of original barbarism and wild disorder," explained a popular American textbook. "It is probable, however," explained the author, "even if we suppose a primeval state of knowledge and refinement, that mankind afterward descended to barbarism, from which they gradually arose to a full development of their faculties." 26

Progress and morality defined each other, since progress was inevitable and right was eventually triumphant. The historian had only to choose the victor to show what was progressive and good. Parkman pointed out, for example, that while the French may have protracted the Seven Years' War they could not possibly have won it, since the priesthood and absolutism of France were recognized evils; and Prescott proved that the Aztecs must have been immoral and despotic since they lost disasterously. America would have developed democratically no matter what the Mayflower Compact said; Washington would have eventually won no matter what happened at Yorktown. Historians lacking sufficient explanation for events could always rely on "the resistless march of progress," or "the great current of events" as the ultimate and obvious explanation. 26

Americans easily transferred their own experience as a nation into generalizations about all history. Local antiquarians, far more than literary historians, found the theme of progress self-evident in the growth of struggling settlements into flourishing cities. To them, progress was not only philosophical but concrete and physical. This American experience, evident in every man's memory and confirmed by every local chronicler, provided an ideological base for the more sophisticated thought of historians and for the more virulent evolutionary progress which reached a peak after Darwin.

26 Levin, History as Romantic Art, p. 28.
For most historians the concept of progress rested comfortably on parallel assumptions about God. Religious feeling characterized the American Romantic movement, permeated almost all fields of thought, and seemed especially to mark history. Not a single significant historian of the period professed agnosticism; Prescott, Motley, and Parkman constantly observed "the workings of Providence"; Bancroft, Sparks, and Palfrey, along with a clear majority of the schoolbook authors and local chroniclers, were clergymen. Aware that piety marked their own generation, critics rejoiced that eighteenth-century free thought was "no longer present" in historical writing. With correct attitudes toward religion, "the events more naturally fall into their places." Religion, claimed an observer, guaranteed "a more profound understanding of the hidden links of events." A reviewer noted that "historians have been successful in proportion as they have recognized a providential plan in the career of the world." By the middle of the century critics frowned at the appearance of younger writers led by Professor Ranke, who are "too much occupied with their learned researches to pay much attention to God." 27

God, in turn, helped explain both morality and progress. The presence of God presupposed right behavior, and piety in any man was an important measure of his morality. God also insured progress, the inevitable natural process of history. According to David Levin in his close analysis of four Romantic historians, progress was a march "toward nineteenth century Unitarianism." 28 The triumph of Christianity over paganism was invariably good, whether in the ancient world against Rome, in Spain against the Moors, or in the New World against the Indians. Almost unanimously American historians approved the Protestant Reformation. For Irving, Motley, and Prescott, the once-pious Spaniards suddenly became priest-ridden and fanatical in contrast with the progressive religionists of England or Hol-

28 Levin, History as Romantic Art, p. 32.
land; for Parkman and Bancroft, the formerly brave Jesuits of North America now appeared evil alongside of the Protestant settlers. To Bancroft, Sparks, Palfrey, and Hildreth, Puritan piety was at first inspiring and beautiful, but was then perverted by witch trials and rationalist agnosticism. Piety and enlightenment combined during the early nineteenth century, especially in New England. A few Southern historians like Charles Etienne Gayarré and George Tucker modified God’s plan for the world as sectionalism required.

Preconceptions about morality, progress, and God led historians to polar preconceptions about immorality, decay, and evil. As men struggled to live a moral life, they were tempted. As societies carried forward the banner of progress, they grew old and decadent. As God was a force, so was Satan. The clearest signs of decay were wealth and tyranny. With increasing wealth, plain living gave way to self-indulgence, dissipation, and torpor. The people, or at any rate the upper classes, became tyrannical, arrogant, and cruel. Ignorance and superstition spread; the society collapsed from within.

Decay could occur wherever great wealth or tyranny appeared. Most primitive societies, Prescott’s Aztecs and Incas, for example, or Parkman’s Iroquois, revealed this evil. Almost every schoolbook found luxury, immorality, and despotism in the late Roman empire. These were the characteristics of the Spanish Habsburgs, the Roman Catholic priesthood, the French Bourbons, and, increasingly, of the English monarchy. “It is difficult,” confessed one writer, “for the mind to conceive of characters more selfish, profligate and vile, than the line of English kings, with two or three doubtful exceptions, have uniformly exhibited from the earliest periods to the present day.” Historians thus discovered a law of aristocratic degeneracy. “It is so, and always has been so, with every aristocracy that the world has produced.”

