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“They could there write the fates of nations”:
The Ideology of George Bancroft’s *History of
the United States* during the Age of Jackson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy in History

By

Eric Scott Saulnier

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“They could there write the fates of nations”:
The Ideology of George Bancroft’s *History of
the United States* during the Age of Jackson

by

Eric Scott Saulnier

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Stephen A. Aron, Co-Chair

Professor Joan Waugh, Co-Chair

Abstract:

During the 1820s, 30s, and 40s, national politics operated under the influence of Andrew Jackson’s political rise and enduring influence. The Jacksonian Era saw dramatic changes occur in the United States. Most importantly, the United States’s national borders expanded to reach the Pacific Coast of North America, encompassing an area that Mexico, Great Britain, Russia, and numerous Native American groups

claimed. At the same time, American letters burgeoned into a vibrant and unique national literature, one that practitioners believed rivaled any European discourses of nationalism in passion and erudition.

George Bancroft operated at the nexus of these developments. He wrote the first popularly acclaimed and professional history of the United States, while simultaneously participating in Democratic Party politics. Ultimately, Bancroft served in the Presidential administration of James Knox Polk, influencing national policy and international diplomacy. This dissertation articulates the ideological assumptions and functions of the first three volumes of Bancroft's *History of the United States*, which covered the Colonial Era of American history, during the Age of Jackson, a period in which the United States ceased to operate on the periphery of European colonialism and became a colonial power in its own right.

The dissertation of Eric Scott Saulnier is approved:

Andrew Sabl

Joan Waugh, Committee Co-Chair

Stephen A. Aron, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

This dissertation is dedicated to my
grandparents: John Carle; Shirley Carle;
Henry Saulnier; and Janice Saulnier.
I am grateful I got to know you all so well,
and that all of you set me such a good
example.

And to Jennifer Pike and Phaizon Wood,
without whom I doubt I would be here, and
due to whom I am a much better person.

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I also need to thank teachers and mentors I had the privilege to learn from before my time at UCLA. The writing instruction I received during high school from Danielle Sexton and Yvonne Lair prepared me to succeed in college. At the University of Tulsa, Eldon Eisenach took me under his wing early during my freshman year, providing me with a rigorous intellectual experience through the study of Western political thought. He kindly included me in his research, introducing me to the fascinating labyrinth of American political history. At the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, Richard Wunderli talked me into going to graduate school. Additionally, he allowed me to take the graduate level historiography course in his department. Under his guidance, I learned much about the nature of the discipline. His passion for studying the past was erudite and contagious. At Colorado State University, Jared Orsi fanned the flames of my fascination with history, while at the same time offering me sober and vital advice on writing. Bruce Rhonda was also a valuable source of insight into the craft of intellectual history writing. Finally, my advisor during my master's program at Colorado State University, Mark Fiege, was and continues to be enormously helpful to my intellectual and professional development. Mark believed in me like no one had before. He inspired

me to reach high in my aspirations to study in a top doctoral program, and he continued to offer me encouragement after I moved on to UCLA.

In addition to my committee at UCLA, I need to thank other professors who shaped my development, intellectually and personally. Michael Meranze, Ellen Dubois, Eric Avila, Russell Jacoby, Perry Anderson, Muriel McClendon, David Myers, Teo Ruiz, Jeffrey Symcox, Joyce Appleby, Daniel Howe, and William Devereell of the Huntington and the University of Southern California all provided invaluable intellectual experiences and expressed interest in me. They also taught me that Southern California is one of the best places in the world to study history.

It is true that you learn at least as much from your fellow graduate students as you do from faculty, and I was exceptionally fortunate in this regard. I need to recognize, in particular: Sarah Pripas, Sarah Promnitz, Daniel Lynch, Rob Schraff, Suzan Solt, Joshua Rahtz, Devon Van Dyne, Matthew Lockett, Joanna Wall, Gloria Guy, and Claire Gilbert. I have been honored to be among their number.

My committee members and advisors were wise and patient, and committed to seeing me through to the end. Lynn Hunt, Andrew Sabl, Joan Waugh and Stephen Aron have my eternal thanks. The faults in this dissertation are in spite of their efforts, and what is good would never have emerged without their assistance.

I also received generous funding from UCLA, the history department and the graduate division. The recruitment package that I entered the program with made my attendance possible and far easier than it might have been otherwise. I also benefitted from summer funding through the graduate school following my first year. And my

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I must conclude by acknowledging friends and family who have offered support and advice during my graduate studies. Jim and Kerry Fox have been steadfastly in my corner since undergraduate days, and their children Lucy, Helen, and James have brought much joy to my life. Bethany Springer, my friend since high school, has offered very wise moral support that is really beyond her years. Jeremy Weiss and Leigh Mathews were generous enough to open their homes to me during my trips to Boston and New York City to do archival research. My grandparents, to whom I have dedicated this dissertation, are all excellent role models. My siblings, Laura and Nick, and my brother-in-law, Brad Hardy, are wonderful, and I have benefitted from their companionship more than they know. My step father, Doug Crotty, has also been a source of support, as have my aunts, uncles, and cousins, especially Susan Young and Nancy Bizjack, who actually read drafts and offered feedback. Finally, I want to thank my parents, for all their support and love, their acceptance of me taking an academic path, and for the many lessons I have learned from them.

Vita

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Preface

This project really began in the winter of 2010 in a seminar I took with Perry Anderson titled “America as a Foreign Country.” Anderson guided me through Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* opening my eyes to the uncertain and contentious nature of the spread of democracy during the mid-nineteenth century. Through reading letters between Tocqueville and his American correspondents, I became familiar with George Bancroft, Francis Lieber, and other figures who participated in these debates on the American side of the Atlantic.

Another graduate seminar with Lynn Hunt about the French Revolution gave me the chance to read more Tocqueville. I sharpened my understanding of the ways the events of 1848 shaped Tocqueville’s and others’ perceptions of democracy. I also began to understand that there were debates about the origins of democracy in the American and French Revolutions that continued to shape discourse about the politics of nationalism during the mid-nineteenth century.

I increased my awareness of George Bancroft’s significance in these debates during a seminar with Ellen Dubois on nineteenth-century American historiography. When Daniel Walker Howe came as a guest to discuss his book *What Hath God Wrought* he observed to us that Bancroft was an important figure, and that no one had written a biography about him in some time. Since one of my advisors, Joan Waugh, was an expert on biography, I decided that using the biographical method to explore larger issues at play during the consolidation of the nation state and American power

would be an interesting path for my intellectual development. I also learned from Waugh and Howe that one could really consider the Mexican-American War the United States's experience with the Revolutions of 1848.

The Mexican-American War, and Western expansion in general, cannot be understood without making use of the borderland paradigm that Stephen Aron pioneered in innovating. Adding him to my committee and completing independent studies with him increased my awareness of the role of borderlands in creating conflict in the hinterlands that shaped politics in metropolises. Finally, a course on the Scottish Enlightenment with Andrew Sabl allowed me to sharpen my skills in close readings of intellectual history. This is the path of intellectual development of this project.

Introduction

“I wish for the sake of good taste, if nothing else,” William Prescott wrote to George Bancroft in June of 1835, “you would forswear such thin potations, as this periodical and party scribbling and speechmaking, and stick to your one great object, too great for any man yet to have done well, though you seem to be in a fair way for it—the history of your country.”¹ Coming from one historian to another, these words were a reprimand. Prescott, a formidable authorial presence in the field of Spanish and Latin American history, to the present day, warned his fellow American of investing too much time in the party politics of what historians now call the Jacksonian Era in United States history—roughly the 1820s, 30s, and 40s. Prescott thought that Bancroft possessed the singular ability of being able to write the history of his country well, and speaking as a fellow American, as well as a historian, Prescott wanted Bancroft to focus on what the former thought would be a substantial legacy: the history of the United States that Bancroft was writing. Surely, a masterfully written history of the United States—destined to be the first and last of its kind, so Prescott and other significant figures in the world of American letters believed—would outlast whatever achievements Bancroft might be able to claim by participating in the partisan affairs of the growing but still young Anglo American republic.

But, as Bancroft’s career demonstrated, history could make as well as chronicle power. The relationship between history and the entwined politics of the burgeoning of

¹ William H. Prescott to George Bancroft, 17 June 1835, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

white male democracy and the territorial expansion of the American nation is hardly opaque to twenty-first-century historians, yet it was complicated for their nineteenth-century predecessors. And exploring the nature of one example of the disjuncture between historians past and present is largely the point of this dissertation. I want to demonstrate how at least one major historian during the nineteenth century, representative of the historical craft as America's leading accountant of events past, could seamlessly—in his own mind at least—meld the veritable pen of history with the metaphorical saber's pursuit of empire, and maintain belief in the integrity of both activities.

For, what Prescott fundamentally missed and what Bancroft practiced was that history and politics, far from being mutually exclusive, were profoundly connected. One might wonder at my audacity, questioning the views of nineteenth century historians themselves when considering the meaning that historical narratives possessed during the nineteenth century, but in many respects this doubting the convictions of Bancroft and his contemporaries forms the crux of my argument. The fact that Bancroft wrote a fundamentally politically charged history, one that served the interests of the social order in control of the American state during the Jacksonian Era, meant that Bancroft wrote within an ideological framework, one so deep that it was in its nature for the ideology to have masked itself so that practitioners of the ideology never realized that they were being ideological. Hiding in plain sight, the ideology of democracy that Bancroft's multivolume *History of the United States* intellectually institutionalized upheld the very modern nation state that he politically served as a public official.

Was this in “good taste”? We cannot know with accuracy what exactly Prescott meant by “good taste,” but the hindsight of posterity does allow us to know that, however distasteful Prescott found it, Bancroft’s participation in politics left a mark that was anything but ephemeral. A decade after receiving Prescott’s letter, Bancroft became an influential member of James K. Polk’s cabinet. And, while serving under Polk, first as secretary of the navy, then as acting secretary of war, and finally as foreign minister to Great Britain, Bancroft proved instrumental to more than doubling the size of the United States. The territory that America acquired under President Polk during the Mexican-American War included land that Britain also wanted—California and Oregon—and thus also served to indicate that the United States was a rapidly rising rival to its once dominant mother country. Incorporating the new Western lands and their peoples into the union of Anglo Atlantic states tipped the balance of power in American government from the Southern slaveocracy to Northern capitalists, precipitating a massive armed rebellion that became the first great modern conflict—the American Civil War. Therefore, we must conclude that Prescott was wrong and that Bancroft’s participation in politics—whatever its moral character—proved dramatically important.

In his intellectual endeavors, Bancroft created a past that identified the United States’s growth as the next, inexorable stage of Western Civilization. In his political life, he worked for a Democratic Party that sought to empower an imagined coherent race of American men—white men—by pushing America’s borders Westward, displacing what Bancroft viewed as inferior indigenous and Latin blooded peoples along the way. In essence, Bancroft enforced, through writing and statecraft, internationally recognized borders that reflected an ideology of racial supremacy responsible for turning the

borderland areas of Northern Mexico into the contentious terrain of the Western United States.²

Theoretical Methodology

In his essay on the role of ideology in upholding state power, the French, Marxist intellectual Louis Althusser mentioned historical narratives as one of the sites of class struggle. “Ideology has no history,” he began, but continued to say, “which emphatically does not mean that there is no history in it.”³ I found this comment by Althusser to be a good starting point for an examination of Bancroft’s *History* because it expressed the idea that a profound connection existed, of one form or another, between ideology and historical narratives.

Althusser grounded his essay as a reaction to a longstanding understanding in Marxist thought about the state, namely, the notion that “the whole of the political class struggle revolves around the state,” an idea that Althusser interpreted as meaning that “the seizure and conservation of state power by a certain class” was the point of revolution.⁴ Althusser, however, criticized Marxist theory about the state as “descriptive,” which meant that the purpose of the theory was merely “political practice”—i.e., a tool to foment revolution. And because Althusser wrote immediately after the 1968 student revolutions in France—which necessarily meant that he wrote in recognition of the limitations of Marxist theory to successfully enact revolution in a fully bourgeois state—he also wrote: “although it [Marxist theory about the state] does now contain complex

² For a definitive account of the process of border making in borderlands, see: Adelman, Jeremy, and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814-841.

³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation),” in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2012), 100-140.

⁴ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 108-109.

and differential elements...[the] functioning and action cannot be understood without recourse to further supplementary theoretical development. Thus, what has to be added to the Marxist theory of the state is something else.”⁵ The existing knowledge about state power proved too limiting, and just as physicists smashed particles together in a hadron collider to more fundamentally and therefore accurately understand material reality, so those attempting to understand social reality needed to further distinguish components of the state apparatus.

What exactly constituted this connection between history and ideology remained unclear in the rest of Althusser’s essay, however, and one of my objectives therefore became explaining exactly how history—specifically, Bancroft’s *History*—functioned within, or as, an ideological framework. I discovered that Bancroft’s narrative fit the parameters of Althusser’s concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), and that Althusser’s chief contribution to thinking about state power—the distinctions he drew between power over the state and the state apparatus, and then within the state apparatus between the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the ISAs—was incredibly useful to understanding how Bancroft’s narrative functioned in its historical context, and therefore was also incredibly useful in definitively articulating something concrete about what Bancroft’s *History* meant. I thus saw that in addition to making a contribution to historiography I could add to theory about the state by essentially putting empirical flesh over Althusser’s critical skeleton.⁶

In fact, the historical observation that initially drew me to Bancroft as an object of study was that in addition to writing the definitive narrative of American history for his

⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁶ Ibid., 110-111.

generation, Bancroft also contributed first hand to key historical developments of the Jacksonian Era. Furthermore, the history Bancroft wrote and the history in which he participated seemed connected. Indeed, what I liked about the prospect of studying Bancroft's *History* was that charting the narrative's creation at the hands of its author revealed clearly that writing history was—or at least could be—itsself an important historical event.

At this point, I realized that I needed to turn from slippery Marxist theory to the professionally more tangible terrain of historiography. And Hayden White provided intellectual resources to help further understand Bancroft's work. In his book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, White argued that history writing was, "most manifestly...a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse."⁷ He asserted that history was, in its essence, poetic, by which White meant governed by distinct structural rules, as well as the parameters of being a vehicle for deeper meaning.

White confined his analysis to Europe, but Bancroft fit well into his concept of a historiographic "golden age" in the early nineteenth century.⁸ Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Jacob Burckhardt were the historian subjects in White's analysis, but Bancroft was their American peer and colleague in history writing, as well as in statecraft. Furthermore, in White's analysis, Bancroft, by virtue of inclusion within the pantheon of "golden age" history, was also an appropriate object of the critical

⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), ix.

⁸ White, *Metahistory*, xii.

gaze of the philosophers of history from the late nineteenth century that White examined: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Benedetto Croce.

White wrote of an “ironic” condition of mind that seized historical thinking at the end of the nineteenth century, something the discipline never truly recovered from, and a perspective that castigated history to the point that the past as a scientific object of study, ultimately, in the mid twentieth century French philosopher Michel Foucault’s thinking, was ludicrous and impossible.⁹ Lynn Hunt’s analysis of French historiography during the middle of the twentieth century proved insightful in this instance, when she wrote that Foucault took the replacement of the subject in history that the Annales and the Marxist schools of historical thought had hastened, “to its logical consequences.” According to Hunt: “Foucault radically historicized all such beliefs and, by insisting on discontinuity in discursive formations, he also seemed to render futile any investigation into historical process, itself always apparently tainted with the much disdained search for origins.”¹⁰ Bancroft, meanwhile, if he wrote for anything, wrote purposefully in search of the origins of his time, the nature of which he believed was defined by the inexorable unchaining of individual consciousness, and, therefore, as Bancroft saw it, of liberty’s progression—that was his “metahistory.”

This significance to historiography of the subject, however, in turn reemphasized to me the importance of also grounding my scholarship on Bancroft within theory of the state. Althusser wrote that “there is no ideology except by the subject and for

⁹ See, Patricia O’Brien, “Michel Foucault’s History of Culture,” in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 25-46.

¹⁰ Lynn Hunt, “French History in the Last Twenty Years: The Rise and Fall of the Annals Paradigm,” in *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 2 (1986): 209-224.

subjects.”¹¹ But that, ironically, “the author, in so far as he writes the lines of a discourse which claims to be scientific, is completely absent as a subject from his scientific discourse (for all scientific discourse is by definition a subjectless discourse, there is no subject of science except in an ideology of science).”¹² Bancroft, who wrote within historiography’s golden age, firmly believed that what he wrote was scientific proof. And because he wrote with this disposition, Bancroft was one of what Althusser, who echoed Marx, called “professionals of ideology.”¹³ Bancroft crafted historical narratives that perpetuated the historical domination of a particular class, that is, of a particular class’s ability to use the power of the state to further their material interests.

Biographical Background



George Bancroft, 1846

¹¹ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 128.

¹² Ibid., 129.

¹³ Ibid., 105.

