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*The*  
**GOLDEN AGE**  
*of* **AMERICAN**  
**HISTORY**



*Selected and edited  
with an introduction and notes by*  
**FRANK FREIDEL**

*The March of American History from the  
Age of Exploration to the Twentieth Century  
as Pictured by our Greatest Historians*

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*The Golden Age of American History*

*For John D. Hicks*

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# Introduction

by Frank Freidel

DURING THE MIDDLE YEARS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, AMERICANS viewed with self-conscious pride the new expanse, wealth, and power of their nation. As befitted a prosperous and growing people, they produced their own talented array of men of letters who in novels, poetry, and essays developed American themes. Among the writers were a group of American historians who, writing sweeping narrative in a grand manner, celebrated the heritage of the United States. There were George Bancroft, William Hickling Prescott, Francis Parkman, and Henry Adams, whose great reputations are still remembered, and there were a number of others, some of whom made their names outside the field of history, as did Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Altogether they so ably combined literary skill with scholarship that they justly obtained wide audiences and created a golden age of American historical writing.

Many of these historians, beginning with the first great trio—Prescott, Bancroft, and Parkman—undertook to write epic history on the model of the classic historians of Greece and Rome—Thucydides and Tacitus—and the more recent European historians. Almost all of them from Prescott to Roosevelt were admirers of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and indeed both Prescott and Henry Adams cited Gibbon's *Autobiography* as having given them an early impetus toward historical writing. Like the classical writers and Gibbon, they developed large themes on huge canvases, filled with heroes sometimes twice as large as life, who were engaged less often in the slow building of political, social, and economic institutions than in the flash and excitement of combat. The impression was sometimes not unlike that of the huge paintings of Peter Paul Rubens, Louis David, or Benjamin West.

These men produced readable history for large and appreciative audiences. Much of it at the present time is still readable, and worth reading. They were, as Samuel Eliot Morison has said of Prescott, masters of narrative, "which history essentially is, a fact which too many modern historians have forgotten." They regarded historical writing as a branch of letters,



and careful though they might be in their research, they seldom neglected form and style. Prescott, as he prepared himself for a writing career, in 1821 outlined a course of study for himself:

"1. Principles of grammar, correct writing &c;

"2. Compendious history of North America;

"3. Fine prose-writers of English from Roger Ascham to the present day, principally with reference to their mode of writing,—not including historians, except as far as requisite for an acquaintance with style;

"4. Latin classics one hour a day."

Through the nineteenth century, an emphasis upon style was a hallmark of this group of historians. Even one of the less successful writers of history viewed as literature, John Bach McMaster, tried to pattern his writing after the rolling sonorous phrases of Macaulay. Late in the century, when a group of professional historians were coming to emphasize history as a science rather than as an art, gentlemen-historians like Theodore Roosevelt protested vigorously. "It seems rather odd that it should be necessary to insist upon the fact that the essence of a book is to be readable," he wrote as a young man, "but most certainly the average scientific or historical writer needs to have this elementary proposition drilled into his brain." James Ford Rhodes, who even more than Roosevelt appreciated the necessity for diligent historical research, complained nevertheless in 1900:

"It seems to me that our scientific historians have done a good deal of good by their methods of teaching history, but in their eagerness to get at original material and make a comprehensive search, they have overlooked the importance of digesting materials, of accurate generalizations and method of expression. As Morse Stephens says, when he reads over a sentence of his that seems particularly good, he scratches it out and re-writes it, for fear someone will think he is aiming at fine writing."

Few of the writers of monographs had the opportunity or skill to write history that was literature; for the most part they were specialists who, writing for specialists, did not even notice that they had lost the broad audience of their nineteenth-century predecessors. They were content to leave popular historical writing to men who often lacked the literary as well as the scholarly standards of earlier generations. Yet between the technical monograph and the superficial potboiler there was a broad area in which historians combining modern standards of scholarship with vigorous style, built upon the old traditions. By the middle of the twentieth century, more sound, readable American history was being published than ever before.