29 Wealth was acceptable, of course, if it was well dis-

tributed and if it did not breed indolence. To historians writing about the United States or their own local areas, however, improving economic statistics were a sign of progress, not decadence. Simple, democratic people like the American pioneers regularly infused a moral regeneration into the stream of history. Benefiting from the previous progress of civilization but escaping from degeneracy in the world around them, vigorous men carried the torch forward. The early Christians, the early Renaissance Spaniards, the northern Europeans of the Reformation, the English yeomanry, and, finally, the Americans each in turn served mankind by their renewed sense of morality, their simple innocence, and their youthful vigor. For many of the literary historians, including Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman, the great drama of history was the clash of the simple and vigorous with the old and decayed, always with predictable result. For the historian, as for the theologian, immorality and decay were instruments for regeneration and further progress.

The assumption of progress led historians to think of origins, to look for the earliest seeds of national institutions. Often institutions and ideas seemed to grow from primitive origins, from the inspiration of vigorous new people. The concept of liberty, for example, appeared to have come into the modern world from the German forests, to have evolved through the British parliamentary system, and to have been reinvigorated in the American colonies where it reached its culmination. The American spirit seemed evident at Jamestown and Plymouth. Bancroft observed, typically, that “The maturity of the nation is but the continuation of its youth,” and he promised to dwell “at considerable length on this first period, because it is the germ of our institutions.” Hildreth likewise promised “to trace our institutions, religious, social, and political, from their embryo state”; and local writers volunteered to emphasize “the seeds of things, watch their first germinations, observe their gradual growth, and witness their flowering and fruit.”

30 George Bancroft, History of the United States . . . (10 vols.; Boston, 1834–75). I, vii; Richard Hildreth, The History of the United States of
Progress became easily entwined not only with morality but also with assumptions about American character and democracy. If mankind had evolved toward New England Unitarianism, it had also evolved toward the American system of government. A verbose Boston historian, Samuel Eliot, began a twelve-volume *History of Liberty*, of which he completed four volumes, tracing the evolution of government upward from the Greeks to the Americans. “The history of Liberty,” said Edward Everett in a typical Fourth of July oration, “is the real history of man.”  

Bulfinch writing on Charlemagne, Irving on Christopher Columbus, Motley on the Dutch, and almost every state and town chronicler established his topic as an episode in the development of American democracy. “We are here to work out, not alone our destiny, but that of the whole world,” said a popular schoolbook. “Here, for the first time in human history, man will be truly man... Here shall be realized the long-prophesied, long-expected *Golden Age.*”  

**National Character**

The early nineteenth-century approach to history pointed to nationalism and, ultimately, racism. Emphasis on the “essence” of a people prepared the way for evaluation of national traits; conscious dramatization and shading of characters invited the use of national types as a leitmotiv; assumptions of progress implied that each nation or race provided a step upward; and, most of all, the Americans’ conviction of separateness and superiority contributed to the impression that the genes some-

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how dictated national character. Although few American historians of the early nineteenth century were prepared to offer a coherent theory of racial traits, they had more than they realized come to depend upon preconceptions about national traits to dramatize and even to explain the course of history.

Americans arrived at their assumptions about national character earlier than most people in western society. Gibbon and Hume had specifically ridiculed the concept, and during the early decades of the nineteenth century all leading English historians avoided the pitfall. In America, however, soon after the Revolution the early geography textbooks of Noah Webster and Jedidiah Morse introduced generalizations about national manners and morals which suggested racial traits. Scholars like David Ramsay and Timothy Pitkin accepted racial characteristics to explain the Negroes and Indians who lived among them. Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson infused the concept into the Unitarianism and Transcendentalism which influenced so many historians. German education and German Romantic nationalism influenced Bancroft and Motley directly, and filtered indirectly into the thinking of Sparks, Prescott, Parkman, and Hildreth. By the 1830's, in any case, most of America's best historians assumed the existence of national character as a racial trait. Rapidly, it seeped from scholars into schoolbooks and popular thought.33