George Bancroft¹⁴ was many things in his life, but he was, in his own mind, and in those of his contemporaries, first and foremost a historian. In January of 1835, a few months after Bancroft published the first volume of his, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*, a review article appeared in the *North American Review*—America’s premier journal for letters—that lavished praise upon the work and the author. “It does such justice to its noble subject,” the author of the article proclaimed, speaking of the *History*, “as to supersede the necessity of any future work of the same kind.”¹⁵ Bancroft was not just any historian; he was the historian. At the tip of his pen and from the vastness of his mind, other men of letters believed, emerged the great epic of America. Bancroft, as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. maintained in *The Age of Jackson*, was America’s Virgil.¹⁶

But who was this man responsible for defining so much of what historians have conceived of as the boundaries—or lack thereof—of American history? George Bancroft was born on 3 October 1800 in Worcester, Massachusetts, to Aaron and Lucretia Bancroft. Aaron was a minister in the town, as well as one of the nation’s leading Unitarian theologians. Lucretia was a struggling minister’s wife, who bore thirteen children, the eighth being a boy named George. Precocious as a young child, Bancroft quickly outgrew Worcester. He had the benefit, in addition to his intelligence, of living in literary home, and he acquired a rigorous work ethic from his parents. By the time he

¹⁴ Daguerreotype of George Bancroft, 1846. Public Domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:George_Bancroft#/media/File:George_Bancroft_by_Plumbe,_1846.jpg.

¹⁵ “Review: Bancroft’s History of the United States,” *The North American Review* 40, no. 86 (1835): 99-122.

¹⁶ See: Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1945).

was eleven, he had exhausted local educational resources and had to look elsewhere for further opportunity.

Studying and family connections took Bancroft far in life. His father had little money, but he knew men of means, and consequently a network of wealthy New Englanders who admired Aaron's Unitarianism and George's brilliance enabled Bancroft to continue his education. Benjamin Abbot, a family friend, ran the Philips boarding school at Exeter in New Hampshire, where Bancroft attended on scholarship. While at Philips, Bancroft amassed an impressive knowledge of the Classics that enabled him to enroll at Harvard at the age of thirteen. At Harvard, Bancroft received instruction and mentorship from Levi Hedge, Andrews Norton, and John Kirkland.

At the time, Harvard underwent a transition in which the College expanded its ambitions to become a center for higher learning equivalent to any in Europe. However, during Bancroft's days at Harvard, students studied local theology of a provincial, New England persuasion more than the Classics. And, although he continued his studies of Greek and Latin in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Bancroft also spent considerable time learning moral philosophy, a worldview grounded in Lockean rationalism and Scottish Common Sense philosophy that served as the bedrock of Unitarian thought.¹⁷

In any event, Bancroft graduated with his bachelor degree in 1817, at the age of sixteen, giving an oration at his commencement ceremony that marked high standing among his cohort. Edward Everett, a classmate several years ahead of Bancroft, and future leader in American letters and politics, recommended to Kirkland and other Harvard professors that Bancroft should follow his footsteps by pursuing the highest

¹⁷ Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984).; Also see: Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Unitarian Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

level of education possible. Since the Harvard curriculum ended with a masters degree in theology, this meant that Bancroft, like Everett, would go abroad, to the Kingdom of Hanover to study at the Georgia Augusta University in Göttingen.

After completing his masters degree at Harvard in 1818, Bancroft went. While at Göttingen, Bancroft took an extremely rigorous course of study grounded in philology that covered modern European languages, Biblical languages, Classics, and the Near East, as well as the emerging discipline of history. In 1820, Bancroft took the oral exam for his doctorate in front of several professors, including his advisor, Johann Eichhorn, a leader in the new, more historical, less metaphysical, evaluation of sacred texts. Bancroft had also taken courses with Arnold Heeren, whose ideas about the role of race in the history of human progress influenced Bancroft's later work.

But, however intellectually stimulating, Bancroft's time at Göttingen proved disappointing to the young American. He loathed the place. In the end, despite the strong impression made by their ideas, the scholars at Göttingen earned Bancroft's disdain due to their lack of what he considered proper manners. Consequently, Bancroft left for the University of Berlin in the Kingdom of Prussia, where he pursued further studies.

Although he stayed in Berlin for less than a year, Bancroft's time there greatly affected his intellectual development. Bancroft took courses with George Hegel, with Wilhelm Von Humboldt, and with Friedrich Schleiermacher—respective fathers of modern philosophy and linguistics, and liberal theology. Bancroft met other professors at Berlin, but these were the three most recognizable names, and the ones who—sometimes surreptitiously, as in the case of Hegel—most influenced Bancroft. Indeed, although

Bancroft claimed to understand little of Hegel's lectures, he acknowledged the strength of his reputation, and went on to write history that fit into the tradition of Hegelian universality.

Following his stay in Berlin, Bancroft went to Paris, where his friendship with Humboldt proved particularly important. The linguist introduced Bancroft to his explorer and polymathic brother, Alexander, who in turn opened the doors of Paris to the young American. While in Paris, Bancroft consequently became a hanger on to the renowned thinkers and historical agents in the city, including General Lafayette. Bancroft also attended the Institute de France's meetings, frequently visited the Louvre, absorbed the splendor of the absolutist, Bourbon monarchy, and read French philosophy—most closely, that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who provided a different interpretation of rights and the origins of society than John Locke, whom Harvard favored. These intellectual experiences generated differences between Bancroft and his more provincial contemporaries in New England.

After these long stays in the German states and in France, Bancroft toured Italy, then took a boat home to the United States, where he received a shock. Despite having identified almost exclusively as an American for several years—being abroad—Bancroft felt out of place in America—his homeland. He grew anxious about his prospects professionally, causing him to ill-advisedly essentially demand a professorship at Harvard, which he viewed as his right after receiving a doctorate.¹⁸ He received a cool reception from his Harvard mentors, particularly Andrews Norton. Ironically, despite Bancroft's attempts to insulate himself from the improprieties at Göttingen, Norton

¹⁸ In her biography, Handlin discusses this falling out at length.

thought that Bancroft's manners had deteriorated, and he banned the younger man from his home.

Another point of contention between Bancroft and his Harvard mentors was Bancroft's desire to reform pedagogy at the College. He wanted greater attention given to study of the Classics, which German textbooks would facilitate, and which would come at the expense of instruction in moral philosophy. Unable to fulfill his ambitions at his alma mater, Bancroft partnered with another young man, Joseph Cogswell, and founded Round Hill Preparatory School, on the outskirts of Boston. An experimental institution, based on the German gymnasium system, Round Hill did attract students initially, but it ultimately failed to become a fixture of the New England educational landscape, partly because Bancroft discovered that he disliked and lacked aptitude for teaching.

Indeed, Bancroft discerned that the true fulfillment of his ambitions lay outside education. Immediately after his return from Europe, Bancroft began to write for periodicals, most notably the *North American Review*. He built a reputation as a man of letters through his article writing, as well as through his translations of German works, most notably those of Arnold Heeren.

The notoriety Bancroft gained through his literary endeavors, and the high standing that he still held among his Harvard classmates—if not his mentors—because he had surpassed almost all of them by achieving a doctorate, enabled Bancroft to arrange an advantageous marriage. He successfully pursued Sarah Dwight, to whom he pledged his loyalty in marriage in 1827. Through the Dwights, Bancroft gained access to capital and business connections, and thus to a higher socio-economic circle

than to what he had belonged. Bancroft, in his turn, proved useful to his new family, as a shrewd analyzer of politics and finance, and as a representative of the family's interests in Washington, D.C.

During the 1830s, Bancroft rose to prominence nationally. He published the first volume of his *History of the United States* in 1834, the second in 1837, and the third in 1840. Widely well received by Americans and Europeans, the *History* provided Bancroft with the cultural capital to enter public life at a high level. He began corresponding with Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, John C. Calhoun, and other notable leaders. By the end of the decade, Bancroft's service to the Democratic Party—an affiliation that set him apart from his Boston Brahmin peers—resulted in his status as a nationally recognized political force.

Bancroft also held influence in a state that often went against the Democrats, Massachusetts, where he served as Port Collector of Boston, the most powerful patronage office in the state. In this capacity, Bancroft provided jobs for other young, nationalistic writers, like Nathaniel Hawthorne. Serving as Port Collector also introduced Bancroft to the importance of the Pacific and of California and Oregon to America's economic prospects. The territories were key to controlling access to the lucrative trade with China.¹⁹

Although he only served as Port Collector for several years, Bancroft's time in the position furthered his political career. During succeeding Presidential elections in 1840 and 1844, Bancroft played important roles, particularly in the latter contest. Through correspondence with Jackson, Bancroft grew convinced that James K. Polk was the

¹⁹ Adele Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784-1848* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1941).

best choice for the Democratic candidate, and Bancroft threw his support behind the man from Tennessee, who of course secured both his party's nomination and then the Presidency.

To reward Bancroft for his services at the Democratic Party Convention in Baltimore in 1844, when Bancroft helped secure the delegates necessary to ensure Polk's nomination, Polk appointed Bancroft to his cabinet as Secretary of the Navy. In this capacity, Bancroft undertook substantial reforms that included founding the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, and preparing that branch of service for action if conflict erupted in the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific among the United States, Mexico, and Great Britain. Also, Polk confided to Bancroft prior to the inauguration that he would serve only one term and that his sole aim as President would be to expand the United States's borders by acquiring Northern Mexico and the Oregon territory.

While Secretary of the Navy, and later as acting Secretary of War, Bancroft gave orders to the United States's Pacific fleet to occupy Monterey, California, upon outbreak of war with Mexico. After serving the Polk administration in these capacities, Bancroft received a new assignment, one that he coveted more. He became the American foreign minister to Britain.

Because Britain sought to control the entire Pacific Coast of North America—economically, if not politically—the conflict with Mexico over control of California spilled over into the conflict with England over the Oregon territory, whose boundaries remained undefined. Bancroft, thus, had a delicate and important role; it was his job to negotiate an informal peace between the world's dominant maritime power and their former colony, flush with territory, treasure, and full of ambition.

Following the change of Presidential administration in 1849, Bancroft resigned his post as foreign minister and returned to private life in the United States. His many activities after this point were interesting and important, but are also outside the confines of this dissertation. One ought to know, though, that Bancroft continued to write prolifically, producing more volumes of his *History*. He became a figure who transcended politics, giving Abraham Lincoln's official eulogy to Congress, despite being a Democrat, while Lincoln was a Republican. Once again, during the late 1860s and early 1870s, he served as foreign minister—this time, to Prussia, when Otto Von Bismarck consolidated the German states into a single nation. After retiring from this position, Bancroft relocated to Washington, D.C., where he became a social icon. He continued writing, producing a history of the Constitution, as well as revisions of his earlier historical works. Before his death in 1890, at the age of 91, Bancroft also served as President of the American Historical Association, then a new organization. He lived almost the entire nineteenth century, and shaped its politics.

Historiography and Organization

But which people constituted the ruling class to which Bancroft belonged, and what were their objectives? At this point, the historiography of the Jacksonian Era provided answers and provoked further questions. The major late twentieth and early twenty first century historians of Jacksonian America have identified persistent historical actors in the history and secondary literature of the period: unsurprisingly, capitalists, and, what was then, a new class of mechanical laborers who combined with an older agricultural workforce to form an Early American proletariat or protoproletariat—the

latter distinction depending on whether one believed that America was fully capitalist before or after the Civil War.²⁰

With this concrete, historical distinction between actors, the contending themes within the historiography of the period came to the fore: namely, whether democratic progress defined the era, and whether democracy and capitalism coexisted symbiotically or antagonistically. Appropriately, democracy was the theme in Bancroft's *History*, something that my immediate historiographic predecessors recognized. Democracy was what was at stake during the Age of Jackson—by all accounts.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, there were three sweeping historical studies of the Age of Jackson that established important precedence for me. The first, published in 1991, was Charles Sellers's, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. The second, published in 2005, was Sean Wilentz's, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*. And the third, published in 2007, was Daniel Howe's, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*.²¹ In the March 2009 edition of the *Journal of American History*, John Larson wrote of these books: "We have in hand now three major tomes portraying this period in significantly different colors—Sellers's *Market Revolution*, Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy*, and Howe's *What Hath God Wrought*. Put all three on your father's Christmas list,"

²⁰ Reeve Huston, "Review: The Nineteenth-Century Political Nation: A Tale of Two Syntheses," *Reviews in American History* 23, no. 3 (1995): 413-420.

²¹ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Larson wrote, “and show him that the historian’s craft is not a science after all but rhetorical art.”²² Clearly, White’s *Metahistory* made a lasting impression.

Sellers emphasized class conflict as the generative force behind democracy. He thus located his scholarship within Marxist thought and Progressive historiography, and positioned ideology as originating within economic relations.²³ In Howe’s words, published exactly two decades after *The Market Revolution*: “Sellers reified the market revolution, making it an actor in his story—indeed, its villain. Sellers’s wicked ‘Market’ ruined the lives of happy subsistence farmers, forcing their sons and daughters to become a proletariat in the service of a repressive bourgeoisie.”²⁴ Ideas about democracy, unlike in Bancroft’s Hegelian narrative, arose from material circumstances, rather than directly driving social relations—much less the entire course of history, as Bancroft maintained.

But what role or shape did democracy assume in Sellers’s prose? For Sellers, democracy was a response by the oppressed to their oppression. More precisely, democracy was a tool used by the proletariat to combat the emerging elite capitalist class. Even more specifically, in the Second Party system of Democrats and Whigs, the Jacksonians represented the interests of the exploited, while the Whigs assumed the role of a political platform for the owners of capital as the exploiters.

To be sure, Sellers recognized that there were potentially anti-democratic ideological currents within Jacksonian Democracy. How could he do otherwise writing in

²² John Lauritz Larson, “Review: *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* by Daniel Walker Howe,” *Journal of American History* 95, issue 4 (2009): 1126.

²³ For the classic analysis of this generation, see: Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935).

²⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, “Review: *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* by John Lauritz Larson,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 31, no. 3 (2011): 520-522.

the aftermath of the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement? “Driven into the racist embrace of slave capital,’ the democratic ideals of Jackson’s plebeian followers were hopelessly compromised from the start.”²⁵ Nonetheless, in Sellers’s narrative, Jacksonian democracy was first and foremost, in the words of Wilentz, “a coherent effort to rid government of class biases, to vindicate the principle that ‘the majority is to govern,’ to dismantle the top-down, credit-driven motors of the market revolution.”²⁶ In other words, although problematic, antebellum American democracy was a good faith effort in the cause of liberty. Which, not coincidentally, was precisely the view that Bancroft held as an actual Jacksonian Democrat.

Wilentz himself, writing in the wake of Sellers’s magnum opus, modified Sellers’s economic determinism, but reinforced the idea that—although problematic—Jacksonian democracy was truly in good faith. What mattered, Wilentz contended, was that in their own day and in their own minds the Jacksonians embraced democracy. Indeed, he explained Bancroft’s social and cultural shift from the Whiggish circles of Boston’s elite to the Democratic Party as a conversion that coincided with the publication of the *History*: “Bancroft’s liberalism finally won out over his breeding, and in 1834, the same year he published the first volume of his monumental *History of the United States*, he threw his support to the Working Men...charging that ‘there is more danger from monopolies than from combinations of workingmen.’” Bancroft became a Jacksonian, through and through. “A year later,” Wilentz wrote, “he [Bancroft] attacked the Whigs as an American Tory party that merged three classes of aristocratic oppressors:

²⁵ Huston, “Review: The Nineteenth-Century Political Nation,” 414.

²⁶ Sean Wilentz, “Review: The Original Outsider: *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* by Charles Sellers,” *New Republic* 206, no. 25 (1992): 36.

commercial monopolists, manufacturing corporations, and southern slaveholders.” The last, Wilentz quoted Bancroft as saying, were, “the most selfish, the most united, and the most overbearing of all.”²⁷ Wilentz thus used Bancroft in *The Rise of American Democracy* to demonstrate that some Jacksonians at least recognized the contradictions in the racial caste system and what they promoted as their party’s democratic awakening in the United States.

On the subject of awakenings, however, Howe had the last word. From his title, Howe gestured to the importance of religion—a subject over which Howe had a mastery in the history of the Early Republic that was second to none, even before he typed a syllable of *What Hath God Wrought*. Indeed, the title of his magnum opus—which won the Pulitzer Prize for *History*—emerged from a historical career steeped in an understanding of the past through the perspective of political culture, something profoundly religious in America, especially during the Age of Jackson when millenarian revivals swept the country—so fiercely that some referred to areas of particularly intense evangelical activity as “burned over districts.”²⁸ Like Wilentz, Howe rejected Sellers’s economic determinism. Howe went a step further, however, and also rejected the notion that the Jacksonian Democracy represented a good faith effort in the cause of liberty, and he used the reform spirit that emanated from religious discourse during the period to prove his point.

Reform, grounded in liberal theological awakening, Howe argued, proved that Wilentz’s faith in politics to explain the democratic impulse of the Jacksonian Era was

²⁷ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 419.

²⁸ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950).

misplaced. “Women’s rights and antislavery both illustrate,” Howe wrote, “the point that some of the most important debates of the period did not take place within the arena of politics. Much of this discussion occurred within the religious communities.”²⁹ He buried the nail of his contention by citing the examples of the most significant but definitely different religious revival leaders from the period. “The moral and reforming outlook of evangelicals like Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney,” Howe wrote, “found the Whig ambition to improve America congenial.”³⁰ Even more removed from Sellers’s economic determinism than Wilentz, who used the political dimensions of the economy as an indirect way of emphasizing class struggle, Howe’s cultural framework embedded the dynamism of the Age of Jackson in private life.

