

DAVID LEVIN



# History as Romantic Art

*Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman*



AMS Press, Inc.  
New York  
1967

Reprinted 1967 by arrangement with Stanford University Press.  
© 1959 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.

AMS Press, Inc.  
New York, N.Y. 10003  
1967

*Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 59-10634*

Manufactured in the United States of America

For  
*Patricia Marker Levin*



## Acknowledgments

In preparing this book I have received invaluable aid from a number of colleagues and former teachers. I owe an immense debt to Professor Perry Miller, whose criticism has helped me immeasurably since the time he was my tutor in Harvard College, and whose lectures on *Romanticism in American Literature* supplied me with essential insights to the period. I am grateful, also, to Professor Oscar Handlin for helpful criticisms, suggestions, and encouragement; and to my colleague Professor Yvor Winters and Professor Kenneth Murdock, both of whom graciously allowed me to audit their lectures on American historians as men of letters. Among other kind friends who read portions of the manuscript, Professors Charles A. Allen, Howard Mumford Jones, Thomas C. Moser, Thomas Pressly, and Henry Nash Smith should recognize their valuable suggestions in the text. I am deeply indebted to the Massachusetts Historical Society for permission to use the papers of George Bancroft, George E. Ellis, Edward Everett, Francis Parkman, and W. H. Prescott; to Mr. Stephen T. Riley, Director of the Society; to the editorial staff of the Stanford University Press; and to Mr. Walter W. Isle, who prepared the Index.

Chapter VII was published in substantially the same form in the Prescott memorial issue of *The Hispanic-American Historical Review* (February, 1959).

## Preface

Historians and literary critics have always placed William Hickling Prescott, John Lothrop Motley, and Francis Parkman alongside Henry Adams as the giants of nineteenth-century American historical writing, and they have usually regarded George Bancroft as an important, if wayward, pioneer. Of the four older writers, however, only Parkman has received much critical attention during the last fifty years, and most studies of Parkman and the others have concentrated more on biography than on the historical works. The standard literary histories, moreover, recognize some affinity among the four historians, but then treat them separately, underscoring their individual differences.

There are good reasons, of course, for emphasizing biography. Bancroft the transcendental Democrat—who earned a German doctorate in philology, talked with Goethe about Byron and Coleridge, and then came home to found a progressive school and to enter politics as campaign biographer, Secretary of the Navy, diplomat—is an extremely attractive, difficult figure. Although his *History of the United States* expresses a notoriously effusive patriotism that he called “objective,” he was capable of great shrewdness not only in political strategy but in perceiving the subjectivity of other historians.

Bancroft's close friend Prescott had a much less complex career and a much less puzzling personality. But his biography gains considerable interest from the collegiate injury that nearly blinded him and from the determination with which, though wealthy enough to live an easy life, he relied on one eye for his writing and the aid of an oral reader for his research. A bland, charming conservative, he seems no less different from the energetically Democratic Bancroft than from Parkman and Motley, both of whom seem to have suffered from neurotic anxieties.

Motley, too, was comfortably rich, and he spent most of his adult years traveling and writing in the high society of Boston, England, and the Continent: joining Thackeray and Macaulay at dinner; living as the guest, first, of the Queen of the Netherlands, and then, of his old friend Bismarck. But his career also had its gloomier drama. His passionate devotion to honor and justice spilled out not only onto the pages of his histories of the Nether-

lands, but into two diplomatic controversies that cost him his posts as Minister to Austria and then as Minister to Great Britain.

Parkman's life is surely the best known and the most pathetic of the four. The grim intensity with which he tracked down historical facts and vigorous experience in Nature makes a fine subject in itself. But his story becomes irresistible when one watches him work daily for only a few minutes, after a doctor has warned him that concentrated thought will drive him mad. His contempt for physical weakness, his passionate attacks on woman suffrage, and his heroic efforts to continue strenuous exercise after he had been crippled by arthritis give a peculiar interest to his historical achievement and his portraits of manly heroes.

These differences are important, and no critic of the histories can ignore them. But they can too easily tempt one to ignore even more relevant similarities. Although Prescott and Bancroft were students at Harvard before Motley and Parkman were born, it is more important to notice that all four went to Harvard; that Motley studied at Bancroft's Round Hill School; that Parkman read Bancroft's volume on La Salle and the Jesuits carefully in the year before he decided that he himself would write a history of France and England in North America. Both Motley and Parkman consulted Bancroft about various parts of their histories, and Bancroft and Prescott frequently consulted each other. All four historians, moreover, looked on the Past from a common geographical and cultural position.