At the bottom of the racial scale but often omitted altogether from mention was the Negro “savage” of Africa. Historians commonly believed that all black Africans were “of the same species,” that they had always existed in a “rude and barbarous state,” that they were “lacking in vigor of mind,” were “despotic and warlike,” but were also “gentle, faithful and affectionate.” Although ferocity and docility appear contradictory, both were based on evidence and the contradiction had to stand. North-

erners and southerners found little to quarrel about in this characterization, for even outspoken abolitionists like Richard Hildreth thought of the African as "a most objectionable species of population." Since most national historians were northerners, however, they found it easiest to avoid discussion of the Negro himself and focus instead on the evils of slavery. Although they spoke as publicists rather than historians on the issue, few scholars or textbook authors could refrain from at least a veiled attack on the institution. George Bancroft, combining racism with hatred of slavery, suggested that slavery had elevated the Negro and then become obsolete. "But for the slave-trade," he observed, "the African race would have had no inheritance in the New World." 34

Romanticists both in Europe and America were fascinated with the American Indian as the complete barbarian and the uncorrupted child of nature. First, he was a barbarian, above the Negro and above savagery, but unalterably primitive. He was baffled by abstractions and unable to grasp concepts of morality. A slave to his impulses rather than their master, he was a sensualist with no concept of propriety, a liar, a thief, and a murderer. Although admirably democratic in the United States, the more advanced Indians of Mexico quickly became materialistic, inclined to luxury, and, consequently, inclined to despotism. The Indians always were noted for dishonesty and treachery. Americans emphasized their "sanguinary character," their bloody raids on unsuspecting families, their legendary tortures, and their human sacrifices. Ultimate proof of Indian depravity appeared in their apparent inability to accept a superior civilization, particularly the concepts of Protestant Christianity. One critic has observed that careful literary historians like Prescott and Parkman utilized the Indian to fit the Romantic convention of Gothic villainy, of dark, shadowy,

diabolical terror. To almost every historian, at the very least the Indian stood in the way of mankind's progress.35

The inevitability of Indian defeat, however, made him into a sympathetic figure also. Indians were children of nature, in perfect harmony with the forest, simple and unspoiled, but destined to destruction by the march of civilization. Their defense of home and freedom was in accord with natural law, and in this cause even their ferocity “invests their character with a kind of moral grandeur.” Historians found the essence of tragedy in the clash of two laws of nature, the one which guaranteed the Indian his land and the apparently stronger law of progress. The Indian gave way to the settler as the forest gave way to the farm. Prescott and Parkman created their major works on this theme of the Indian's tragic fate. “Shall we not drop a tear?” asked Bancroft, indulging himself in the sweet sadness of the Indians' doom. Local historians, especially in the West, generally managed to counter their hatred of the Indian with a sad awareness of his fate. By the 1850's, however a few critical historians like Hildreth had rejected sentiment to embrace a much harsher racism.36

Somewhere above the Indian, though probably related, were the infidel oriental “nationalities,” variously including the Moors, Turks, Jews, Chinese, and Malayans. Although American historians dealt little with these exotic peoples, schoolbooks clearly defined their traits, and they frequently appeared on the scene in minor roles. Orientals, unlike American Indians, were generally marked by over-refinement, decadence, and torpor.


36 Worcester, Elements of Geography, p. 12; Bancroft, History of the United States, II, 266–69; Samuel Gardner Drake, Biography and History of the Indians of North America (Boston, 1837); Henry Howe, Historical Collections of the Great West . . . (2 vols.; Cincinnati, 1851); Hildreth, History of the United States, pp. 50–70; see also Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land, The American West As Symbol and Myth (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), passim.
Love of vast riches, immorality, and cruel despotism marked their character. They were more civilized than the Indian but “less active and enterprising; more effeminate in their character and habits.” Prescott and Irving, unable to hide admiration for Moorish Spain, employed the theme used for Indians, the tragic and inevitable fall of inferior peoples. For most Americans, however, this failed to diminish the simpler images of “Oriental despotism” and the sensualism of the harem.37

National stereotypes almost faded before religious emotions when American historians considered the Spaniards, Italians, French, and Irish. Running through the works of virtually all of the great literary historians, through those of hundreds of local chroniclers, blatant in popular magazines, and in almost every schoolbook, the hatred of Roman Catholicism colored the sweep of history. Sophisticated writers like Prescott and Parkman dramatized the theme of the sympathetic Indian against civilization, and the countertheme of savagery against fanatical Catholicism. “Popery” seemed both unreasonable and unnatural to most Americans, a relic of the past, epitomized by the sallow, effete, thin-lipped Jesuit. The Church remained, however, not so much a corrupt institution which fostered authoritarianism as a refuge for decadent, superstitious, authoritarian, morally lax peoples. Without the Church such people would have hardly been different. Racially they were Latin or Celts, characterized by emotional instability, indolence, and greed. Specific traits marked each one—Spanish pride, Italian affability, French refinement, and Irish passion.38