Howe never neglected material reality, though; indeed, he gave it a prominent place by demonstrating the close relationship between technological change and cultural consciousness. “Improved transportation and communications, promoting economic diversification, widened people’s horizons, encouraged greater equality within family relationships, and fostered the kind of commitments to education and the rule of law exemplified by Abraham Lincoln,” Howe wrote. “Accordingly,” he wrote, “economic development did not undercut American democracy but broadened and enhanced it.”³¹ Howe therefore did not conclude that democracy was a reaction that emerged from the oppressiveness of capitalism; rather, he argued that capitalism and democracy developed in tandem, if not symbiotically. And, in this contention, Howe and Bancroft agreed.

²⁹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 851.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 580.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 449-450.

In this consensus that the democratic thought of the Age of Jackson served liberty, I have found fault. Bancroft's discourse about democracy that he crystallized into a historical narrative in the three volumes of his *History* that he published during the Jacksonian Era was thoroughly ideological in nature, and thus ultimately undermined, rather than furthered, the cause of liberty. Bancroft and his historical narrative enabled, precisely through its self-evident factual nature for its readers, the violent takeover of the Northern Mexican borderlands and their transformation into the Western United States.

This activity displaced a diverse array of peoples that included Americans, Comanche, and Mexicans, as Anne Hyde showed in her own magnum opus, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A New History of the North American West, 1800-1860*.³² The networks of individuals and small groups that Hyde explored existed in tension with each other, but also demonstrated a mutual respect that disappeared once Bancroft's Jacksonians infiltrated the territory—and beyond that Mexico itself—with the United States Army and Navy. Regardless of whether the Jacksonians sought in good faith to promote the interests of part of the American population, regardless of whether there was a genuinely liberal reform spirit that existed in Whig religious and political alliances, the democratic spirit that Bancroft made the chief subject of his historical narrative was ultimately ideological in character and content—precisely because, as Howe demonstrated, it developed in the service of capitalism, in all its diverse, Democratic or Whiggish, Northern or Southern forms. In the final analysis, Bancroft's *History* formed a significant component of an empirical bulwark of ISAs, without which American

³² Anne Farrar Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

imperialism would never have enjoyed a profusely universal and long lasting legitimacy through American nationalism, despite its violent and aggressive nature.

So, how have historians—represented in the three big syntheses of the period—understood Bancroft's world? Despite significant differences, the books underscore the importance of the three key dynamics of the period: the rise of democracy, the use of racial ideology to discipline labor, and the intensifying development of industrial capitalism. The three historians disagree in regard to causal primacy. Sellers, in what may be called classic Marxist style, presents industrial capitalism as the age's driving force. For Wilentz, it is democracy. For Howe, the answer is a spin on Sellers: technological innovation, specifically in communication and transportation. However, as even the titles reveal, each author's assertion amounts to the same structural development. Sellers—the first of the three to publish his big book—makes no attempt to obscure his interpretation; he uses the word, “revolution.” Wilentz says “rise” and Howe “transformation.” But they amount to the same thing: the idea that the period represented a sharp disjuncture in the course of American history.

A fourth book is worth considering. Reginald Horsman's, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, does not offer a sweeping narrative in the manner of Sellers, Wilentz, and Howe, but does clarify the comparative weaknesses of the big three in their omission of race as a structural cornerstone. Yet, Horsman undersells his subject. Race needs to be not only at the center of a book on the Second Party System; books about race also need to aim for the center of interpretations of the period.

Eugene and Elizabeth Fox Genovese get closer to a fully accurate synthesis of the antebellum years in their book, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Fate in*

the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview, but like Horseman they come up short for my purposes because they circumscribed their narrative—in their case, to a single region.³³ The Genoveses explain why historians writing syntheses of the Early Republic make race a sideshow and why historians who focus on race avoid grand narratives. The introduction to their book devotes multiple paragraphs to explaining why they chose to write about elites and why it is important to avoid demonizing elites. In his book, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession*, Peter Novick quotes Eugene Genovese, describing his experiences writing about African American history at the height of the social history revolution of the 1970s. Genovese claims that black historians told him he had no business writing about what they perceived to be exclusive narrative territory.³⁴ Yet, as Genovese observed, if social history is the history of people who were marginalized, then the danger in the historiography is for social historians to allow their categories of analysis to prevent their subjects from participating in the synthetic narratives represented in the works of Sellers, Wilentz, and Howe—not coincidentally, all white men trained in economic, political, and intellectual history. Social history needs to claim the center of historical analysis, and historians need to realize that social history includes elites.

Of course, these conclusions counteract the views of an older historiography. For example, Vernon Parrington's classic texts on the rise of Romanticism in the United States assumed that Bancroft not only spoke for the age as a historian, but that his

³³ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholder's Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁴ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

moment was a genuine step toward equality. Claiming that the “Brahmin mind” in early-nineteenth-century Boston “found a more congenial field for its literary ambitions in history,” as opposed to poetry—something Bancroft’s career embodied—Parrington argued: “The greatest and...most characteristic work of the period was George Bancroft’s *History of the United States*.”³⁵ Furthermore, Parrington claimed that although the “renaissance of Boston scholarship” began with Edward Everett and George Ticknor, their “German training was imposed on natures instinctively aristocratic, swayed by the older Federalist prejudices.”³⁶ Bancroft, meanwhile, was “a militant Democrat,” whose historical scholarship pleased the German tradition from which it sprung. In the words of the father of modern historiography, Leopold von Ranke, to Bancroft: “Your history is the best book ever written from the democratic point of view.”³⁷ Parrington’s work therefore illustrates for me not only the departure of this dissertation from older groups of historians, in alliance with social and cultural history—as opposed to older intellectual history traditions like the myth and symbol school of the 1950s—but also indicates the political importance that writing history carried in Bancroft’s day. Ralph Emerson, Prescott, Jared Sparks, Everett, Ticknor, and others certainly also sought to fill a void in American literary and, indeed, national life by joining the world republic of letters. But it was a task that Bancroft performed better than anyone.

And what have other historians using the biographical method had to say about Bancroft? He appears in other works on historiography as a precursor to supposedly really interesting historians like the Progressives but less prominently as a subject in his

³⁵ Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860* (Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 437.

³⁶ Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution*, 437.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 438.

own right.³⁸ The first major biography of Bancroft was M. A. De Wolfe Howe's, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft*.³⁹ Written in 1908, this work offered readers a biographical sketch of Bancroft's life, as well as insight into his life by publishing select letters between Bancroft and several notable Americans, as well as his second wife. The biography emphasized Bancroft's relationship with Jared Sparks, the man responsible for editing the majority of Bancroft's articles for the *North American Review*, and the political and diplomatic activities for which Bancroft received notoriety as a statesman.

Since DeWolfe Howe, there have been three major biographies on Bancroft. And a disagreement runs through them concerning one theme central to Bancroft's life: his affiliation with the Democratic Party. Russel Blaine Nye's book, *George Bancroft, Brahmin Rebel*, maintained a view similar to my own that Bancroft's European experiences dramatically shaped him, probably explaining his shift from the Whiggish circles of his early life to the Jacksonian political choices he made as a grown man. Robert H. Canary's, *George Bancroft*, offers a similar assessment: that one cannot understand Bancroft accurately without noticing a shift in his sensibilities that occurred around the time of his European adventures. But, on the other hand, Lilian Handlin's *George Bancroft: the Intellectual as Democrat* manifested the position that Bancroft's early upbringing in Unitarian circles in New England explained the positions he took throughout his vast oeuvre. In Handlin's analysis, there was little room for influence on

³⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty," *The American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 651-677; Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 909-928.

³⁹ M. A. De Wolfe Howe and Henry C. Strippel, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908).

the part of Bancroft's European experiences. His education in German universities remained uninspiring the long run.⁴⁰

It is in no way my intention in this dissertation to join the previous Bancroft biographers in narrating the full arc of his life, or in amassing the same level of detail in familiarity with his personality and quotidian passage through the world. It is my object to bring to light the profoundly interesting nature of the history that Bancroft wrote. I take the position that Bancroft's *History* was informed by both his New England, Unitarian roots, as well as by his European experiences. I lean toward Nye's assessment that Bancroft's European travels shaped him in significant ways, thus rejecting to some degree Handlin's sense that Bancroft remained a largely provincial character, in mind if not in activity. But my real point and contribution is that Bancroft's activities as a historian and his movements as a political actor sprung from a common desire in him to shape the fate of his country by expanding its role in the course of civilization, something that he believed meant extending the United States's democratic politics across North America.

The question as to why Bancroft chose to affiliate with the Democratic Party is therefore of a secondary importance to me. My explanation is that he did so because the Jacksonians best represented, in his mind, the universal democratic ethos that he came to believe was humanity's destiny and America's purpose to fulfill in the world as a major intellectual and coercive power. But the story of the *History* and its entanglement in Jacksonian politics is the point of interest for me and the object of this dissertation. I make no pretensions to actually be a biographer of George Bancroft. I am a student of

⁴⁰ Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft: the Intellectual as Democrat* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); Robert H. Canary, *George Bancroft* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974); Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1944).

the *History* he wrote and of the empire he helped create. To be clear, therefore, this text is not the best resource for someone seeking to understand the chronology of Bancroft's life, or his personality—to those readers, I recommend Handlin—my point is to demonstrate the ideological function of Bancroft's text in the context of an expanding American empire that served the interests of white manhood.

Research Methodology and Chapter Organization

My research methodology involved a close reading of the first editions of the first three volumes of Bancroft's *History*, and placing that text in the context of his letters, orations, and diary entries. There have been many editions of Bancroft's master work. Most are abridgments. During his own life, Bancroft revised existing volumes of the *History* even as he wrote new ones. I selected the first editions of the first three volumes because I sought to understand the immediate origin and effect of the text. Paired with archival research at the Massachusetts Historical Society and the New York Public Library, this close examination of Bancroft's text yielded valuable results, namely evidence that the history that Bancroft wrote during the Age of Jackson was important as an ideological device for the emergence of American empire and democracy that favored white men.

I have correspondingly divided this dissertation into four chapters. The first chapter is the place in which I describe Bancroft's educational experiences in Europe as highly influential in his life and as an important step in his development into a public figure. In the second chapter, I demonstrate two things: one, how Bancroft's European experiences transformed into a distinctive career in letters in the United States that ultimately culminated with the publication of the *History's* first volume; and, two, how

previous examples of historical writing in the United States about the United States laid a foundation upon which Bancroft worked when he wrote the *History*. The third chapter discusses Bancroft's *History* as a narrative structure, namely a framework within which the ideology of democracy that Bancroft experienced as a Jacksonian received full expression in the historical literary genre. And the fourth chapter demonstrates the political uses of Bancroft's *History*—a few examples of how the text functioned as an ideological tool.

Chapter 1

Bancroft's European Experiences and the Shaping of His Mind

When George Bancroft arrived in Europe in late 1819, he acted as a reverse pioneer, exploring the Old World for the New. A handful of other Americans had established footholds of identity in Europe, representing the young American republic to its older counterparts. But during the late-1810s and 20s, a new type of ambassador from America emerged—the agent of cultural exchange. This individual type, which Bancroft, Everett, Ticknor, Washington Irving, and Ralph Waldo Emerson embodied, began the American “renaissance” precisely because they had spent time abroad accustoming themselves to the culture of letters of Europe.

The German states were the most fruitful ground for inspiration during the late-Enlightenment and Romantic Periods in letters. So, consequently, the intellectual work of cultural exchange that Bancroft carried out while abroad—sometimes, indeed, perhaps often, unintentionally—led to significant traction in the world of letters once he returned home. This chapter discusses what exactly happened to Bancroft while abroad, and the next chapter discusses—in part—how this journey catalyzed Bancroft's life into one of scholarship and letters once he returned home.

The Nature of Bancroft's Journey

George Bancroft went to Europe to pursue a doctorate at the Georgia Augusta University at Göttingen, in the Kingdom of Hanover. After receiving a bachelor's and a master's degree at Harvard, the only place for Bancroft to go for further education was

abroad. The faculty at Harvard believed in Bancroft's intellectual potential and wanted to encourage the young man. They also sought to lay the groundwork for Harvard's future by ensuring that the College would be able to draw on the best pool of talent possible in the future hiring of professors. Bancroft, thus, went to Europe on a personal, as well as an institutional errand. By growing into a formidable man of letters, he would strengthen New England's and America's reputations in the global network of letters.

Because Harvard was still an institution primarily devoted to the study of theology during the early-nineteenth century, Bancroft's educational mission included strengthening his grasp of hermeneutics. Men of letters in the United States viewed literature and the people who wrote it most useful and accomplished when contributing to moral philosophy—something profoundly ethical in the nature of its questioning, and therefore keenly sensitive to sacred texts. In this way, Bancroft's education amounted to a project in civics, because he would supposedly return to America able to better form American character as a person of letters—something he did through the *History*. Bancroft's mind would be the meeting point of religious sensibility with the secular world of nation building.

Bancroft recognized his endeavor's dual scholastic and political nature. During the early nineteenth century, religious debates captured national attention, and the Unitarians responsible for sending Bancroft to Europe wanted to persuade the people in the United States that orthodox ideas about the soul and salvation—Calvinistic doctrine of predestination upholding God's arbitrary selection of individuals as the only hope in a bleak, static world defined by sin—proved inadequate in the face of an increasingly complex and global world of interconnected cultures and beliefs. In contrast to the

doctrine of predestination and the singular path to salvation it postulated, the Unitarians proclaimed that, just as God had devised many peoples, so he had created multiple paths to the divine. This doctrine was known as Arminianism.

The differences mattered in practicality because what was at stake was the capacity for the human of the Enlightenment—an inherently rational creature, full of positive potential—to continue to believe in the omnipotent, Christian, God, and this creator’s miraculous interventions in history. Indeed, the real intellectual quandary was about the ability of people to freely exercise their capacity for reason—basically, the Enlightenment’s definition of freedom—while maintaining the ethical foundations of social intercourse, which were religious in nature, and amounted to acceptance of the divine design of the world. The stakes were high, because, although they acknowledged the Enlightenment and its doctrine of free reason as progress, the Unitarians also believed that faith in God remained crucial to ethics, and thus to public well being under the rule of nationalism. America’s destiny seemed to hinge on the union of the Enlightenment individual with the Christian community through the province of ethics. A theology of multiple salvations would thus be modern in the sense that it would enable people to embrace the discoveries of the Enlightenment, while simultaneously resisting violent revolutionary impulses, like those that had afflicted revolutionary France.

Bancroft thus viewed himself as part of a movement in America, largely centered around people who had graduated from Harvard, united in their passion for letters and their vision of transforming the United States into a literary superpower. Nothing mattered more to this group than perfecting America’s written discourse. Indeed, improving the standing of America’s intellectual production in the eyes of Europeans

was, to them, a vital matter of national interest, key to protecting the vitality of the United States as the world's first new nation—a modern democracy.

In the spring of 1820, Bancroft received a letter from another member of this group, his friend, S.A. Eliot, a young man still attending Harvard. Eliot shared with Bancroft his excitement about the increasingly propitious prospect of letters in the United States. The language Eliot used reflected the complex, interdependent nature of the relationship between letters and nationality. “We certainly have here at home much that may justly give one a high feeling of pride in the moral, and strong and animating hope for the literary and religious state of the country,” Eliot proclaimed.⁴¹ Moral was the key word; it revealed that the fundamental purpose of letters, in the eyes of young Americans, was the discernment and encouragement of ethics at the national level. Indeed, it was no accident that at Harvard Bancroft received most of his training in theology. Many of them, Bancroft included, considered a career at the pulpit inevitable. In his comments, Eliot also explicitly likened letters to a religious quest. He wrote that a revolution was at hand in the way Americans thought about their identity. Literary development had become synonymous with national development.

However, the question that most concerned Bancroft and others was whether intellectual dynamism could coexist with democratic political progress. Eventually, Bancroft would answer this question in the affirmative in his own mind because he would write the history of this democratic spirit. But, at the time, Eliot's words struck Bancroft poignantly because, for Bancroft and his counterparts, progress was measured

⁴¹ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 21 March 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

in liberty. Bancroft called this valuation freedom of mind. It meant the ability for a person to pursue a line of thought, regardless of politics or propriety.

By the 1820s, Americans had, for decades, claimed to exemplify modern democracy as the world's first modern republic. But the United States, nonetheless, remained deficient in their eyes. Bancroft and his fellow authors felt anxious about their country's liberty. Because in a political and economic system in which people could choose how to spend time, what did it mean when literary output failed to match what the absolutist monarchies of Europe produced? Perhaps popular sovereignty worked against literary production and, indeed, the life of the mind? Thus, for Bancroft and his counterparts, letters were more than a means of communication. Literature was the intersection of nationality and the grand scheme of history. If America was the land of liberty, then the absence of a strong national literature could only suggest a deficiency with representative government itself.