The rise of the monograph had expanded the frontiers of historical knowledge; it had led to an exploration of many an economic or social area which had been *terra incognita* to the nineteenth century historians. It filled in with minute detail what had been hazy or ill-drawn lines on

their maps. And with the zeal of explorers, many of the scientific historians in proclaiming their own discoveries had emphasized the errors in fact or interpretation, the shortcomings, and the omissions of the earlier writers. A pioneer generation of archaeologists and anthropologists hooted down Prescott's descriptions of the Aztec empire, only to have the modern generation find that Prescott, despite his outmoded early nineteenth-century judgments, was on the whole more accurate in his evaluations than his detractors. The works of Prescott and most of the others represented in this volume, with the notable exception of the polemicists on the outbreak of the Civil War and Woodrow Wilson writing on his own times, still merit being read both as history and literature.

The earlier group of nineteenth-century historians were genteel Bostonians, not dependent upon historical writing for their livelihood. They had sufficient funds to invest in extensive research, adequate leisure to engage in projects that consumed years of work, and an elite social circle that gave its approbation to their writings. Henry Adams, who, in some ways perpetuated their tradition in the closing years of the century, in 1872 wrote amusingly about them in a letter of advice to Henry Cabot Lodge:

"There is only one way to look at life, and that is the practical way. . . . The question is whether the historico-literary line is practically worth following, not whether it will amuse or improve you. Can you make it *pay*? either in money, reputation, or any other solid value. Now if you think for a moment of the most respectable and respected products of our town of Boston, I think you will see at once that this profession does pay. No one has done better and won more in any business or pursuit, than has been acquired by men like Prescott, Motley, Frank Parkman, Bancroft, and so on in historical writing; none of them men of extraordinary gifts, or who would have been likely to do very much in the world if they had chosen differently. What they did can be done by others."

Adams, as so often, was overcritical. There were few others, except for Adams himself, who could achieve as well as they; Adams was far too disparaging of his own nine-volume history. But Adams was right in one respect, the wonder was that Prescott and Parkman did anything in the world at all. Both of them were purblind and in ill health most of their adult years; in their comfortable financial circumstances they would have been excused by everyone if they had spent their lives idly as gentlemen of semi-invalidated leisure.

William Hickling Prescott (1796-1859) when he was a junior at Harvard was a victim of student roistering. As he was leaving Commons Hall after dinner one day, he turned and was struck in the left eye by a large hard crust of bread. The appearance of the eye remained unchanged, but the sight in it was gone; a year and a half later, his right eye became so inflamed

that he was threatened with total and permanent blindness. He recovered part of his sight, but for the remainder of his life suffered from attacks of acute rheumatism.

While all but a few intimates knew him only as a fine social companion, Prescott was quietly learning his craft and slowly writing a study of Ferdinand and Isabella. When finally in 1837 he arranged publication, he confessed his diffidence, remarking, "During the ten years I have been occupied with the work, few of my friends have heard me say as many words about it." Thus it was that Daniel Webster, who had known Prescott only in the drawing room, referred to him with surprise as a comet that suddenly burst upon the world.

It was no transitory flash, for Prescott immediately began to gather materials for even more ambitious studies. His background led him again toward a Spanish subject, and early in 1838 he concluded, "On reflection nothing in this field seems to me to offer such advantages for an American as the Conquest of Mexico by Cortés." For several years he employed manuscript researchers and copyists in Madrid, investing heavily in his materials. To his dismay when he was well embarked upon the project, he discovered that Washington Irving, who had recently finished a life of Columbus, was also planning to write on Cortés. Irving graciously relinquished the subject although, he later commented, "I, in a manner, gave him up my bread; for I depended upon the profit of it to recruit my waning finances."