Even if these biographical facts were not available, the massive evidence heaped up in the histories themselves and in the historians' journals and correspondence would make the relationship quite clear. In this book, therefore, I have declined to assume that the uniqueness of a writer's psychological experience or political ideas explains his most significant literary techniques. The evidence has forced me to ask instead whether other causes might not have been equally influential. If Bancroft's La Salle differs little from Parkman's, and if both La Salles resemble some characters of Byron's, then Parkman's battle with his own mysterious "Enemy" (his undiagnosed malady) does not necessarily explain his portrayal of La Salle.

For these reasons I have concentrated first on the histories and papers of all four men and on their relationship to other writers. One cannot understand the individual history without understanding its vocabulary and its context. In Parts 1 and 2 I have delineated the literary conventions that function in all these histories, and I have examined the relationship between the historian's assumptions and his literary techniques. In short, I have tried here to combine literary and intellectual history with literary criticism.

Clarifying the histories has also required me to answer some important questions about American versions of romantic thought. The common notion that Prescott, Motley, and Parkman sought some kind of escape from the Present into the Past is erroneous. Nor did Prescott try, as one critic has claimed, to put the Past safely away in a separate place. All three Brahmins sought as earnestly as Bancroft to give the meaning as well as the experience of history an immediacy in their own time. They all shared an "enthusiastic" attitude toward the Past, an affection for grand heroes, an affection for Nature and the "natural." But whether he approached the darker vision of Hawthorne and Melville or the expansive optimism of Whitman, every one of them saw history as a continuing development toward nineteenth-century America, the most "natural" of nations. Their histories tell a remarkably consistent, composite story of Western development from the Reformation through the American Revolution. They regarded romantic conventions not as meaningless stereotypes, but as effective ways of communicating a message that all their literate contemporaries would understand.

One of my major purposes, then, is to illuminate the individual histories by studying conventional themes, characters, and language in all of them. Yet this process of abstraction inevitably causes some distortion. When a conventional character is lifted out of the history in which he was originally placed, he may seem as lonely and unreal as the Byronic hero himself. For this reason, and because the evaluation of any work of art must consider it as a unit, I have devoted Part 3 to separate studies of the three best histories: Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico*, Motley's *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, and Parkman's *Montcalm and Wolfe*.

My judgment of these three masterpieces proceeds from a few convictions that can be stated briefly. I believe that the writing of history is a literary art, and that history is one of the most difficult of literary forms. However "scientific" the historian's preoccupations or research, he must eventually select the evidence that merits preservation in his work, and any principle of selection implies at least the quest for a coherent order, the choice of one or two major themes. If he believes that individual experience affects the development of history, he must find some convincing way of portraying human character, and he cannot avoid some evaluation of character. He must also arrange the events so that those which he considers most important appear to be the most important, while his narrative reveals a coherent relationship among events, between action and character, between particular fact and general principle.

These are literary problems, but one cannot divorce them from more narrowly "historical" questions without risking the absurdity that H. H. Brackenridge ridiculed when he wrote his model of pure form unencumbered by content. No serious student of history or literature will actually read Motley or Prescott "for his style," although some people talk of doing so. The judgment of a historian's characterization, his structure, and even his style must be based at least partly on his fidelity to the evidence and the validity of his interpretation. The history written by previous generations will always display interesting contemporary attitudes, but it can endure as literature only if it presents a defensible version, however liable to revision, of historical truth.

Clearly, then, the criticism of history, like the writing of history, demands more gifts than most men who attempt it can bring to it. The ideal critic of these four historians should know the literary materials on which I shall draw so heavily, and the historians' own sources as well: the records of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain, France, England, Mexico, Peru, and the Netherlands; of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, England, and America. Since I cannot pretend to such erudition, I have had to rely on secondary materials for those periods, except for some random checking and the original research that I have done in American colonial history. The accuracy of particular statements of fact in the New England histories lies beyond my chief interest here and, with few exceptions, beyond my competence. I have assumed that transcriptions of documents in the histories are accurate, and my judgment of the historians' interpretations usually focuses on general questions or on those that can be discussed on the basis of internal evidence. One should understand, however, that although each of these historians has been criticized with varying severity for some faulty research, specialists in their different fields agree that most of their research was sound.