German Experiences and Influencers

At Göttingen, Bancroft discovered the German Enlightenment and laid the intellectual foundations of his abilities as a historian. Despite a diversity of thinkers, including Immanuel Kant and Johann Herder, the German Enlightenment was singular in its rejection of the rationalism of the earlier, French Enlightenment, as well as more nuanced in its treatment of the Christian tradition. Through his exposure to this discourse in German seminar rooms and books, Bancroft acquired the ability to serve as a medium connecting the German Enlightenment with Unitarian theology.

The powerful potential of Bancroft's experiences in Europe were not lost on his American contemporaries. "You have been transported from a country in which

everything is new and plain and unclassical, and nothing which is interesting to a man of letters has advanced beyond its elements,” an American friend wrote, “to a land in which you are presented at every step with monuments of ancient art, and warmed by the visions of ancient glory.” In the American mind, Europe represented a promise that America could fulfill. The same correspondent continued to praise Europe, proclaiming it to be, “a land in which you converse directly and familiarly with men whose immense volumes we have been accustomed to regard with veneration—and to a quarter of the world in which you are a neighbor of mighty actions, mighty things, and mighty spirits, whose noise has reached us here at home, but,” he lamented, “from which we are divided by a rolling ocean.”⁴² Bancroft had the ability to be a veritable ship crossing that ocean in the spirit of intellectual exchange.

Surprisingly, in his comments to Bancroft, the American correspondent, W. P. Greenwood, chose to establish a parallel between the concepts of “new” and “plain.” The juxtaposition alluded to democracy—something new, something as of yet ugly. Indeed, judged through the eyes of the achievements of the Old World, the aesthetic accomplishments of the New World were at best dull, possibly vulgar. Eventually, Bancroft would remedy this perception through the *History*.

In another letter that Bancroft received from home, Nathaniel Frothingham made the same point more specific to literature. Indeed, he critiqued the most basic aspect of letters—its material form. Frothingham wrote that to see “the production of the Deutch worthies in our Yankee leather and lettering” was in poor taste. He implored Bancroft to send him the books of the German scholars in their German binding, thus going so far

⁴² W. P. Greenwood to George Bancroft, April 1819, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

as to critique American letters in form as well as content. Frothingham also begged Bancroft to describe the details of his days at Göttingen, to take him into the study of Eichhorn—to in essence transport him away from the dreary state of literary affairs that Frothingham perceived in the United States.

Although the thoughts of one person, Frothingham's interest in German letters and the fact that he implicitly revealed that there was a market for Enlightenment ideas in America indicated the existence of the penetration of a discourse from Europe that challenged traditional American religiosity. Bancroft was a conduit. Kant, whom Bancroft read, exemplified the Enlightenment shift in religious thinking that influenced Bancroft's German mentors, who in turn influenced Bancroft. Kant moved from a clerical or dogmatic application of faith to a view of religion as essentially one of many ethical systems of morality. Religion, thus, amounted to a mere vehicle for truth, rather than the truth itself. Christ, in particular, maintained his significance, but not as a real messiah. A representative figure whose moral example could and should inspire others. The ultimate object of Enlightenment thought characterized by Kant's work was "an ethical polity," whereby the people of God could just as easily be people "ruled by moral laws," whatever the name applied to the system.⁴³

Enlightenment thought further undermined traditional religion by shifting the source of morality from theology to nature. Theology was only good if it institutionalized moral principles that existed outside and independent of specific religious teachings. Indeed, religion, in this sense, became chiefly historical, one of many moments in time when an attempt was made to inscribe the laws of nature—true morality—into human

⁴³ Magne Sæbø, e.d., *The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, The History of Its Interpretation, Vol. II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2008), 1036.

institutions and daily practice. This view of religion did not by any means exclude religion itself from social or political life, but it subjected religion to a litmus test from outside the religious doctrine itself, and this development was shocking and proved almost cataclysmic intellectually to the orthodox religious viewpoint in America, even though subordinating religious teaching to natural rights theory was the inevitable consequence of the growth of an absolutist state that demanded obedience to itself and its bureaucratic clerical order before adherence to mystics or purely religious teaching. Indeed, the way that Kant's thought maintained that religion was important in fact disregarded the possibility of religion possessing a legitimate truth claim. "Because getting hold of something visible belongs to the natural needs of humans, a historical church-faith is unavoidable." Furthermore, this visible religious and historical coupling as a clear indication of right and wrong was "not possible without holy scripture." The Bible thus existed to serve an end, rather than serving as an end in and of itself.⁴⁴

The path from this shift in sensibilities to Bancroft, and eventually to America, was one of intellectual influence, ultimately embodied in the *History*. Herder, a theologian with humanistic convictions, exemplified these Biblical studies at the close of the eighteenth century. For example, Herder was "one of the most prominent representatives of the Sturm und Drang movement," a late Enlightenment tradition that influenced people with whom Bancroft directly associated. Indeed, in accordance with this intellectual affiliation, Herder wrote of the Bible that "the author was a holy person, building on the holy tradition....originating from God's teaching the human beings," which implied the ability of secular traditions to understand sacred thought.⁴⁵ Herder

⁴⁴ Magne Sæbø, e.d., *The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, The History of Its Interpretation, Vol. II*, 1037.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1043-1044.

also articulated that the truest way to understand humanity was through its creation of the divine in art and feeling—a way of thinking that Bancroft would encounter during his studies at Göttingen.

The man most responsible for Bancroft's education at Göttingen University was Eichhorn. A leading academic, Eichhorn pioneered historical study of the Bible. He viewed the Old Testament not as a literal recording of the past, but as a collection of documents, from various points in time, that made sense only when understood through their historical context. Likewise, the books of the Old Testament were only inherently valuable as primary sources for historical study of the age in which they were individually composed. But the most radical aspect of Eichhorn's hermeneutics was the implicit identification of the Bible as belonging to a past that was fundamentally the same as the present. Locating the Old Testament's composition within the same fabric of time as nineteenth-century Europe, Eichhorn asserted that the events described in the Bible were appropriately understood only when they were viewed as the cultural artifacts of primitive societies of the ancient Near East. This resolution about the Bible contradicted the traditional understanding of the scriptures as accounts of real miracles. Under Eichhorn's intellectual rubric, the act of writing the Old Testament replaced the content of its books as most important. The content, the stories, parables, and individuals mentioned, were almost incidental.

Bancroft agreed with Eichhorn about the Old Testament. What Eichhorn taught that shocked his American pupil concerned the New Testament. The books in the Bible about Jesus's ministry had been viewed, for millennium, as eyewitness testimony of God's redemption of the world—activity that had of course included miracles. But

because Eichhorn's hermeneutics was, in essence, the new discipline of history, his view of the books of the New Testament precluded the existence of miracles. Therefore, metaphysical evidence was not evidence that proved something metaphysical; it was merely a cultural artifact that told a story—the same as a painting. The New Testament was thus ultimately a witness only to humanity's capacity for imagination and allegory. Eichhorn taught the New Testament as a book of ethics, compiled as a memorial to a mystical Rabbi named Jesus, a man known, philosophically, as the Son of God.

Bancroft's Unitarian upbringing emphasized multiple paths to salvation, but nonetheless maintained belief in the divine redemption of earthly life, a miracle to which Jesus, the actual Son of God, was central.⁴⁶ Familiarity with Eichhorn and his school of thought supplied Bancroft with additional surprises and concerns. Bancroft observed the German university first-hand, and what he saw demoralized him. For one, scholarship in Prussia existed under the influence of the government. Eichhorn, Bancroft learned, censured his work to avoid running afoul of the Hanoverian Monarchy. Recently restored to power in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the monarchy reacted negatively to any subversion of traditional authority. For example, if Eichhorn doubted God's sovereignty in Christ, then the crown reasoned that they could expect open rebellion against royal prerogative. Elements in Prussian politics sought to introduce democracy and a government more responsive to popular will. Consequently, the recently displaced old regime felt threatened. Bancroft wondered that intellectual dynamism flourished

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint 2001).

under political oppression—even as he agreed with the monarchy, regarding views of the New Testament.⁴⁷

Göttingen University also had a social context that upset Bancroft as much or more than its political situation. The university functioned in a world of base trappings. In particular, Bancroft expressed dismay and disgust at his professors' lifestyles and personalities: "A German man of letters is very different from the idea formed of a scholar in America," Bancroft wrote. "Here learning is not made the companion in public life, nor the beautiful of retirement, nor the friend and companion in affliction, but it is attended to as a trade, is cultivated merely because one can get a living by it." The German scholar viewed letters as a profession, as opposed to a sort of social favor or type of service. Consequently, there was an element of the perverse in German letters. Bancroft clarified this: "The men of science are distinguished from the rest of the world neither by pure morals, nor refined taste, nor love of fame. They are neither polished in their manners, nor elevated in their ways of thinking, nor very agreeable, witty, or interesting in their conversation." Bancroft would remedy the situation in his own life of action and reflection and writing, but in the 1820s, he was aghast at what he saw: "In one word, they learn Hebrew because 'tis better to teach Hebrew than till the earth, they learn law or medicine because 'tis more pleasant to heal the sick or get places under government than to make shoes or cut out coats, as their fathers have done before them...And I have not seen yet an instance of a theologian whose manners were

⁴⁷ David Blackbourn, *History of Germany, 1780-1918: The Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Wiley, 2002).

agreeable.”⁴⁸ American letters created social distinction; in Germany, it was quite the opposite.

Ironically, it was from the democracy that the complaint came that letters failed to signify class differences—one instance of disjuncture between Bancroft’s intellectual product and his personal life. This example underscored the unique relationship between letters and democracy. Under the old regime, letters marked a horizontal distinction, separating people of the same class into different occupations. In the new democracy across the Atlantic Ocean, however, the inherent lack of a philosophical distinction of difference within society led to letters becoming more than an earnest occupation, as it was in Prussia. For Bancroft, being a man of letters meant entering the capitalist class that his father had ministered to from the pulpit. Bancroft rejected theology precisely because it no longer signified fortune or power. In Germany, Bancroft began to understand that the university offered no better prospect.

Although Bancroft was excited upon arriving at Göttingen, his admiration dissipated. Within half a year, Bancroft saw his new home as a “factory,” where books and professors were made, as if the knowledge they represented was no different than any other commodity. Upset, he wrote letters to his countrymen and pined for a return to a place with American values. Indeed, the longer Bancroft stayed away from the United States, the better America seemed to him.⁴⁹ Bancroft reflected on the character of German men of letters thus:

1. They are mostly from the lower orders of society.

⁴⁸ George Bancroft to John Kirkland, 15 January 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴⁹ George Bancroft to John Kirkland, 15 January 1820.

2. They are at least very many of them bookworms.
3. They have no taste for domestic enjoyment.
4. They have very little feeling for the beauty of devotion.
5. They have not good manners, such as to fit them for good company.
6. Hence they are not noticed on their travels except by men like themselves.
7. They have no nice feelings, either moral or of good breeding.
8. Hence no idea of beauty of style, of grace in speech.
9. They regard letters as a trade, are then on a level with most mechanics.
10. They write for money, even the richer part of them.
11. They embrace a life of study from no high motive.
12. They care no more for everlasting fame than the common herd.

He continued his reflections to encompass the whole of German literature. He explained in greater precision the difficulties that he perceived in the entire project of the German mind. Although he never truly realized his youthful, pure objectives for letters, at a young age Bancroft had a sharp pen, and he made use of it to the following effect:

1. The multitude of authors in all branches.
2. The want of originality—the multitude of translations.
3. The propensity to imitation in the lower orders of poets, etc.
4. The want of a great city, where the men of letters might unite.
5. The little attention paid to style and beauty of language.
6. The divisions of the sciences, each forming a body distinct from the rest.
7. The little direct influence on the public.
8. The want of a moral spirit.

9. The democratic state of letters, no men acknowledged as models.
10. The tendency to say new things.
11. The German language not yet purified.
12. The Germans excel all nations in critical accuracy.
13. The sciences live and are advanced; individuals die and are forgotten.
14. The multitude of school books and compendie.
15. The cultivated state of literary history.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, the Germans exercised considerable influence on Bancroft in his later work. For, Eichborn extended Herder's humanistic theology further. He became a true historian in the modern sense. "He was a genuine universalist," writing many volumes on world history, the history of culture, and of literature."⁵¹ A professor of oriental languages at Jenna, and then of Biblical studies at Göttingen, Eichhorn was Bancroft's advisor and thus shaped the latter's view of the connection between the study of the Bible, the study of human nature, and the nature of the past. Eichhorn fundamentally approached the Bible as a piece of literature, and thereby presented himself as a historian of literature.⁵²

A decade after Bancroft's return from Europe, Tocqueville wrote that, culturally, democracy produced a pernicious leveling effect. Ideas suffered; equality threatened creativity. Bancroft knew Tocqueville; they were familiar with doubts regarding the capacity for a political democracy to sustain an intellectual aristocracy years before Tocqueville summarized the issue. It was the desire to overcome this leveling effect in

⁵⁰ George Bancroft Diary, 24 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵¹ Magne Sæbø, e.d., *The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, The History of Its Interpretation, Vol. II*, 1051.

⁵² Ibid., 1052.

democratic society that motivated Bancroft's and others' literary endeavors, and by extension his travel to Europe for education.⁵³

If the movement to aggrandize American letters had a leader in the European passage, then it was Everett. Eventually a member of congress—as well as the keynote speaker at the commemoration of the Battle at Gettysburg—Everett preceded Bancroft by several years in attending Göttingen University. Bancroft wrote home that Everett and their mutual friend, Ticknor, were remembered well by the Germans. Everett served as a model to Bancroft, and Bancroft consequently confided in Everett. Unlike their mentors at Harvard, Everett could understand Bancroft's attraction to the historical turn that German theology and philosophy had taken. Lamenting to Everett about the dangers of confining himself to doing only what the Harvard Unitarians wanted, Bancroft argued that one would find neither fame nor the chance for self-support through theological work. And fame and self-support were precisely the things that Everett had encouraged his contemporaries to pursue.⁵⁴

In his letters to Everett from Berlin, Bancroft made clear his preference for his new location. Of his time in Göttingen, Bancroft wrote: "It was like living among the dead."⁵⁵ Bancroft mentioned the "roughness" of the students, and the jealous and petty nature of the faculty. He found in Berlin the intellectual and social community that he had hoped for in Germany. Again, Bancroft singled out Schleiermacher, writing that due to the latter's guidance, "I became acquainted with a great deal of theological literature,

⁵³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed., Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 1 August 1819, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵⁵ Bancroft to Everett, 28 December 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

which I should not otherwise have understood.”⁵⁶ Bancroft’s remarks to Everett demonstrated the significance of his intellectual genealogy in Germany to his overall intellectual development. Not only had Schleiermacher introduced him to new theological texts, but had shaped Bancroft’s understanding of the general subject.

The exchanges with the Germans and Bancroft were far from one sided, however. Bancroft spoke to Everett of his visits to Wilhelm Von Humboldt and the latter’s interest in the copy of the *North American Review*, which Bancroft had lent to him. Since Everett was the *Review*’s editor at the time, and also a former pupil of Humboldt, the literary exchange meant something significant. It was evidence of a dialogue of letters that existed at the highest levels between America and Germany, as early as the 1820s, what some might call the height of the German Enlightenment—which was the late Enlightenment in Europe as a whole.

Bancroft also wrote to Everett that orthodoxy, philosophical and theological, were far more triumphant in Berlin than at Göttingen. This situation pleased Bancroft. Indeed, he wrote that the “horrible neologists,” the school of thought of his advisor at Göttingen, Eichborn, were in decline in Berlin. “The voice of the people...is declaring itself very strongly against Eichhorn and his school.”⁵⁷

Other correspondence clarified the relationship between theology and literary attainment. Eliot illuminated the subject in a letter to Bancroft in the early summer of 1819. Evidently, there was a previous understanding that—despite being limitless in scope—the study of theology was, in the final analysis, a provincial undertaking.