Because of his defective sight, Prescott worked with a secretary who could read to him, and wrote with a noctograph or writing-case for the blind. Its parallel brass wires guided his ivory stylus as he wrote on a piece of carbon paper that made a barely legible impress on a sheet of white paper beneath. After he had gathered and weighed all his material, he would compose a whole chapter in his mind. His secretary once reminisced:

"Many of his best battle-scenes, he told me, he had composed while on horseback. His vivid imagination carried him back to the sixteenth century, and he almost felt himself a Castilian knight, charging with Cortés, Sandóval, and Alvarado on the Aztec foe. . . . When beginning to describe a battle, he would often, to rouse his military enthusiasm, as he said, hum to himself his favorite air, 'O give me but my Arab steed,' . . . As the sheets were stricken off [on the noctograph], I deciphered them, and was ready to read them to him when he had finished the chapter. He was as cautious in correction as he was rapid in writing. Each word and sentence was carefully weighed, and subjected to the closest analysis. If found wanting in strength or beauty it was changed and turned until the exact expression required was found. . . . He hated fine writing, merely as fine writing. I have known him mercilessly to strike out several pages of beautiful imagery, which he believed on reflection had a tendency rather to weaken than enhance the effect he desired to produce."

Prescott gave as much pains to accuracy as he did to vividness. His reward when the *Conquest of Mexico* appeared in 1843 was the lavish praise of reviewers, and perhaps even more than this the tribute that a reader like Mrs. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was moved to write in her journal, "Mr. Prescott seems to have seen it all with his own eyes as he makes his reader [see it]." Philip Hone noted in his diary, "Prescott has established his claim to rank as *the* historian of the United States." Before his death in 1859, Prescott was sometimes referred to as "the American Thucydides."

George Bancroft (1800-1891) made history as well as wrote it. He became such a personage that when he died in Washington, ripe with years, President Benjamin Harrison ordered the flags to fly at half-mast on all the public buildings in the city. Bancroft was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, the son of a Congregational minister of limited means and unbounded Calvinist and Federalist conviction. At sixteen he was graduated from Harvard; just before his twenty-first birthday he received his doctorate from Göttingen. The President of Harvard had sent Bancroft there to study theology in preparation for the Unitarian ministry, and this involved what in the end became more important, thorough training in the new German historical methods. Upon his return he did serve as a minister for a while; it left its mark permanently upon his writing in which he saw a favoring providence shaping the destiny of the American people. But he was not made for the pulpit, nor for the tutoring of Greek at Harvard, which he also tried. For four years he was headmaster of Round Hill School, patterned after a German gymnasium, but he tired of this also. He resigned in 1831 to enter upon the two vocations which thereafter absorbed his interest and efforts, politics and historical writing. In both he was a Jacksonian Democrat.

Bancroft's prominence began in 1834 when he attracted notoriety by running for the Massachusetts legislature on a workingmen's ticket, and fame by publishing the first volume of his *History of the United States*. The Democratic President Martin Van Buren appointed him Collector of the Port of Boston in 1837, and Bancroft in turn gave a customs house appointment to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Under President James K. Polk he served as Secretary of the Navy and established the Naval Academy at Annapolis, and in 1846 was appointed Minister to England. When Congress fatefully assembled in December, 1865, it was Bancroft who had written the statesmanlike message that President Andrew Johnson sent to them. It failed to stem the flood of Radical Republican anger against Johnson, but the Senate in 1867 ratified Johnson's appointment of Bancroft to be Minister to Berlin, where he remained into the second Grant administration in 1874.

During all these years Bancroft was collecting mountains of materials, laboriously entering data into bound notebooks, and publishing his enormously successful history volume by volume. Although the cliché is commonplace that every page of Bancroft's history voted for Jackson, his

patriotic position stirred all readers regardless of their party affiliations. They might deplore his membership in the Democratic party, but they accepted him as the great historian of the United States. Bancroft was for his part so eager to be considered objective that he was rather bothered by an interchange in 1867 with the German historian Leopold von Ranke:

"One day when I met him . . . he gave an arch twinkle to his eyes and said 'Do you know what I say of you to my classes?' Of course I did not. 'And will you not be angry if I tell you?' And then he continued: 'I tell my hearers, that your history is the best book ever written from the democratic point of view. You are thoroughly consistent; adhere strictly to your method, carry it out in many directions but in all with fidelity, and are always true to it.' I am not certain if this is high praise; for ask yourself what books have been written from the democratic point of view? and then again consider if it is not rather a hard judgment to say that a book is written from a democratic point of view. I deny the charge; if there is democracy in the history it is not subjective, but objective as they say here, and so has necessarily its place in history and gives its colour as it should."