D. L.

*Stanford University*  
*July 10, 1959*



# Contents

---

## PART ONE

### *Romantic Attitudes: Themes and Judgment*

CHAPTER 1	The Historian as Romantic Man of Letters	3
CHAPTER 2	Nature, Progress, and Moral Judgment	24

## PART TWO

### *Conventional Characters: Individuals and Races*

CHAPTER 3	Representative Men	49
CHAPTER 4	Teutonic Germs	74
CHAPTER 5	Priestcraft and Catholicism	93
CHAPTER 6	The Infidel: Vanishing Races	126

## PART THREE

### *The Achievement: History as Romantic Art*

CHAPTER 7	The Conquest of Mexico	163
CHAPTER 8	The Rise of the Dutch Republic	186
CHAPTER 9	Montcalm and Wolfe	210
CHAPTER 10	Conclusion	229
	Notes	233
	Index	257

1

ROMANTIC ATTITUDES

*Themes and Judgment*



## CHAPTER I

# The Historian as Romantic Man of Letters

---

*In short, the true way of conceiving the subject is, not as a philosophical theme, but as an epic in prose, a romance of chivalry; as romantic and chivalrous as any which Boiardo or Ariosto ever fabled . . . ; and which, while it combines all the picturesque features of the romantic school, is borne onward on a tide of destiny, like that which broods over the fiction of the Grecian poets; for surely there is nothing in the compass of Grecian epic or tragic fable, in which the resistless march of destiny is more discernible, than in the sad fortunes of the dynasty of Montezuma. It is, without doubt, the most poetic subject ever offered to the pen of the historian.*

PRESCOTT, Notebooks IX (MHS)

*Before me lies a bundle of these sermons, rescued from sixty score years of dust, scrawled on their title-pages with names of owners dead long ago, worm-eaten, dingy, stained with the damps of time, and uttering in quaint old letterpress the emotions of a buried and forgotten past.*

PARKMAN, *Montcalm and Wolfe*

Behind all the histories of George Bancroft, William Prescott, John Motley, and Francis Parkman lies the conviction that the historian is a man of letters. Although their names dominated American historical writing for fifty years, every one of these men had established a place in the New England literary community before he wrote a word of history. Bancroft published a volume of poetry and wrote regularly for *The North American Review*; Prescott wrote a series of critical essays for the same journal; Motley published two historical novels, two essays on Goethe, and a long essay on Balzac for *The North American Review*; and before Parkman began his *France and England in North America*, he had written *The Oregon Trail*, a critical essay on Cooper, and his only novel. Of the

four, only Parkman had decided in his earliest adult years to write a major history, but by the time he made that decision as a college freshman in 1841 he had the examples of Washington Irving, Jared Sparks, Prescott, and Bancroft.<sup>1</sup>

Membership in this literary aristocracy did not mean being a professional writer. The New England man of letters was a gentleman of letters, trained for some other, more "useful" profession and usually practicing it. Bancroft prepared for the ministry; Prescott, Motley, and Parkman made gestures toward the law. Both Motley and Bancroft tried to build careers in politics even after they had written their most successful histories, and Motley tried strenuously to get himself appointed to a Columbia professorship in history.<sup>2</sup> None of these men, moreover, had to write history for a living; they all considered some other useful occupation a duty, and Prescott and Parkman were prevented mainly by their physical disabilities from putting historiography in its "proper" place as an avocation.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the four historians typified the large community of men of letters that distinguished Unitarian Boston in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. They belonged to the world of the Everett brothers: Alexander, the diplomat, editor, essayist; and Edward, the minister, orator, politician, professor, college president. As a diplomat in Spain, Alexander served as Prescott's agent, document hunter, and overseer of copyists, and in England Edward performed the same favor—as well as some free copying himself—for Bancroft. As editors, at different times, of *The North American Review*, both brothers acted to introduce foreign literature to America and to encourage American writers. Motley's closest friend was Oliver Wendell Holmes, the doctor; Prescott's two confidential advisers were George Ticknor, a lawyer first and later a scholar, and William Howard Gardiner, another lawyer who revised Prescott's *Ferdinand and Isabella* for publication and then wrote a laudatory review of it.<sup>4</sup>

During the early years of Unitarianism, then, it was the Bostonian gentleman's duty to promote American letters, and the Unitarian ministers set the example. Perhaps O. B. Frothingham exaggerated when he defined the most conservative ministers' belief as "literary Unitarianism," but the phrase named a fundamental interest of the whole fraternity, conservatives and radicals alike. Joseph Buckminster, William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Jared Sparks, Andrews Norton, George Ripley, Charles W. Upham, John Gorham Palfrey, Edward Everett, George Bancroft—all were Unitarian ministers even more dedicated than their seventeenth-century predecessors to encouraging scholarship and good literature.