American letters needed to incorporate and respond to foreign discourses. Eliot wrote,

⁵⁶ Bancroft to Everett, 28 December 1820, George Bancroft Papers.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

“raising the standard of American literature” depended upon more American scholars learning German and studying the new theology—history.⁵⁸

Eliot wrote to Bancroft that under Everett’s leadership, the *North American Review* had increased in circulation and influence, but deteriorated in other areas—at least in Eliot’s opinion. “There is a very great want of a high and correct moral tone which has entirely failed since he [Everett] has had it. He keeps all such topics out of sight with the same sort of cold blooded philosophy which has distinguished *The Edinburgh*.”⁵⁹ Eliot claimed to feel very strongly that this omission of moral advisement—if one might call it that—was a severe defect. Yet, his complaint might not have reached Bancroft in the way Eliot had wished. Like Everett, Bancroft wanted prestige for American letters, and in many ways he had concluded that this achievement would mean assuming European models of writing and publication. Although Everett and Bancroft later disagreed about the right European model to follow, they had a consensus that Europe had much to teach America about letters—even if the conclusion among the Americans was that the United States would ultimately prove to be a more fertile ground for thought than the Old World. Tellingly, Eliot concluded his letter by informing Bancroft that Everett filled the Review with articles that he personally solicited. But what was absent—or who was absent—mattered as much as what was there, in Eliot’s opinion. Eliot wrote, “We have not had an article I believe from Mr. Frisbie, the President [of Harvard College] Mr. Norton, or Ticknor, or Ellery Channing, or

⁵⁸ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 21 June 1819, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵⁹ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 11 June 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

half a dozen others I might name... These are the men who gave it [the *North American Review*] its moral character.”⁶⁰

Bancroft’s outlook improved once he graduated from Göttingen University and relocated to the University of Berlin in the fall of 1820. Introduced to a new faculty that included Wilhelm von Humboldt and G. W. F. Hegel, Bancroft finally found mentors in Germany that he could admire. Friedrich Schleiermacher quickly stood out as a model figure for Bancroft. In Schleiermacher, Bancroft discovered everything he had hoped to find in a man of letters. Schleiermacher was quick-witted, sarcastic, yet polite and pleasant, as well. Possessing all the eminence but none of the vulgarity that Bancroft had respectively admired and disdained in his teachers at Göttingen, Schleiermacher proved a brilliant and refined instructor. Here was a man worthy of Bancroft’s youthful enthusiasm. Schleiermacher appeared to Bancroft to have reconciled modern reason with traditional faith, and philosophical reflection with empirical research. He preached from the pulpit on Sunday with as much authority as he commanded in the seminar room during the week. It was his philosophy of ethics that bound Schleiermacher’s diverse efforts in a common purpose. And it was in his courses on education that Bancroft encountered Schleiermacher’s ideas. Education served explicitly civic ends, and thus morality was a key pedagogical component.⁶¹

Like the moral philosophy of Bancroft’s earlier years at Harvard, Schleiermacher’s ethics unified the life of the mind with the responsibility of

⁶⁰ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 11 June 1821, George Bancroft Papers.

⁶¹ Jacqueline Marina, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

citizenship.⁶² Everything coalesced for Bancroft in the courses he took with Schleiermacher on education. Under this influence, Bancroft felt capable of reconciling his European experience with his American patriotism. Prussia, Bancroft came to think, epitomized state sponsorship of education, and Bancroft hoped to return to America with this example ready for reimplementation—a far more optimistic assessment of his host country than he had formed while in Göttingen. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, Everett and Ticknor were already undertaking reform of the college. This, combined with Schleiermacher's influence, enabled Bancroft's attitude to improve.⁶³

The concept of sentiment was at the heart of Schleiermacher's influential ethics. "Moral feeling," as Bancroft called it, proved essential to good reasoning.⁶⁴ The positive connection between reason and moral sensitivity mollified the confusion that Bancroft felt about his experiences at Göttingen. Despite its talented faculty, Göttingen University had failed to nourish truth because it had lacked morality. This deduction allowed Bancroft peace of mind because it explained how professors like Eichhorn could be brilliant, but worthy of disapprobation, nonetheless. Furthermore, the line of thought enabled Bancroft to determine that Göttingen University lacked morality because it lacked religion—earnest Christian faith. It lacked religion because at Göttingen sentiment was worth less than rationalism. The circularity of this series of deductions set Bancroft's mind at ease. Bancroft believed that Schleiermacher's liberal theology had

⁶² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, reprint).

⁶³ George Bancroft to Anonymous, 5 November 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; George Bancroft to Andrews Norton, 13 November 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁶⁴ George Bancroft to Anonymous, 3 December 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

reconciled faith and reason, and—as he understood things—thereby fulfilled the Enlightenment.

And yet doubt lingered. In a letter to Levi Frisbie, written in the spring of 1821, as Bancroft's time in Berlin drew to a close, Bancroft revealed the ongoing nature of his uncertainty by recounting the last two centuries of intellectual history—as he had learned it from his mentors, Hegel among them. Prefacing the account with a remark that penetrating German philosophy was difficult—Bancroft wrote that he found Hegel's lectures unintelligible—Bancroft told Frisbie that his only tool for comprehension was to view German philosophy from the perspective of its historical development. It all began with “the famous Dutch Jew, Spinoza,” Bancroft wrote. Spinoza put science in a state of crisis by showing how the leading principles of his day led to pantheism. Although Spinoza's ideas were still imperfect during his lifetime, they reached fulfillment during the 18th century, and culminated with Kant's speculative philosophy—a revolution in the abstract sciences that was, according to Bancroft's advisors, comparable with what Copernicus had done for astronomy. Bancroft continued his narrative, contrasting Kant with Locke, who had erred by, “assuming the external world,” a problem that the Scottish philosophers of the 18th century shared. If the soul was will and the mind consciousness, then soul and mind were the same. And if the soul was beyond the world, as was its creator, God, then how could the ephemeral, external, material world shape the eternal, inner world of the soul? Locke's idea of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate ready to be shaped by sensory input from the external world, was therefore preposterous. According to the German idealists, the soul grew by turning inward. The

soul, like all of creation, possessed a telos, and to deny the soul's autonomy from the world was to denounce the spiritual necessity and higher nature of human life.⁶⁵

The interesting context of this retelling by Bancroft of what he had learned was that Frisbie was a self-professed empiricist and a great admirer of Thomas Reid and the Scottish Enlightenment. Furthermore, Bancroft had begun the letter by stating that he remained committed to Frisbie's sound empiricism—Frisbie was the divinity professor at Harvard and ostensibly the director of Bancroft's master's program.⁶⁶ Bancroft meant to affirm the soul, Christianity, and the higher nature of life, but how? Which way was right? Everywhere Bancroft turned, he faced intellectual discord. Göttingen University had—surprisingly—challenged what his mentors in America had taught him. The idealists at the University of Berlin resonated with Bancroft, but implied a devaluation of the ideas that his mentors at Harvard admired. In the conclusion of his letter to Frisbie, Bancroft asked his former mentor if he had confused him. It was a deflection; Bancroft felt confused. He wondered what parts of what he had learned in Europe his Harvard professors would approve of, and what ideas would meet with disapproval. Bancroft left Germany in the spring of 1821 with these conflicts.

Given all that Americans hoped to gain from Germany, one wonders if the Germans wanted anything from America. In fact, German scholars hoped to profit from exposure to American letters. Bancroft wrote home that his mentors and the other men of letters he met were fascinated with America and American letters. German philosophers and academics hoped to have their names known in the new world, where

⁶⁵ George Bancroft to Levi Frisbie, 13 April 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁶⁶ Howe, *Unitarian Conscience*.

many of their countrymen had immigrated, and where the fate of democracy, and thus of civilization, was supposedly going to be decided. Although many German men of letters were influenced by German politics—Eichhorn’s relationship to the Prussian monarchy, for example—they also invested mental energy in the Anglophone world. Whatever his own troubles, Eichhorn contented himself with the knowledge that America would be England’s downfall—and, incredibly enough, this statement came on the heels of the War of 1812.⁶⁷ German scholars received Bancroft and other young Americans like Everett as celebrities. The young American men were representatives of the new world and of democracy. German journals had begun to carry reviews of American works. German scientists sought access to samples of North-American flora and fauna. America was a mystery because its lack of a Eurasian past made its future open to speculation.⁶⁸

German scholars, “these children of the North,” as Bancroft called them, wanted to study North America, particularly the North-American West, because they viewed the land as an Edenic state of nature.⁶⁹ In continuity with the Enlightenment, Bancroft’s professors at the University of Berlin—Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, most notably—considered the examination of North America, including its indigenous peoples, to be the best approach to comprehend what they called the “pre-Adamic” world.⁷⁰ This search for human origins encompassed the European Near East,

⁶⁷ George Bancroft to Andrews Norton, 1 December 1818, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁶⁸ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, reprint 1991).

⁶⁹ George Bancroft, Diary, 28 December 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁷⁰ George Bancroft, Diary, 5 November 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Obviously, the word, “Adamic,” refers to the Biblical Adam.

as well. Thus, fascination with the American West was, for German men of letters, ultimately a species of the same orientalism that exoticized the Islamic world and Southeast Asia. Interest in the United States was part of a fetish, and suggested more about debates concerning epistemology than about anything resembling a forthright portrayal of North America.⁷¹ Exposed to this view of America as an exotic other, Bancroft incorporated it into his perception of the United States's place in world history.⁷²

Fascination with the other ultimately amounted to fixation on doubts about the nature of knowledge. Bancroft mentioned two epistemological camps that he depicted as at war. One group, the party that he enjoyed most, operated from Berlin and emphasized reflection as the source of true knowledge. This more deductive approach to truth valued extrapolation from basic, fixed principles—ideas often based on research. The other camp that Bancroft encountered, the one at Göttingen, was empiricist in orientation. They believed in the extended collection of information, evidence that they imagined spoke for itself. Bancroft put it this way: the Berlin group founded their thought on “speculation;” the Göttingen party relied on “experience.”⁷³

Bancroft also called on Goethe while in Berlin. Goethe seemed indifferent to the many men of fame that Bancroft had come to know, except for Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose *Agamemnon* Goethe praised and claimed to have read frequently. One other work that Goethe praised was Schlegel's translation of Shakespeare, which he had

⁷¹ Bancroft, Diary, 5 November 1820.

⁷² There are many books about the Edenic myth of America, for a sample of the best, see: R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth-Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) and Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, reprint).

⁷³ Bancroft, Diary, 5 November 1820.

enjoyed reading. Goethe also discussed America with Bancroft, praising “the progress of civilization there.” Goethe was in contact with Cogswell, and had sent him literary material.⁷⁴

French Connections

Upon arriving in Paris in late spring of 1821, one of the first people whom Bancroft met was yet another German, August Wilhelm Schlegel. During his meeting with the renowned philosopher, Bancroft learned more about the connection between interest in a geographic other and literary ambition. Schlegel told Bancroft that he wanted to combine, “the grave genius of occidental letters” with “the fantastic fairy that wanders over the gardens of Asia.”⁷⁵ Schlegel hoped that this synthesis would “give new life” to letters in the West. He also believed that America had “good promise” to distinguish herself in this arena.

Bancroft’s meeting with Schlegel set the tone for the encounters that were to come. Increasingly, Bancroft viewed his country’s literary ambitions as part of the fabric of a larger tapestry, the progress of Western Civilization. Thus, one of the major themes in the *History* appeared early on in Bancroft’s life, manifesting through encounters he made during his travels. Improving the standing of American letters meant doing more than working for personal acclaim or national ambition; it was a transitional endeavor in the pursuit of universal freedom. In the Western imagination, freedom was most clearly visible in contrast with its antithesis, Eastern absolutism. Orientalism—exoticized depictions of what Europeans viewed as different civilizations—was an outlook that could also encompass visions of the United States. Part of what Bancroft learned in

⁷⁴ George Bancroft, Diary, 7 March 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁷⁵ George Bancroft, Diary, 6 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Paris was to distinguish America from Europe. Although different from the exotic fetish applied to the European Near East, America also met the qualifications of other. Bancroft learned to view his country not as normal or familiar, but as shockingly different.⁷⁶

The area of the United States that most interested his European mentors was the West—a moving target during the 19th century, the West was anything beyond the Appalachian Mountains. The West's strangeness was what made the United States exotic for Europeans. Bancroft celebrated industrial expansion into this area. He lauded the destruction of the preexisting ecosystems and the changing demographics—white settlers displacing Indian peoples—as, “a glorious monument to the history of our world.”⁷⁷ Bancroft proudly wrote, “Need I remind you that the noise of civilized man is heard in the wilderness...that the hum of business, the noise and bustle of cities are heard, where in the days of our childhood the snake reposed undisturbed, and the wild beast formed his lair in security.”⁷⁸ In his 4th-of-July toasts, Bancroft asked his friends to recall how the forests of the West were falling beneath the husbandman's axe, and how the once quiescent lakes and rivers now teemed with the vessels of commerce. He rejoiced in the death of a world that included, as he well knew, Native Americans. The United States's—and by extension, Western Civilization's—triumph was the dramatic snuffing out of a way of life that Bancroft felt certain would occupy the shadows of history.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Edward Wrote, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁷⁷ George Bancroft, Diary, 4 July 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁷⁸ George Bancroft, Diary, 4 July 1820.

⁷⁹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*.

The idea of changes in the American West—the supposed extinction of Native American peoples foremost—provided Bancroft with common ground with his mentors in Europe. For example, Bancroft bonded with Wilhelm von Humboldt over discussions about the place that North America should occupy in the annals of civilization. Because the West was America’s future, their rapport ultimately centered on events that occurred in what was, at the time, the Spanish Empire’s Northern domain—what would shortly become the Mexican North. Humboldt expressed interest in Indian languages. And, after Bancroft told him about the *North American Review* and Timothy Pickering’s publications on Native-American dialects, Humboldt borrowed Bancroft’s only copy of the periodical and obliged the young American to write home for more editions. Humboldt offered to trade copies of German periodicals, in return. A trans-Atlantic literary exchange blossomed over the study of the West and the peoples living there.⁸⁰

Interest in the American West also brought Bancroft closer to other Americans living abroad. Although he benefitted enormously from the company of Europeans, Bancroft also profited from time spent with other Americans. After relocating to Paris, Bancroft encountered more of his countrymen. They were united in their experience of being foreigners. For the first time, perhaps, being American was their principal identity. Washington Irving, the future coiner of the term for the West, “Great American Desert,” was one of the individuals that Bancroft knew. Irving introduced Bancroft to the other Americans living in and around Paris. Perhaps most notably, Bancroft spent time with Albert Gallatin, the foreign minister to France and the former secretary of the treasury for two presidents, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. In this latter capacity,

⁸⁰ George Bancroft to John Kirkland, 24 March 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 28 December 1820, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Gallatin had proven instrumental to expanding the United States into the Mississippi River Valley and the Missouri River watershed. Like Humboldt and Timothy Pickering, he also had an interest in Indian languages, and considered himself an amateur ethnographer. In Irving and Gallatin, Bancroft found examples of people who served their country at the same time that they participated in the global community of letters. Indeed, the two capacities reinforced each other: the most notorious minds in Europe wanted to know Americans, and the United States needed literary capital.

Bancroft's stay in Paris introduced him to the inner workings of the world of letters. The phrase, "the world republic of letters," a cosmopolitan cultural group, united by erudition and enthusiasm for the life of the mind, best described what Bancroft joined. Paris was the capital of this republic. No other city, or country even, could boast the same conglomeration of men and women of letters. Bancroft discovered a place where he felt he belonged. Paris had brilliant minds with bold characters and stately manners. He grew acquainted with the most interesting people in the Western world, including some who were personally familiar with America. The people Bancroft met in Paris fulfilled the education he had acquired in Prussia. After his time at the center of world literary life, Bancroft recognized America's existence on the periphery. In essence, he saw his home through foreigners' eyes. However much he realized it at the time, when Bancroft returned to the United States, he would feel like a stranger there.⁸¹

Among the additional consequences of Bancroft's geographic distance from the United States was a feeling of propinquity between him and the spirit of his country. America was removed from his sensory perception, but it expanded in his mind until his intellectual horizons filled with nationalism. However, the America in Bancroft's dreams

⁸¹ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

was no longer the concrete place he had known during his childhood and adolescence; after his time in Germany and France, America belonged to Bancroft's imagination.

Bancroft allowed his enthusiasm full expression on the fourth of July. He toasted George Washington's memory, the American eagle, the abolition of slavery, and the prospects for American letters to achieve greatness. He wrote that from the fall of Troy to Napoleon's defeat there had never been a day as grand as the fourth of July. In an emotional crescendo that was also an intellectual battle cry, Bancroft wrote: "From the remote lands where we are now performing our pilgrimage, from regions, where the hard hand of absolute power wears down the spirits of the oppressed, we turn our eyes with the greater longing to the home of our friends." He continued to say that "following the course of our history we may glory in the years which succeeded. Do but think of the grandeur of the scene"—something Bancroft would seek to paint in lurid detail through the *History*—"when the sages of America, deputies of the people assembled to form a system of government for the largest republic the world had ever seen, to lay the foundations of a building whose turrets might rise to the heavens and which might last forever...The book of time lay open before them. They could there write the fates of nations."⁸² Or, more accurately, there he—Bancroft—could write the fate of his nation.

Bancroft acutely felt the separation from the United States that his time in Europe forced upon him. He felt closer to the idea of America, however, and by separating his homeland from the flow of ordinary time—"the book of time lay open before them"—Bancroft made the United States tangible as an ideal. He began by lamenting how far he was from America. He concluded with the assurance that because America's true location and form were outside of time—as an ideal, his nation was always with him.

⁸² George Bancroft, Diary, 4 July 1820.

Like the presence of a higher power, the spirit of America was Bancroft's companion in post-Napoleonic Europe.