The scientific historians of the end of the nineteenth century and thereafter levelled more serious charges against Bancroft. They lamented that he rendered useless for their purposes the vast collection of documentary material upon which he based his writings since he seldom cited them fully in his footnotes, and seldom quoted them with scrupulous accuracy. His footnotes were sparse, and in several of the later volumes omitted entirely. "I see, sir, that you have many footnotes in your book," he commented to young John Bach McMaster. "That is a mistake. At the cost of great labor you have unearthed certain facts and you tell your readers where they may find them. Some of them will use them and give you no credit." As for Bancroft's habit of changing the language or tense of quotations, transposing them, and running together materials from different sources, these were devices commonplace among classic historians. At least he did not compose elaborate orations, as did they. Vexatious as these inaccuracies are to other historians, they seldom render invalid the general impression Bancroft sought to convey. Finally, critics have hooted at his purple style. An angry Southern reviewer during Reconstruction, with unconscious irony wrote: "Affected, stilted, pretentious, meretricious and hyperbolic, it sounds as if swaggering Thraso spoke it through a tragic mask." Bancroft was sensitive to such jibes, and in his final revision, from which come the selections reprinted, he removed adjectives with diligence. He never ceased to try to improve his work. When he was 82, he sent to one of the finest of the new historians, Justin Winsor, the request that if he or his collaborators "should find an error in my revision or in the as yet unrevised volumes, you will give me *swift* notice; for, brother, the time is short." Bancroft did in many ways improve as an historical writer throughout his long life, but his volumes, fine reading though they are today, bear the mark of the first half of the nineteenth century in their attitudes and assumptions.

Francis Parkman (1823-1893), more conservative in his attitudes, was brought up in the same romantic traditions as Bancroft, yet there ran through his writing echoes of newer voices of thought that set him apart from Prescott and Bancroft. A large part of his writing came in years after the Civil War; indeed only two of the dozen volumes of *France and England in North America* were published before 1865. Heroes dominated the pages of Parkman's books, as in those of earlier historians, but the Indians, despite his prejudice against inferior races, were living men. The great struggle between the French and the English lent itself to romance, but in Parkman's rendition there was scrupulous historical accuracy based on indefatigable research. His style was simple, swift-moving, and full of images. His writing has continued to be a model for those among later generations of historians who have sought to be readable.

Parkman, born into a well-to-do Boston family, went to Harvard, then briefly studied law. But his bad eyesight and chronic ill-health were deterrents against a career in the law, and the lure of the out-of-doors drew him in other directions. He wrote a friend in 1878:

"You ask why I conceived the purpose of writing the history of the French in America? The answer is very simple. In my youth I was fond of letters, and I also liked the forest, shooting, and the Indians. I frequented their camps, I roamed the woods with them, I went shooting, I journeyed on foot and in canoes. I passed my vacations in this way. Well, at an early day I saw that these two tastes, for books and for the forest, could be reconciled, could be made even mutually helpful, in the field of Franco-American history."

Thus it was that Parkman, leaving law school, intensified his visits to old battlefields and along one-time Indian trails in the East, and spent weeks gathering materials in libraries on Pontiac's conspiracy. In 1846, he engaged in the most strenuous of his adventures, travelling for weeks along the Oregon trail, living in an encampment of Sioux Indians, in their dignity and squalor. Parkman combined in his writings what he could learn from old books and manuscripts with what he himself had been able to see, hear, feel, and smell. First, in 1849 came *The Oregon Trail*, then two years later the first two volumes of his large history, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*. He had married in 1850, had several children, and was happily engaged in his grand project. But he was plagued with arthritis, and in 1857-1858 lost first his only son and then his wife. He suffered such acute head pains that work became impossible, and for the next five years was in such great physical and mental ill-health that he could do little but devote himself to horticulture. In this he was so talented that in 1872 he served briefly as professor of horticulture at Harvard. As his health intermittently improved, he increased the time he spent on his writing. In 1883, he was well enough to take a six-day horseback ride into the White Mountains of New Hampshire. One after another he brought out his volumes. *Montcalm and Wolfe* was published in 1884, and *A Half-Century of Conflict*, which rounded