Indeed the reputations of Sparks and Bancroft did not suffer noticeably when the two young ministers decided to abandon the pulpit for scholarship, teaching, and letters. (As a new minister Sparks had been praised by his Boston friends for his delivery, but his style, one of them wrote, turned out to be "rather inferior to what we expected.")<sup>5</sup> Even Emerson was cherished in the fold until he was identified as archangel of "The Latest Form of Infidelity."

These Unitarian ministers also perpetuated their Puritan ancestors' strong interest in history. Whatever their allegiance in the Unitarian-Transcendentalist war, the question of the historicity of miracles engaged their attention.<sup>6</sup> For the rational, orthodox Unitarian, who had been repelled by trinitarian dogma, theology itself was a historical science, to be based on verifiable evidence. Andrews Norton, who had *not* gone to Germany to be corrupted by the most irreverent Biblical critics, wrote volumes emphasizing the historicity of miracles as the basis for Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> And Harvard sent young George Bancroft to study under Johann Eichhorn at Göttingen, there to be made into "an accomplished philologist and Biblical critic, able to expound and defend the oracles of God."<sup>8</sup> By thus pointedly reminding Eichhorn of the conclusions to which Bancroft's investigations were expected to lead, and by admonishing Bancroft to acquire Eichhorn's knowledge without catching his infidelity, Norton and President Kirkland made almost pathetically clear the orthodox Unitarian's belief in historical study. Although well aware that some German scholars liked to "scoff at the Bible and laugh at Christ,"<sup>9</sup> they sent this eighteen-year-old boy to learn the facts and methods which German scholars could teach. Eventually Kirkland advised Bancroft to give up Biblical criticism and German theology,<sup>10</sup> but he did not object to Bancroft's heavy concentration on historical study. Bancroft read all of Tacitus, Livy, Herodotus, and Thucydides in the original, and he studied under Heeren, whose *History of the Political Systems of Europe* he later translated.<sup>11</sup> This was part of the theologian's training.<sup>12</sup> At Bancroft's doctoral examination Eichhorn examined him in history; a decade later the young American followed Eichhorn's example, moving from theology and criticism to history.<sup>13</sup>

Without emulating Bancroft's apostasy to transcendentalism and Jacksonism, Jared Sparks took the same step from the ministry to history (becoming one of Parkman's Harvard teachers), and John Gorham Palfrey and Charles W. Upham combined preaching with diligent historical labor. Edward Everett, too, dabbled in the fashionable avocation by writing "The Life of John Stark" for Sparks's *Library of American Biography*.<sup>14</sup>

And in *Representative Men* Emerson himself, having rejected "historical Christianity," tried to write a new kind of history.

The Unitarian's religious inclination to historical study does not, of course, explain the strong general historical interest of this period, either in Boston or in the large world outside New England. If the Unitarian man of letters was interested in history because he was a Unitarian, he was interested also because he was a man of letters and an American. The patriotic call for a native literature had been reiterated since the days of the Connecticut Wits, and during the first thirty years of the new century Americans expressed the same growing desire to discover and preserve historical records that permeated Spain, France, Germany, and England during those years.<sup>15</sup> Municipal, state, and eventually federal appropriations encouraged the collection and publication of historical documents. In this atmosphere New England gentlemen considered it their patriotic duty to help the writers of their country's history, even those whose political bias offended them. Although Bancroft's activity for the Democratic party was regarded as apostasy,<sup>16</sup> and although it has been said that every page of his history voted for Andrew Jackson, his most determined political enemies considered him the historian of his country, and they helped him cordially when they could. Prescott's father, the old Federalist judge, "trembled with delight" when his son read him Bancroft's outline for the battle of Bunker Hill; Amos A. Lawrence, the pro-Bank, high-tariff Whig, sent Bancroft a cordial letter in 1842, offering him revolutionary documents; and Edward Everett continued to help him despite the political strains on their friendship.<sup>17</sup>

Important though this context is, however, the essential characteristic of the Unitarian's view of history was the kind of literature he had in mind when he referred to historical research as "literary research."<sup>18</sup> To the most conservative men of the older generation, the founders of Boston's Athenaeum, this expression meant simply that history was a branch of letters and that histories should be well written. Trained in the classics, they had read the Greek and Latin historians, and their affection for eighteenth-century English literature led them to think of Robertson and Gibbon when they thought of history. But to most New England men of letters after 1820 the expression carried new meanings suggested by the foreign books which the Athenaeum had been buying. They read not only Scott and Cooper but Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron. Those who had been to Göttingen read Schiller, Goethe, Herder, and perhaps Jacob Grimm; those who had not, read essays about them in *The North American Review*.<sup>19</sup>

Like so many lines in intellectual history, the lines leading to the sources of these historical ideas crossed in many directions, and different New Englanders held different lines. Some led directly to Germany, but more led to France and England: to Mably, Barante, Sismondi, Cousin; to Southey, Scott, Macaulay, and Carlyle. For all those minds informed by these lines the idea of "literary" history included new assumptions about the value and meaning of the Past, about the proper subjects for historical work, about the function of history, and about proper emphasis within the historical work. The historian was a romantic man of letters.