One of Bancroft's most notable human guides in Paris was the famous traveler and scientist, Alexander von Humboldt. The younger brother of Wilhelm, who had befriended Bancroft in Berlin, Alexander took Bancroft under his wing at the request of his sibling. Humboldt opened doors in Paris for Bancroft, literally. Salons, libraries, and meeting halls welcomed Bancroft because he possessed letters of introduction from the famous explorer. And, sometimes, Humboldt took Bancroft with him on his own calls. For example, on the afternoon of 7 May 1821, Bancroft accompanied Humboldt to the Institute de France. Bancroft thought of the Institute as the preeminent body of scholars in the world, and attending the session that day as a guest of one of its most distinguished members represented a cultural and intellectual achievement. Bancroft had now been at the center of the world republic of letters.⁸³

Bancroft attended the Institute at an interesting moment. The body, led by Georges Cuvier and Jean-Baptiste Joseph Delambre, was debating the identity of a person's bones that they had recently interred with great ceremony. The skeleton was allegedly that of Rene Descartes. However, a new skull had recently arrived from Sweden, and it was now in doubt whether the bones buried had actually been those of Descartes. Delambre, a famous astronomer, led the defense of the skeleton that had already been buried, arguing that it was the best candidate for Descartes's remains. Cuvier advocated that a skull recently arrived from Sweden was in fact authentic. Sitting in the Institute's meeting chamber, watching the great minds of Europe argue over the

⁸³ For more information about Alexander von Humboldt, see: Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006).

authenticity of the head of one of the founders of the scientific method, exemplified the meaning of Bancroft's time in Paris. He—the young American—saw old men, some, in his words, “on the very threshold of the grave,” argue over the legacy of one of their predecessors.⁸⁴ It was like gazing over a land that he hoped to immanently inherit.⁸⁵

Bancroft's last year in Europe included meetings with more famous Europeans. Bancroft established a relationship with the illustrious English poet, Lord Byron. He enjoyed calling on Byron formally at his residence, as well as encountering him in a more informal setting off the Coast of Italy on the deck of the U.S.S. Constitution.⁸⁶ One evening in the spring of 1822, Bancroft also enjoyed the hospitality of Benjamin Constant. Seated in what he described as a “cozy” room, around a small, circular table, Bancroft shared his space and his ideas with Constant, Humboldt, and General Lafayette.⁸⁷ In a letter that he wrote for Bancroft, Humboldt provided what served as a good summary of Bancroft's change while in Europe: “He is party to this noble race of young Americans, who find that man's true pleasure consists in intelligent culture.”⁸⁸ Bancroft had transformed from a provincial in the republic of letters to a naturalized citizen. He was part of a group of young Americans from Massachusetts that occupied an honored place in a literary republic that knew no geographic borders, but which they had nonetheless entered and to which they now belonged.

⁸⁴ George Bancroft Diary, 7 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁸⁵ For a detailed account of the history of Descartes's bones, see: Russell Shorto, *Descartes' Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict between Faith and Reason* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

⁸⁶ George Bancroft to S. A. Eliot, 29 May 1822, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁸⁷ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 28 May 1822, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁸⁸ Alexander von Humboldt, 7 September 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

While in Paris, Bancroft also saw troops passing for review before the palace of the Tuileries. Bancroft recalled that he had been “struck by the sight of such well disciplined troops.” Indeed, they were a sight that he beheld with awe, feeling a “sense of emotion and splendor” upon beholding the soldiers, who, “dressed in various uniforms,” were nonetheless, “all of a martial appearance...able bodied men, stout and well made...the very flower of the army.”⁸⁹ Despite having felt anxiety about the absolutist monarchies’ interference with the business of scholars through oppression of dissenting voices, Bancroft felt inclined to appreciation of the very coercive apparatus that defended the ancien regime’s power. This interest in the display of the ancien regime’s force through pageantry underscored that, at least for Bancroft, romanticism transcended government, and that aesthetic appreciation could extend beyond ideological inclination.

Bancroft visited August Wilhelm Schlegel while in Paris. He appreciated the man’s accomplishments, and enjoyed his mannerisms, finding Schlegel “lively and rapid, expressing himself with conciseness and clearness, and passing from one subject to another with ease and elegance.” Appropriately, therefore, Bancroft discussed multiple subjects with Schlegel, ranging from Goethe, to Greek poetry, Roman history, and the study of Eastern languages. Regarding the latter, Schlegel wrote that “by study of the oriental authors he hopes to make many important discoveries in the early history of the culture of the human race.” Indeed, Schlegel was so convinced of this line of inquiry’s importance that he had “superintended the casting of an elegant form of Sanskrit types.” Schlegel was open about the conclusions he wished to draw and the broader aims that infused his study with purpose. Evidently, he had claimed that he

⁸⁹ George Bancroft, Diary, 6 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

wanted “to give new life and freshness to the literature of the West by introducing the bold fictions and rich imagery of the East...marrying as it were the grave genius of occidental letters to the fantastic fairy that watches over the flower gardens of Asia.”

What later scholars would identify as strong orientalist language permeated the discourse between Bancroft and Schlegel in such a profoundly vivid tone that one wonders how far their interest in applying the categories that they distinguished extended. It was implicit in Bancroft and Schlegel’s discussion that not only geography, but clear metaphysical boundaries separated the West and the East—Europe from Asia. But what about the distance between Europe and America? It was far greater geographically, but was it also different in literary merit and character? Schlegel only wrote that there was “good promise of America to distinguish herself in literature.” Bancroft ended one visit with Schlegel by remarking to himself that the man was “one of those literary men, who knows how to make use of their stories in general discourse.”⁹⁰ Bancroft was ever mindful of how to reach the public with his thought.

Bancroft sometimes wrote poetry in the morning and then went to the Louvre. He called the gallery “magnificent,” and wrote: “Their lot is happy, who have always in the vicinity a fine picture gallery.”⁹¹ Bancroft did not stop with the claim; he went on to explain the merits of art. “The eye accustoms itself to beautiful groups and elegant forms,” Bancroft professed. “The fables of mythology are presented to the eye in ideal grace, and famous anecdotes or events that history records, here life and breath on the canvas.” Indeed, Bancroft claimed that “when a mighty master writes truth with force, grace with expression, the imagination is satisfied and delighted, and the ancient heroes

⁹⁰ Bancroft, Diary, 6 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁹¹ Bancroft, Diary, 7 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

seem really again starting into life and reacting their great deeds.” Art, according to Bancroft, also had a particularly salubrious effect on religion: “The sentiments of religion are beatified and strengthened by the living representations of scenes dear to the pious heart.” Bancroft articulated the special role that he believed painters performed. “The painter has known how to impress angelic mildness and divine wisdom on the features of the Savior, which glow beneath his pencil. The whole history of the gospel,” Bancroft professed, “has been repeatedly displayed on canvas; and now when the bible is read, each narration presents itself to us with the face of reality, as if it had taken place before our eyes, as if we had been witnesses of the miracles of Jesus. Language,” Bancroft explained as he finished his thoughts on the superiority of art to the written word, “can never convey an idea of the sufferings on the cross like the pencil.”⁹²

Bancroft went on to discuss specific collections at the Louvre that he admired for their realistic depiction of past events. Claude Joseph Vernet’s series on French seaports⁹³ captivated Bancroft’s attention, in particular. “They are admirable,” Bancroft maintained, “for the endless variety displayed in treating the same subject.” With surgical precision, Bancroft picked apart the artist’s method, arriving at conclusions that would later sharpen his own writing, as he attempted to capture the same degree of accuracy and emotive power that he perceived in the paintings he saw in the Louvre. “The bales of goods that are unloading, barrels, carts, ships of all kinds, boats, alehouses, are all painted with masterly precision and a true imitation, which makes you think you see the objects in nature.” The way the wind was blowing, the sunlight, the

⁹² Bancroft, Diary, 7 May 1821.

⁹³ Jean-Claude Vernet, *A Calm at a Mediterranean Port*. 1769. Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Joseph_Vernet#/media/File:Claude-Joseph_Vernet_-_A_Calm_at_a_Mediterranean_Port_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.

weather, changed in each picture; yet, the artists maintained a unity of subject that Bancroft praised. Clearly, visual art from the neoclassical and romantic schools impressed the young Bancroft with the gravity of historical interpretation, and instilled a sense of responsibility in him as a would-be conveyor of past experience to his own generation.⁹⁴



Vernet, *A Calm at a Mediterranean Port*

Bancroft announced to himself in his journal the meaning of a historical painter. “This is the history, which the painter has immortalized by his genius.”⁹⁵ Bancroft called the Louvre a “splendid specimen of imperial extravagance.” He wrote that places like the Louvre were what made the differences between the old and new worlds seem the most profound.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Bancroft, Diary,. 10 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

But then he turned against passion in a roundabout that anticipated the shifting themes of the *History* he would later write. “Religion ought never be mixed with passion,” Bancroft proclaimed in his diary in May of 1821. Fearing that passion “excites the mind to a kind of frenzy to leave it as in a state of languor or exhaustion,” Bancroft offered a contrasting position that emphasized religion’s potential as a calming, rational presence. He clarified his meaning by claiming that “religion ought to be the ruling principle within...it should be that to the mind which the air is to the body.” At the age of twenty one, there was no room in Bancroft’s intellectual universe for unbridled emotion, for religion as a ritual practiced only at certain times and through dramatic gestures. Religion was, or was meant to be, the staying presence in thought that created the opportunity for serious intellectual work.⁹⁷

One day late in May 1821, Bancroft dined with Benjamin Constant. The occasion was one Bancroft would remember. “I do not know,” Bancroft later wrote, “when I have been present at an assembly of such choice spirits, of men eminent for their learning and genius, and accustomed to the great world during the whole of an active life.”⁹⁸ In attendance were: Benjamin Constant, General Lafayette, Alexander von Humboldt, and Dr. Gall, a craniologist. Bancroft admired all the men, but his highest praise went to Humboldt, whom he wrote modeled perfect conversation ability, speaking to people of any background with genial authority on any subject, and with the most polite manners, despite having spent so much of his life exploring the wilds of Central and South

⁹⁷ George Bancroft, Diary, 25 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁹⁸ George Bancroft, Diary, 28 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

America.⁹⁹ A General Sebastian later came to the party, as well. Everyone seemed to have liberal politics.

Bancroft went to see Lafayette individually at his home. Lafayette had engravings hung in his parlor: The Rights of Man and Citizen; the United States's Constitution; a likeness of George Washington, hung over the Constitution; a French frigate whose captain refused to surrender to the British and as a consequence was sunk; and an engraving of a statue of George Washington recently made.¹⁰⁰

Bancroft read Rousseau and paid special attention to the latter's *Confessions*. Bancroft found Rousseau's writing admirable. "I admire above all things," Bancroft confessed, "his disinterestedness and his enthusiasm." Bancroft recognized that Rousseau appeared negatively in light of his agnostic religiosity and indecent life experiences, but Bancroft made excuses for the French philosopher, claiming that Rousseau had eventually changed for the better, and that he had possessed a "singular" and "romantic" mind that no religion could encompass.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Bancroft also asserted that Rousseau was "a most powerful enemy to despotism and to selfishness: he has done much toward freeing the world from the base shackles of prejudice and superstition."¹⁰² The fact that in his private writing Bancroft defended a major figure of the Enlightenment against orthodox religious sensibilities demonstrated the fact that Bancroft's time in Europe altered his moral compass, shifting the native New Englander toward a more secular philosophical worldview.

⁹⁹ George Bancroft, Diary, 28 May 1821.

¹⁰⁰ George Bancroft, Diary, 30 May 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ George Bancroft, Diary, 1 July 1821, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁰² George Bancroft, Diary, 1 July 1821.

Conclusion

In essence, Bancroft's time in Europe fundamentally altered his worldview. True, he returned to his native New England after a short time—what was a few years in the vast swath of Bancroft's long life. But the experiences that Bancroft had as a young man abroad shaped his intellectual trajectory. The next chapter demonstrates just exactly how.

Chapter 2

The *History's* Origins and Predecessors

A decade after Bancroft's stay in Europe, Alexis de Tocqueville made a trip to America to reflect on the differences between the Old World and the new. The book that the French aristocrat produced considered the cultural and aesthetic implications of democracy, precisely the questions that concerned Bancroft. Tocqueville praised the United States for its decentralized, free institutions. But it remained an open question if intellectual liberty could persevere under democracy. With the cultural ethos focused on innate equality among people, the presence of hierarchies that reflected something as intangible as reason and reflection affronted popular sensibilities. Tocqueville's concerns implicitly doubted America's intellectual production. Although his travels to Europe preceded Tocqueville's journey to America, Bancroft shared similar concerns; he felt that unless he could improve the standing of letters in the United States that the old regime would win a moral victory over democracy.¹⁰³

Consequently, Bancroft was determined to uphold the merits of representative government, as well as freedom of mind, in his work. He believed that the most effective way to fight for liberty was with the pen, and he understood a European education as the key to arming one for this combat. By acquiring the old world's intellectual training,

¹⁰³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. For a helpful analysis of Tocqueville, see Michael Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform* (New York: Palgrave, 2003). For an excellent long-view of American intellectual history, see: Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harvest, 1955, reprinted 1991). Also see Hartz's, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964). Hartz has an important analysis of the effects of America's lack of a direct feudal past on its political development.

Bancroft would engage with the community of world letters more effectively for America's purposes. He hoped to discover ways to build bridges between the old regime's literary capital and the new democracy's potential. In the end, Bancroft discovered that he was the bridge.¹⁰⁴

The Benefits of an Education Abroad

Once returned to the United States, Bancroft made a career working as an independent-minded author. By embracing the traditions of criticism that he had learned in Germany, Bancroft found much to be desired in his countrymen's writing about their native land. Speaking to Everett, who was then editor of the *North American Review*, about the kind of articles that he would like to write, Bancroft wrote, "American history has never been written with criticism (Kritik). I am surprised at the...fables, which...a chief justice...has been willing to endorse."¹⁰⁵

At least in the early 1820s, Bancroft believed that there was a difference between letters and politics. "I agree with you fully in your belief that it is not right to make the N.A.R. a partisan journal in politics," Bancroft wrote. "Let us have one corner for letters and science."¹⁰⁶ But he eventually changed his views. The same year he published the first volume of his *History*, Bancroft claimed that he was a radical and a republican. "I am radically a republican in feeling and in principle...my radicalism extends still further."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*. Pierre Bourdieu's work on the concept of distinction and cultural capital is also an important part of my intellectual framework here. See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) and Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage, reprinted 1990).

¹⁰⁵ Bancroft to Everett, 23 October 1833, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁰⁶ Bancroft to Everett, 23 October 1833.

¹⁰⁷ Bancroft to Everett, 29 December 1834, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Bancroft had wanted to make reforming the education offered to men of letters in the United States his vocation, but he found reason to feel oppressed by the circumstances surrounding the state of American pedagogy. Calling the prospect of promoting Greek studies, “a most dreary one,” Bancroft wrote that one could expect little from his generation in this regard. Bancroft concluded: “We must leave our testimony and affect in other things what Providence and the age may permit.”¹⁰⁸

Bancroft, thwarted in his desire to shape American intellectual life from within its academic institutions, looked elsewhere for opportunity and inspiration. He thought he found a kindred spirit in Everett. “It is also very agreeable to me to find,” Bancroft wrote of Everett, “[that] with regard to our country, its conditions and prospects, the means of acquiring honor, and becoming widely and permanently useful, I have but been led to conclusions to which you had long before arrived.”¹⁰⁹ What were these conclusions? They mainly concerned the compatibility between letters and politics. Despite having earlier decided that letters—at least in the *North American Review*—should be a space apart from partisanship, Bancroft—and allegedly Everett—now agreed that politics and letters could be important complements in the same person, depending on the circumstances of course. “Political influence can but increase the support you may be able to render to the cause of truth and liberty,” Bancroft wrote. “And besides, if a man’s character and bent of mind lead him to the councils of the state, it is there that he will accomplish the most. Nobody would wish,” Bancroft wrote, “that Sir Walter had become a member of parliament,” but equally forcefully he continued, “no man of sense would

¹⁰⁸ Bancroft to Everett, 31 July 1824, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁰⁹ Bancroft to Everett, 4 May 1825, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

regret that Burke became a statesman.”¹¹⁰ It seemed that the way to politics was opening, at least as a philosophical possibility, for Bancroft. At the same time, it appeared that in order to pursue his ambitions to improve his country—and indeed civilization—that recourse to the theater of the state would be necessary. One additional motivation for Bancroft might have been the difficulties in communication he experienced with the new editor of the *North American Review*, Jared Sparks, a man with whom Bancroft had a long, albeit tumultuous relationship—at least as matters concerned the former’s tendency to over edit Bancroft’s articles. Perhaps speaking directly to the public as a politician—Bancroft mused—would offer the best path to influence and usefulness.

Bancroft wrote and edited Greek grammar books with German associates in the attempt to revitalize the study of the language and its culture in the United States.¹¹¹ In response to Sparks’s editorial alterations of Bancroft’s writing, the latter wrote, “No man shall stand between me and the high court of public opinion.”¹¹² Bancroft advocated for the inclusion of German books on history and philosophy in the Harvard College Library and for use in the classrooms there. He asked Everett to use his influence as a faculty member.¹¹³ Bancroft’s justification for changing the curriculum was that the Germans provided a more robust and complete picture of the ancients than more narrowly focused studies that the college currently used. The German sense of historiography had taken hold of Bancroft; although, not without cost to him in America,

¹¹⁰ Bancroft to Everett, 4 May 1825, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹¹¹ Bancroft to Everett, 23 August 1825, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹¹² Bancroft to Everett, 1 December 1826, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹¹³ Bancroft to Everett, 16 November 1827, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

since many of his former mentors and friends lagged behind him in their esteem of German historicism.