The Germans, Dutch, and English represented vigor and a striving for liberty. Romantic historians looked to the ancient forests of northern Europe for the men who carried civilization to


new heights. Spontaneous folk, free from artificiality and corrup­
ting institutions, they provided the primitive vigor for prog­
ress. Their simple instincts led them to piety, aspiration, self­
reliance, and industry. Their special gift, however, was
independence, a love of liberty, a determination to protect liberty
through democratic institutions. Historians seeking the origins of
tolerance, democracy, or the various institutions of representative
government assumed that they must look for the Teutonic
embryos. Rising German nationalism of the early nineteenth
century emphasized the Volk virtues and the forest origins of
institutions. Americans like Emerson and Bancroft easily absorbed
the German theories. Toward the middle of the century, as race
became increasingly basic to these traits, Americans assumed
that the German–English racial heritage was also their own.39

Assumptions about Teutonic traits provided a distinctly post­
Gibbon explanation of the fall of Rome. “The corrupted Roman
world,” observed a popular textbook of the 1830’s, “could not but
fall before such a people.” German piety explained the strength
of medieval Christianity. The Reformation was a reassertion of
that piety but, far more, was a reassertion of the German spirit
of liberty. Prescott suggested that a Visigothic heritage and
possibly the Magna Carta invigorated fifteenth-century Spain
and inspired Ferdinand and Isabella to become liberated from
the Moors. Motley observed that the history of liberty was
“essentially the same, whether in Friesland, England, or Massa­
chusetts”; Bancroft promised to trace liberty from “that Germanic
race most famed for love of personal independence”; and Park­
man gloried in the “ancient energy, that wild and daring
spirit, that force and hardihood of mind, which marked our
barbarous ancestors of Germany.” The differences between the
nationalities were less important—German idealism and serious­
ness, Dutch industry and frugality, and English intelligence and
enterprise.40

39 See Gossett, Race, pp. 84–122; Levin, History as Romantic Art, pp. 74–
92; Ralph Waldo Emerson, English Traits (Boston, 1856).
40 Royal Robbins, The World Displayed in Its History and Geography
(2 vols.; New York, 1839), II, 361; Alexander Fraser Tytler, Elements of
Finally, of course, the chosen people, the Americans, entered. The glorification of American character stemmed from all the assumptions about morality, God’s guidance, progress, and the existence of national traits. Further stimulus came from the natural filial piety of the young nation and from the exuberant nationalism which flowered after the war of 1812. For textbook authors, American superiority was not only an interpretive assumption, but also a major lesson for history to reveal. For popular writers—such as Weems, Irving, Barber, Headley, Lossing, and Parton—revelation of American traits allowed both reverent display of honest emotion and deliberate appeal for sales. Assumption of the superior traits of Americans supplied Prescott and Motley with a standard by which to measure other peoples; it provided inspiration for compilers and local chroniclers; it was a motivation for such national historians as Holmes, Pitkin, Sparks, and Bancroft. The cynical Hildreth, who ostentatiously condemned “centennial sermons and Fourth-of-July orations,” came closest of all to a frankly racial explanation of American character.

Historians generally assumed that the religious basis of settlement, the simple pioneer life, and the widespread landholdings all reinvigorated the virtues once ascribed to the Northern Europeans. Above all, Americans loved liberty, hated oppression and aristocracy, were democratic and willing to sacrifice personal gain for the common good. Their plain life promoted moral strength—the qualities of industry, temperance, and self-reliance that historians celebrated in defining moral virtue.41 Most writers found a distinctly conservative tendency in the American character. Even devoted Jacksonians like George Bancroft emphasized the nonradical, nonviolent stance of Americans, and viewed the


American Revolution as a defense of ancient liberties, property, and the status quo. Although Bancroft praised Bacon's Rebellion as a harbinger of independence, he joined the majority of his contemporaries in condemning Shays' Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion as dangerously subversive. Northern and southern historians, as they gradually began using history to attack each other, compared northern traits of piety and industry with southern traits of honor and graciousness. Such concepts could be made laudatory or pejorative as necessary.

The Romantic approach to history ended, however, when historians ceased to share assumptions and began to prove their own theses. Readers were eager for their historians to interpret the past as long as they agreed with the basic interpretations. An era of historical writing was marked by general consensus about essence, morality, progress, and national character. When men began to disagree about these things, a different approach to historical scholarship and a different kind of history were required.