## 2

The New England historian was conditioned by the very attitude toward the Past that one can find in almost any literary young American's letters home from Europe during the early years of the nineteenth century—by the inclination to wallow in sentiment at the sight of ruins. The calm Prescott, whose prose and temperament were so stately in their balance, admitted that it was Gibbon's autobiography that had first moved him to consider becoming a historian;<sup>20</sup> and his susceptibility to Gibbon's account of inspiration among the ruins on Capitoline Hill seems unemotional in comparison with a letter he wrote his parents in 1816. "When I look into a Greek or Latin book," he said, "I experience much the same sensation one does who looks on the face of a dead friend, and the tears not infrequently steal into my eyes."<sup>21</sup> The extravagance of the comparison, the obvious posturing in the entire sentence, Prescott's confidence that his parents would know what the sensation was—these underscore the conventionality of the statement. One finds the same kind of prescribed sentiment in the awe with which he first viewed "the chaste Gothic" of Tintern Abbey, and in his "profound" emotion when he first saw some of England's other "venerable ruins."<sup>22</sup> Usually more extravagant than Prescott in both style and temperament, the young Bancroft told Andrews Norton that he was delighted to discover "how intimately" a learned man can "commune with antiquity," how "he rests upon her bosom as upon the bosom of a friend. He can hear the small feeble voice, that comes from remote ages, & which is lost in the distance to common ears."<sup>23</sup>

By the time Motley made his first trip to Europe one could even admit the self-consciousness of the conventional emotion in the same letter in which one expressed it. Having told his parents of two "complete and perfect ruins, but very well preserved," Motley apologized for his "very tame description"; "I shall undoubtedly see many a thousand times more inter-



esting on the Rhine," he said, "but the effect which this first antiquity had upon my brain was so turbulent that it effervesced for some time, and at last evaporated in a disagreeably long ode in the German taste, which, however, I will not increase the postage of this letter with."<sup>24</sup> One might hear the "small feeble voice" of remote ages when contemplating a complete and perfect ruin or the site of any historic action. One might hear it speaking through a "barbaric" epic—not only Ossian's but the Spaniard Ercilla's as well<sup>25</sup>—or through the unruined architecture of Belgian cities, which Motley found just as picturesque as "the most striking and stirring tragedies" enacted there.<sup>26</sup>

Secure in the country of the future, the American writer could still lament conventionally, as Motley did on several occasions, the "naked and impoverished" appearance which the absence of a "pictured, illuminated Past" gave America.<sup>27</sup> But even in America Parkman heard the feeble voice from among the "blasted trunks," the "towering sentries" of the primeval forest.<sup>28</sup> And one could certainly hear it speaking from the authentic documents, the genuine private letters and diaries of historic figures. Wherever one heard the voice, one concentrated on responding emotionally to its sound, on putting oneself or one's reader in proper imaginative relation with it—with its reality as well as its message. To be thrilled with the idea of participating in a continuing history, to imagine the ruin in its former wholeness, and the life that it contained; to feel melancholy over, though seeing the moral in, those "silent Tadmors and Palmyras, where the fox dwells in the halls of forgotten princes"; to imagine oneself on the most familiar terms with "any ghost that ever flits by night across the moonlight air" of a historic city—this was the conventional experience of the literary observer.<sup>29</sup> In the ancient natural scenery, the vanished Aztec and Inca dynasties and architectural ruins, or the relics of French empire in North America, Bancroft, Prescott, and Parkman found the same opportunities for imaginative contemplation of the Past that Motley restricted to the Old World.

This romantic attitude toward the Past applied to human experience itself. The beauty in relics and scenes seemed less important than "their historic associations."<sup>30</sup> What thrilled the writer was his contact with the life, the vital feeling of the Past. To a group of men whose literary experience, however varied, hammered so consistently on the theme of *experiencing*, of the observer's responses to objects and ideas, no history could be valuable unless it brought the Past to life upon the printed page. Whether from Schiller and Goethe (whom Bancroft and Motley admired),