Bancroft felt pleased by Everett's review of his *History*. He wrote, "had I not steeled my heart against all weakness, I should have shed tears of delight as I read it."¹¹⁴ Bancroft wrote that the praise meant so much because he had always valued Everett's candor and genius. "From my earliest years," Bancroft wrote, "you have been a sort of good genius to me. In boyhood my love of letters was kindled and heightened by my admiration of your example...It was your advice to our excellent Kirkland, which carried me to Germany; it was your letters which made me friends there." Bancroft continued to say, "I saw then at Göttingen, the impossibility of reconciling the acquisitions of a German university with...Boston." Truly, Bancroft seemed to have owed the path he had chosen that led him to write the history of the United States to Everett. "I remember well advising with you on devoting myself to the pursuit of history, and for sixteen years my main focus in life has been unchanged."¹¹⁵

Eliot, another Harvard friend, never developed the affinity for German letters that Bancroft did. Like Bancroft, Eliot complained of German manners. He wrote, "German manners are becoming every day more intolerable to me." And he also wrote that he had developed no affinity for the literature written in "this villainous crack-jaw language."¹¹⁶ Indeed, Eliot concluded that he might actually end up regretting having spent a year in the country. Unlike Bancroft and Everett who, despite disliking certain aspects of German culture, developed an esteem or at least appreciation for German

¹¹⁴ Bancroft to Everett, 8 January 1835, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹¹⁵ Bancroft to Everett, 8 January 1835.

¹¹⁶ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 2 February 1822, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

letters, Eliot, firmly grounded in the ethical convictions of Harvard moral philosophy, took away no lessons from his Teutonic teachers. I hope you will forgive me,” Eliot wrote. “You will see that I do not participate in your admiration of the German character, manners, literature, or language.”¹¹⁷ Poor Eliot, who was suffering from Tuberculosis, did slightly improve his opinion of the Germans, their language, and their literature, but was forced to leave for warmer pastures before he could gain any traction like Bancroft eventually did through rigorous study.¹¹⁸

The Perils and Promise of Nonconformity

In the end, Bancroft’s transformations in Germany served him well, but in the short term his German dispositions created problems for him in Boston. Upon returning to the United States, Bancroft wrote to Eliot, “My first labour must be to make myself acquainted with the state of feeling about me. I have grown quite estranged from my own country and countrymen.”¹¹⁹ Realizing that a gap now existed between him and his advisors at Harvard, Bancroft also wrote, “My ways of thinking are I firmly trust worthy of New England, but my manner of expressing them may have a foreign character.”¹²⁰ In fact, Bancroft had changed a great deal. He noted that he occasionally used German and French expressions when plain New England vernacular would have sufficed—something that annoyed and even dismayed his old advisors—but what was more substantial in departure from his native land were the remarks that he made regarding

¹¹⁷ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 2 February 1822.

¹¹⁸ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 29 March 1822, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹¹⁹ George Bancroft to S. A. Eliot, 24 September 1822, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹²⁰ George Bancroft to S. A. Eliot, 24 September 1822.

the landscape of the United States. Upon arriving in New York, Bancroft wrote, “I was inclined to find everything agreeable and beautiful.” But after journeying through the interior again, his opinions changed: “Yet on traveling from New York to Worcester I could not but feel that pleasant as the general surface of our country may be, it is not formed after the higher laws of beauty.” Indeed, Bancroft wrote, “I look in vain for the land of romance, for the bold scenery or the luxuriant landscapes, which charmed me in other countries.” Bancroft, it seemed, actually had to remind himself that he was an American at heart. “I find it necessary,” he wrote, “to check those feelings...I remember that our country is the land of our hearts for different and more serious reasons.” Bancroft clarified what he meant: “I think of it as the place of refuge for pure religion, for civil liberties, for domestic happiness, and for all the kindly affections of social life.”¹²¹ Bancroft wrote to Eliot that his convictions about the protections that America afforded to the perfect domestic life were heightened after staying with his old advisor and the President of Harvard College, Andrews Norton. But that was a one sided view—unfortunately for Bancroft. Norton banned him from his house after meeting with Bancroft following the latter’s return.

Speaking about the experience of preaching from the pulpit, we find greater indication as to why Norton might have found Bancroft increasingly distasteful. Bancroft wrote that religion was best served when united to the poetic spirit, a romantic attitude that violated stern New England religious tradition. Bancroft also wrote that ultimately reason should dominate faith, something else that contradicted the worldview he had once lived with at Harvard. Clearly, something had changed in Bancroft during his time abroad. In another letter to Eliot, Bancroft recounted what precipitated his falling out

¹²¹ Ibid.

with Norton. It was after staying for a week at the older man's home that Bancroft received a letter informing him to stay away and no longer call at Norton's house. Bancroft wrote that his spirit "bent" beneath the weight of Norton's criticisms of him. Apparently, he was told that his character was terrible. Bancroft felt wounded because the censure from his former mentor caught him by surprise, considering that Norton had helped support him while abroad. It appeared that both men suffered from mistaken expectations of the other.¹²²

Indeed, returning home in 1822, Bancroft faced the shock that, although for the past four years being an American had been the center of his identity, he felt out of place in the United States. The older generation responsible for sending Bancroft abroad expressed displeasure at the new comportment of their former protégé. Bancroft dressed oddly, he muttered foreign words and phrases, and he behaved differently than he had before. Bancroft tried his hand at preaching, and he attempted to settle into the life of a tutor at Harvard—he was denied the professorship that he had expected to receive—but he felt called to something something more important. After trying his hand at education by founding an experimental school near Boston, Bancroft decided that he would write a history of the United States, done in such a way that the nation's colonial and revolutionary past would need no retelling. This project of endowing America with a narrative of its origins would occupy Bancroft for the rest of his long life, and would also contribute to America's establishment as a nation capable of producing letters of the same quality as those written in Europe.

¹²² George Bancroft to S. A. Eliot, 2 April 1823, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Bancroft's experiences revealed that American exceptionalism was historiographic and transnational in nature, the product of a change in perspective that resulted from exposure to foreign discourses. There were two sites for this interaction: German universities and Parisian society. The seminars and the salons respectively represented different discourses. The former attuned Bancroft to modern theological debate and epistemology, the latter to the sociology of knowledge. By encountering people of letters of notoriety, Bancroft grew into a cosmopolitan man. He shared in conversations that initiated him into the world republic of letters.

Bancroft's example was significant. Because he later wrote the first grand narrative of American origins—the United States's past before there was a United States—and since he wrote this history while engaged in a larger project to endow America with a distinctive literary tradition, Bancroft exemplified historical nationalism. The message, the underlying but deliberate motif of Bancroft's history was that the United States warranted special recognition in the chronicles of civilization because it was the fulfillment of an ancient covenant. Indeed, Bancroft asserted that the United States existed even before the discovery of North America by Europeans. Its germ of national life was ultimately nothing less than God's promise to Israel. American democracy was the fulfillment of world history. Of course, other nations had their own historians—Thomas Carlyle, Francois Guizot, and Alexis de Tocqueville to name a few. But through the social or cultural capital that he amassed through his European education and connections, Bancroft was able to establish America's exceptional role in the world at the same moment that the United States was expanding territorially and consolidating sovereignty in the people and their national government. The democracy

of Andrew Jackson was the other contextual catalyst for Bancroft's literary endeavors, an ironic counterpart to the sophisticated discourse of Europe's seminar rooms and salon parlors.

Bancroft's foray into the professional world after his falling out with his mentors at Harvard began with the foundation of an institution of secondary education. However, even in the eyes of his mentors, this endeavor represented significance only in light of Bancroft's literary talents. Theodore Parker, a fellow Unitarian, and a mentor of a sort to Bancroft, wrote the younger man that he thought his interest in founding a school was noble. "Should your scheme be carried into effect," Parker carefully articulated, "much good would result from it to the cause of letters in our country." However, Parker laced his words with caution: "But I have strong doubts whether the public sentiment is yet sufficiently enlightened to admit of the ready execution of your plan." Parker claimed that Bancroft would face "prejudice" for some time. He attributed the resistance to the entrenchment of habit in New England institutions of learning, adding to Bancroft—albeit late—that maintaining a connection with Harvard would serve him well in terms of social distinction.¹²³

Bancroft had also mentioned pursuing a career in the ministry to Parker, and the older man weighed in on Bancroft's aptitude for this vocation, as well. He recognized Bancroft's keen intellectual abilities, but in a way that demonstrated that he thought that Bancroft's true calling lay in other endeavors of the mind. "To be a clergyman in name only, when the principle object is literary distinction," Parker explained, "is to sacrifice

¹²³ Theodore Parker to George Bancroft, 16 March 1823, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

both reputation and happiness.”¹²⁴ True, Parker allowed, preaching required a knowledge of the human mind and of the literary context in which human thought grew, but perhaps even more importantly the ministry demand that its leaders reflect intensively “upon what is keeping in our own breasts.” The profession, in other words, involved more than an “acquaintance with books.”¹²⁵

Bancroft favored German authors in his writing. For example, when reviewing Greek grammar books for use in teaching Greek, Bancroft focused on German textbooks, to the point that other Americans complained to the *North American Review*’s editor, Jared Sparks. Sparks encouraged Bancroft to give the English grammars some praise, writing, “Some of the old school here have expressed to me their apprehensions since your late article, that the North American is becoming too partial to the Germans, at the expense of our worthy brethren the English.” Indeed, Sparks apparently agreed with the criticism of Bancroft, going so far as to ask for a resubmission: “With this view I return you the manuscript, hoping that if you can think of anything to say in praise of English Grecian elementary books, you will give them the passing of a paragraph or two.”¹²⁶

For his part, Bancroft defended his singular praise for German scholarship by citing the superior quality of the institutions of higher education in the German states. “If the Germans can claim to have excelled all other nations in any branch of letters,” Bancroft wrote in the *North American Review* article in question, “they certainly may claim to have done so in those humble but all important works, which are intended to

¹²⁴ Theodore Parker to George Bancroft, 16 March 1823.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Jared Sparks to George Bancroft, Boston, 1 February 1824, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

familiarize the young with the severer parts of knowledge.” Furthermore, Bancroft proclaimed that his conclusions were practically self-evident. “This superiority is easily accounted for. The Germans have been more assiduous than the scholars of any other nation in their efforts to improve elementary works; and further, this intellectual labor has been performed among them by men of high intellectual gifts and attainments.” Bancroft further explained his reasoning by contrasting German methods and the intellectual products that resulted from these labors with British examples. His words amounted to a critique of the entire Anglo system of knowledge production. Referring to one scholar and his grammar, in particular, Bancroft wrote, “The Scottish nation is not celebrated for its philologists...his lectures, which have been printed, are barren and useless.”¹²⁷ By making the issue of selecting a grammar a matter of national character, Bancroft fueled a cosmopolitan debate that shaped his basic orientation toward intellectual pursuits, history writing chief among them.

Bancroft wrote with some degree of acrimony because he despaired of others sharing his views. While counterproductive in actuality, this method accurately expressed his sentiments. “If we consider the great question of promoting Greek studies in the country,” Bancroft lamented to Everett in a letter, “it can only be wrote that the prospect is a most dreary one.” Indeed, Bancroft thought that it was so obvious that his perspective was destined to languish as the minority opinion that he added that one would have to be “incapable of observing tendencies” to expect the cause of Greek letters to receive the kind of distinction that Bancroft hoped to attract.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ “Review: The Greek Reader by Frederick Jacobs,” *North American Review* 18, no. 43 (1824).

¹²⁸ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 31 July 1824, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

A letter from Bancroft's close friend, S. A. Eliot, later the same year demonstrated just how private correspondence, in addition to what he received publicly in regard to his publications, discouraged Bancroft from thinking that his views on letters were mainstream. The letter also underscored the link that Bancroft perceived between embracing German academia and furthering the cause of classical studies in the United States. Eliot confronted Bancroft directly when the latter expressed interest in finding a young German scholar on the cheap to bring into his new secondary school, Round Hill. Eliot forcefully squashed this notion, pointing out that German scholars possessed "a certain inaptitude to the things of this world" that rendered them "utterly unfit for this climate [New England]." Indeed, Eliot went further and claimed: "I know of no more incongruous things than Germans and Yankees."¹²⁹

Eliot might have believed that Germans and Yankees were incompatible, but some in Bancroft's circle seemed to believe that there was one marriage worth celebrating: literary and political labors. Edward Everett, recently elected to political office, supplied Bancroft with reason to reflect on the compatibility of these pursuits. "At first," Bancroft wrote, "it seemed to me unfortunate that the weight of your character should be withdrawn from the support of literature. But," Bancroft continued, "it did not take me long to perceive that this view of the subject was a very narrow one." He concluded, "Political influence can but increase the support you may be able to render to the cause of truth and liberty." Bancroft went on to compare Everett's endeavors with those of Sir Walter Scott and Edmund Burke in politics, reflecting on the value of these men's activities in statecraft to their reputations and oeuvre as authors. "And besides,"

¹²⁹ S. A. Eliot to George Bancroft, 24 November 1824, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Bancroft added, “if a man’s character and bent of mind lead him to the councils of the state, it is there, that he will accomplish the most.”¹³⁰

It became evident that Bancroft’s acceptance of Everett’s foray into active public life belied his own interests. In the future, Bancroft wanted to celebrate his talents in a more widely appreciated realm than what letters by itself promised to provide. “Some men,” Bancroft proclaimed, “Providence has designed should lead happy, quiet lives... beget children, acquire a fortune, die, and be forgotten.” But, Bancroft maintained, “to some of lofty powers quick and penetrating judgment has been given to...direct the mind in its action; and some unite alacrity at labor and perseverance with a love of independence and something of nervous irritability. To the last class, I belong.”¹³¹

Bancroft reflected on his personality and predilections intensely during this period of his life. In the spring of 1825, he wrote with disdain of those who were “parsimonious” and who kept to the rear, sharing their opinions only informally in private conversation and never taking the pains to write something weighty that could appear in a periodical before the public. Indeed, Bancroft confessed, “It costs me a great struggle to keep to myself the contempt which I entertain for many that are forward in no work but that of going their opinions about others.”¹³²

Edward Everett provided Bancroft with more than an audience for sharing his own beliefs. Everett also produced letters prodigiously, and what he wrote influenced Bancroft. Speaking of the staff at his school, Round Hill, Bancroft informed Everett, “Our Spanish instructor...is translating into Castilian your Plymouth Oration; we hope it will

¹³⁰ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 4 May 1825, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹³¹ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 4 May 1825.

¹³² Ibid.

find its way [around the world].”¹³³ The themes in Everett’s oration about the early New England settlers presented Bancroft with a scope of time and importance that was universal in nature—something the latter’s historical writing would also embody. “We commemorate the birthday of all New England,” Everett had articulated in his oration, which was later published, “the foundation, not of one institution, but of all the institutions, the settlements, the establishments, the communities, the societies, the improvements, comprehended within our broad and happy borders.”¹³⁴ Speaking generally of the grandness and significance of the early New Englanders, Everett placed their activities within a framework of world history. And in this context, New England loomed large. “It is the language not of exaggeration, but of truth and soberness to say, that there is nothing in the accounts of Phenician, of Grecian, or of Roman Colonization, that can stand in the comparison.”¹³⁵ In his speech, Everett also referenced the land, claiming that the deeds of the early New England “fathers” had made it possible for his generation to claim the soil as their native ground. Everett observed with reverence the continental scope of the founders’ achievements. He was an ardent patriot in his view of the past and present, and for this Bancroft appreciated him.

Bancroft delivered his own orations. One, given on the Fourth of July, 1826, also established the universal significance of the American republic. Bancroft began by citing the debt that America owed to God, “the eternal Providence, on which states depend,

¹³³ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 27 July 1825, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹³⁴ Edward Everett, *An Oration Delivered at Plymouth, December 22, 1824* (Cummings, Hillard, 1825), 7, available on [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/anorationdelive03evergoog), <https://archive.org/details/anorationdelive03evergoog>.

¹³⁵ Everett, *An Oration Delivered at Plymouth*, 8.

and by whose infinite mercy they are prospered.”¹³⁶ And, then, through invocation of the divine, Bancroft opened his message to encompass world history within the celebration of the beginning of American history. “When the names of our venerated Fathers were affixed to the instrument which declared our independence,” Bancroft exclaimed, “an impulse and confidence were imparted to all efforts at improvement throughout the world.” Indeed, Bancroft declared, “The festival which we keep [the Fourth of July] is the festival of freedom itself; it belongs not to us only, but to man; all the nations of the earth have an interest in it, and humanity proclaims it sacred.”¹³⁷ The celebration of America’s fiftieth anniversary of independence occasioned such proclamations. Although easily dismissed as hyperbole, one must remember that Bancroft and his generation ardently believed the truth of their words. For, far more than boasts, the proclamations that Bancroft made were in fact historical assertions, arguments about the past that themselves had a history of development early in the 1820s in Bancroft’s education in Europe and in his subsequent literary endeavors in the United States.