out the series, appeared in 1892. The following year, aged seventy, he was planning a thorough revision of his entire history, but one day in the late autumn after a row on Jamaica Pond he suffered an acute attack of peritonitis, and three days later died. One can apply to Parkman himself the spirit of his tribute to the French explorer La Salle:

"He belonged not to the age of the knight-errant and the saint, but to the modern world of practical action. He was the hero not of a principle nor of a faith, but simply of a fixed idea and a determined purpose. As often happens with concentrated and energetic natures, his purpose was to him a passion and an inspiration; and he clung to it with a certain fanaticism of devotion. It was the offspring of an ambition vast and comprehensive, yet acting in the interest both of France and of civilization. . . . America owes him an enduring memory; for in this masculine figure she sees the pioneer who guided her to the possession of her richest heritage."

Henry Adams (1838-1918) was a young contemporary of Parkman and Bancroft, who combined their mastery of an effective style with a firm acceptance of the canons of modern scientific history. He was less carried away by narrative, less prone to focus on martial scenes and heroes, more insistent upon observing society and the growth of its institutions. To Adams, history was not so much story-telling as a science which might be made to yield useful generalizations.

Adams, who in his early childhood had known the impressive figure of his aged grandfather, ex-President John Quincy Adams, and who had served during the Civil War as secretary to his father, Charles Francis Adams, Minister to England, naturally aspired to an active political career. Disillusioned by the Washington of President Grant, he became an assistant professor at Harvard, where he taught a course in medieval history. He did not find it entirely enjoyable. "Between ourselves the instruction of boys is mean work," he once confided. In 1877, he moved to Washington and embarked upon his *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*. "The fragment I did," he wrote privately in 1899, "was merely an Introduction to our history during the Nineteenth Century and was intended only to serve the future historian with a fixed and documented starting-point. The real History that one would like to write, was to be built on it, and its merits or demerits, whatever they might be, could be seen only when the structure, of which it was to be the foundation, was raised."

It was indeed a foundation, as Adams had hoped, for the writing of history which would combine sound analysis with literary merit. The sale was disappointingly small compared with that of the works of Prescott, Bancroft, and Parkman—only three thousand sets during the first decade. But Adams's history had posed, and to a considerable degree answered, the challenge to modern historians. In his concluding volume, Adams had declared:



"Historians and readers maintained Old-World standards. No historian cared to hasten the coming of an epoch when man should study his own history in the same spirit and by the same methods with which he studied the formation of a crystal. Yet history has its scientific as well as its human side, and in American history the scientific interest was greater than the human. Elsewhere the student could study under better conditions the evolution of the individual, but nowhere could he study so well the evolution of a race. The interest of such a subject exceeded that of any other branch of science, for it brought mankind within sight of its own end."

Thus evolved historical writing in the United States during the nineteenth century. Very brief sketches of other writers represented in this volume precede the selections from their writings. Space limitations prevented including representative work of other major historians of the nineteenth century, especially Richard Hildreth, Hermann von Holst, and James Schouler. For further reading on the historians and their writings, see the notes at the end of the book. In the selections that follow, generally full sections or chapters appear, whatever their meanderings, in order to present accurately the flavor of the original. Footnotes, since they are for the most part bibliographical, have been eliminated; they may be consulted in the complete editions, cited in the back of this book. I hope these segments will tempt readers to turn to the full works, many of which have long been gathering dust on library shelves. Those that have been forgotten merit rediscovery.