Bancroft made sure to include these intellectual labors and the people responsible in the historical philosophy that he laid out in the oration. Citing Milton and other authors from the Western canon, Bancroft argued, “To the contemplative man there is no equivalent for freedom of thought and expression; freedom to follow the guidance of reason wherever she may lead; freedom to make an open profession of all deliberate convictions.” He concluded his reflections on the importance of the literary class to the progress of history ordained by Providence with another universal appeal: “The historians, the orators, the philosophers, are the natural advocates of civil liberty.

¹³⁶ Bancroft, Fourth of July Oration, 1826, 3, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹³⁷ Bancroft, Fourth of July Oration, 1826, 3.

From all countries and all ages we have the same testimony; it is the chorus of the whole family of nations.”¹³⁸ In this chorus, freedom of mind was the object of praise. And freedom of mind, which emerged as the focus of Bancroft’s view of progress—something that his concept of Providence embodied—became the cornerstone of his philosophy of history and his love of country.

Indeed, Bancroft and fellow boosters for letters in America believed that love of country was vital for authors of history to possess. “Excuse this little burst of—patriotism, nothing but patriotism—a mere love of country, which makes one desire to have all its great points of history put in the true view,” Prescott proclaimed to Bancroft.¹³⁹

Bancroft thought that history writing was a form of letters that needed his intervention in America. Before the publication of the first volume of the *History*, Bancroft wrote to Everett: “American history has never been written with criticism Kritik.”¹⁴⁰ By this, Bancroft meant that no one had approached the history of the United States with a scientific perspective on the act of writing history, something Bancroft believed he had learned in Germany.

Historical Precursors

Bancroft crafted his ideological history of American democracy at the end of a chain of historical precedence in writing history, and the first person worth mentioning as one of these predecessors was the explorer, Captain John Smith. A hero in Bancroft’s

¹³⁸ Bancroft, Fourth of July Oration, 1826, 6-7.

¹³⁹ William Hickling Prescott to George Bancroft, 16 March 1833, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁴⁰ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 23 October 1833, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

work, Smith portrayed himself in the same positive light in his own two historical compositions. One, a pamphlet written in Virginia in 1609, with the long title, “A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of note as have happened in Virginia since the first planting of that colony, which is now resident in the South part thereof, till the last return from thence,” was an epistolary account of the happenings in the Virginia colony from the landing of Smith to the return of ships from England. Smith leapt into the narrative quickly, as if the intended reader—who remains unknown, except as “Kinde Sir” [sic]—was awaiting news of the expedition. It is not so much a history that seeks to explain anything, as it is an account of events, perhaps intended to highlight Smith’s own indispensability to the colonization project, and, indeed, of the worth of the colony itself. In this vein, Smith concluded the pamphlet by writing about the peace that he alleged existed with the Indians and the general stability of the colony. He wrote that Virginia was: “a Country, not only exceedingly pleasant for habitation, but also very profitable for commerce in general, no doubt pleasing to almightie God, honourable to our gracious soveraigne, and commodious generally to the whole Kingdome [sic].”¹⁴¹ The last sentence being very near a plea for continued support, one can reasonably infer that the point of the letter was to secure the colony’s—and Smith’s—continued reception of support from the home country.

Smith’s next historical work offered more in the way of background and insight into the colonization of North America by English speaking peoples, and was therefore closer to a model for Bancroft. *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the*

¹⁴¹ John Smith, *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of note as have happened in Virginia since the first planting of that colony, which is now resident in the South part thereof, till the last return from thence*, 1609, reprinted in 1866 by Wiggin and Lunt, 77, available on Google Books, https://books.google.com/books?id=BUEUAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Summer Isles [sic], published in 1620, 11 years after the publication of “A True Relation,” offered a longer, geographically more diverse, and generally fuller account of the founding of the English colonies. The volumes—it was a two-volume work—began with praises for King James, the English sovereign, and expressions of thankfulness to the benefactors of the colonization project. Smith reassured investors that they would reap rewards. Then, there were several poems praising Smith, apparently written by his friends. Finally, the work began in earnest by explaining the earliest rumored contacts with the Americas, and then proceeding to accounts of the attempts by England to establish colonies, dating from the 16th century. In the end, however, the history read more like a report, which, in essence, it was. The intended audience was investing interests in the colonial enterprises with which Smith had associated.

Nonetheless, the attempt that Smith made in *The General History* to establish precursors to his own activities warrants greater attention. For, Bancroft did the same at the beginning of his narrative. The overarching point of the beginning of *The General History* was apparently to substantiate English claims in the New World, in animosity to the Spanish and their American Empire. “The Spanyards say Hanno a Prince of Carthage was the first: and the next Christopher Cullumbus,” Smith wrote. But these accounts, according to Smith, may have been false. “The Chronicles of Wales report, that Madock, son to Owen Quineth, Prince of Wales seeing his two brethren at debate who should inherit, prepared certain Ships, with men and munition, and left his Country...till he came to a Land unknown [sic],” Smith also wrote, and proceeded to recount the fertility of the land as described by the Welsh. Smith then switched to John

Cabot, hired by King Henry in 1488, rounding out his defense that the Americas were in fact English possessions from the beginning.¹⁴²

This need to deal with the presence of the Spanish in the New World was a theme that also demanded Bancroft's attention. Although Bancroft responded somewhat differently, the way he used his narrative to deprive the Spanish of their primacy in discovery worked to the advantage of the successors of the Anglo colonies—the United States—in the same way that Smith's words bent the morality associated with first discovery to the interests of the English. Clearly, everyone involved considered primacy of place to have something important to do with the right to hold a given territory. And, although Smith and Bancroft went about their tasks differently, they were alike in their need to displace and discredit the territorial claims of Spanish speaking peoples. Historical narrative was a mechanism to achieve this normative goal.

But one cannot speak of morality in the New World without mentioning the Puritans. William Bradford, the long-time governor of the Pilgrims' colony at Plymouth in Massachusetts and a leader of the Puritan exodus there from Holland, was a contemporary of Smith and also warrants consideration as a historian precursor to Bancroft. Nonetheless, although he wrote with greater deliberation, crafting his book, *History of Plymouth Plantation*, across more than two decades, his writing was also in the manner of a report. And, like Smith, Bradford sought to demonstrate his colony's excellence, despite the fact that the object of Bradford's colonial venture differed from Smith's. Indeed, the Puritans had rejected Smith's offer to provide the forceful power that supported their spiritual journey, instead choosing Miles Standish. And yet, in the

¹⁴² John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*, 1620, reprinted in 2006 by Applewood Books, available on Google Books, https://books.google.com/books?id=z77xqkcCBOWC&dq=smith+generall+historie+of+virginia&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

end, Bradford's report on Plymouth the colony was perhaps just as elegiac as Smith's accounts of his ventures—the very initiatives that Bradford had viewed as too materialistic to accompany the founding of a New Jerusalem in North America.

Bradford provided important precedence for Bancroft in several respects. The first that was worthy of mention was Bradford's approach to Native Americans in his narrative. From the beginning of his discussion of how the Puritan elders while in Holland decided to settle in America, Bradford included the Indians in his analysis. However, unlike Smith, who maintained that the Indians were important actors with whom having amicable relations was key to establishing a permanent colony, Bradford was dismissive, and sought to demonstrate that Native Americans represented an obstacle to settlement in America because they possessed too legitimate a claim to the land. Bradford wrote: "The place they [the Puritans] had thoughts on [for resettlement] was some of this vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful and fit for habitation, being devoid of all civil inhabitants, whether there are only savage and brutish men, which range up and down, little otherwise than the wild beasts of the same."¹⁴³ By comparing the Indians to "wild beasts," Bradford invoked a natural rights argument to possession of the New World that Bancroft later found useful in his own historical narrative. Indeed, the Puritan dismissal of Native American land ownership appeared to have had a far more lasting and powerful impression on relations between the United States and Indians than Smith's more inclusive worldview which at least recognized that Native Americans possessed meaningful agency. In the line of thought

¹⁴³ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1630-1651*, reprinted in 1856 by Little and Brown, available on Google Books, https://books.google.com/books?id=tYecOAN1cwwC&source=gbs_navlinks_s, 24-25.

that Bradford began, Native Americans possessed no more claim to being historical subjects than the animals they hunted.

In his narrative, Bancroft referred to Native Americans as part of nature in a similar manner, with language that echoed Bradford's. Bancroft used the euphemism, "the sons of the forest," to refer to Indians. And he went further in his use of the logic of improvements to render the indigenous inhabitants of North America incapable of making a legitimate claim to the land. Bancroft wrote of the time prior to the European settlement of New England: "Before that time the whole territory was an unproductive waste...Its only inhabitants were a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians, destitute of commerce, of political connection, and of morals. The axe and the ploughshare were unknown. The soil...was lavishing its strength in magnificent but useless vegetation." And then Bancroft concluded: "In the view of civilization the immense domain was a solitude."¹⁴⁴ Bradford's language, "being devoid of all civil inhabitants," was thus important precedence for Bancroft. It is worth noting, in particular, that in the logic of Bancroft's narrative—written several generations after the founding of the United States—the discourse used to discuss Native Americans was still that of the settler colonists of the seventeenth century. In both cases, dismissing the potential claim to territory that indigenous peoples might possess was paramount politically, and unsurprisingly at the center of the historical narrative employed in both times.

The use of the serpent as a possible metaphor for Native Americans also occurred across Bradford's and Bancroft's texts. Bancroft wrote of progress in the New World in his second volume: "The thorn has given way to the rosebush; the cultivated

¹⁴⁴ George Bancroft, *A History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent to the Present Time*, Vol. I (Boston, M.A.: Little and Brown, 1834), 3-4.

vine clammers over rocks where the brood of serpents used to nestle; while industry smiles at the changes she has wrought.”¹⁴⁵ Since Native Americans were part of the forest, there was little discursive distance to overcome between the brood of serpents occupying land that God wanted industry to overtake and Indians squatting on territory that Anglo settlers coveted. Bradford used the serpent more directly to refer to the devil. But the way he positioned this evil power as the enemy to progress was similar to how Bancroft invoked the same metaphor to refer to obstacles to settlement.¹⁴⁶

One more colonial immigrant who wrote what could pass for history deserves mention: John Winthrop. In his, *History of New England*, compiled from journal entries that he made between his people’s departure for Massachusetts Bay in 1630 until 1648, shortly before his death, the story of the colony unfolded in just as personal an account as what Smith and Bradford wrote. Indeed, Winthrop’s work read like a diary, an even more intimate composition method than what Smith and Bradford employed, and even included the dates when the various passages were written. The narrative was an account, rather than an overt interpretation, something that Bancroft sought to transcend in his work.

Winthrop’s journal provided illumination about how the colonists at the time of the settlement of New England dismissed the claims of Indians to the land. In recounting how Roger Williams had asserted his right to the territory that eventually became Rhode Island, Winthrop cited how the governor refused to recognize the claims of Williams, in part by invoking Indians and their lack of a legitimate claim to the territory Williams wished to establish as a colony independent of Massachusetts. Winthrop wrote: “The

¹⁴⁵ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. II, 269.

¹⁴⁶ Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 34 and 64.

governor and assistants met at Boston and took into consideration a treatise, which Mr. Williams (then of Salem) had sent to them...wherein, among other things, he disputes their right to the lands they possessed here, and concluded that, claiming by the king's grant they could have no title, nor otherwise, except they compounded with the natives."¹⁴⁷ No title except as existed through an agreement with the Natives. This rejection of the sovereignty of the Indians, coming directly from a diary entry made at the time only substantiated the claims that Bradford—and later Bancroft—made regarding the rights of Native Americans.

Indeed, the way that Bancroft used Winthrop in his own historical narrative as evidence suggested that the former found the latter precedent for denying Indians the same moral dignity given to African slaves by the opponents of the Atlantic slave system. Bancroft cited Winthrop's *New England Journal* when he wrote of the Puritans' rejection of the Atlantic slave trade: "Richard Salton, a worthy assistant, felt himself moved by his duty as a magistrate, to denounce the act of stealing negroes as 'expressly contrary to the law of God and the law of the country.'"¹⁴⁸ Yet, Bancroft also made a point to write about how the condemnation of slavery in the case of Africans made no impression on the early New England settlers' views regarding Native Americans. "The slavery of Indians was recognized as lawful," Bancroft claimed, in this instance regarding Columbus and the Spaniards. He then proceeded, "The practice of selling the natives of North America into foreign bondage, continued for nearly two centuries...The excellent Winthrop enumerates Indians among his bequests."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1639* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 145.

¹⁴⁸ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. I, 187.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 181.

Apparently, enslaving Africans—or, rather, bringing Africans as slaves to the New World—was wrong, but taking Native Americans into bondage—at least in the Early Modern Period—was acceptable practice.

Bancroft laid the blame for slavery carefully. It was the Spanish who had turned the slave system of the Atlantic into an enduring institution. “Royal edict [from Spain] soon permitted negro slaves, born in slavery among Christians, to be transported to Hispaniola,” Bancroft wrote. “Thus the royal ordinances of Spain authorized negro slavery in America.”¹⁵⁰ When it came to the question of where the Spanish had learned slavery, Bancroft made sure that the blame lay not in modern Europe, but elsewhere in the world and in time. He mentioned the long history of slavery in the Mediterranean, going as far back as Rome in his narrative. But the Spaniards stood out for their wickedness, nonetheless. “To carve out provinces with the sword...to plunder the accumulated treasures of some ancient Indian dynasty, to return from a roving expedition with a crowd of enslaved captives and a profusion of spoils, soon became the ordinary dreams, in which the excited minds of the Spaniards delighted to indulge,” Bancroft wrote.¹⁵¹ Spain was a dark presence in the New World, and if the Anglo colonists had also violated what many in the nineteenth century considered natural rights, then it was due to a precedence that infected the entire landscape.

Bancroft clarified that vice entered the Americas on the ships of Spain—perhaps with the exception of slothfulness, which, according to Bancroft’s narrative, was already present with the Indians, and, indeed responsible for the lack of improvements in the New World. In the Spanish, Bancroft wrote, “the passions of avarice and religious zeal

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 35.

were strangely blended; and the heroes of Spain sailed to the west, as if they had been bound on a new crusade, where infinite wealth was to reward their piety.”¹⁵² The Spanish were messengers from the Old World, but after their moment—if indeed it had ever existed—as the carriers of the flame of Providence’s plan for civilization had passed. The Spanish could never be the true sovereigns of the New World because they lacked the conviction of morals and the corresponding democratic political institutions necessary to make this claim.

The first author from the generations succeeding the original colonists whose writing expressed historical characteristics similar to Bancroft was Cotton Mather. The latter’s narrative clearly established why the Puritans and their descendants were the true heirs to God’s kingdom in the New World, as well as in the Old. The scion of several prominent Puritan families—the Cottons and the Matherses—and with close ties to the New England theocracy, Mather embodied his background in his work. His most significant contribution to literature was his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, otherwise called *The Ecclesiastical History of New England*. In this work, Mather overtly did what earlier writers had merely attempted: he connected the New England colonial venture of the 17th century with events described in the Bible, especially those of the Old Testament’s book of *Exodus*. Although Mather provided precedence for Bancroft in attempting to write a holistic narrative of the New World, his greatest contribution was in staking a claim for American history as sacred history. Mather hastily skipped over aspects of the history of North America that failed to fit into his concept of an “ecclesiastical” history. He wrote, for example: “Not only did the merchants of Bristol now raise a considerable stock to prosecute these discoveries, but many other persons of several ranks

¹⁵² Ibid., 34-35.

embarked in such undertakings; and many sallies into America were made.” But he then continued to say that readers should turn to other sources if they wished for a full account of these more secular events, writing, “I had rathe my reader should purchase at the expense of consulting Purchas’s *Pilgrims*, than endure any stop in our hastening voyage unto the history of a New-English Israel.”¹⁵³ Mather thus established a precedent not only for a providential history of New England, but for ignoring aspects of the past that failed to substantiate that narrative.

The literary historian Sacvan Bercovitch has used the concepts of diachronic and synchronic time to explain Mather’s achievement. Like Saint Augustine did in his masterpiece *City of God*, Mather created a theory of conflated temporal and sacred time, a system in which events proceeded linearly, as the colonial project in New England interacted with the outside world of empires and commerce. But, internally, the colony in Massachusetts could only be accurately understood—in the Puritan mind—through the concept of divine intervention. Thus, the secular, diachronic time of the colony’s experience in worldly reality coincided with moments of synchronic or sacred time that demonstrated that the Puritan venture in New England was more than the sum of material events. Most explicitly marked by the transcendence of particular individuals of their time and place through the manifestation of Biblical archetypes, New England was the kingdom of heaven on earth. For example, Jonathan Edwards was Mathers’s Nehemiah Americanus, the leader of the New Jerusalem, and proof that the errand into the wilderness was in fact a pivotal moment in the fabric of time when the inexorable

¹⁵³ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New England, from Its First Planting, in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of Our Lord, 1698* (New England: S. Andrus and Son, reprinted in 1853), 44.

changelessness of God's plan for the world coincided with the seemingly arbitrary events of history.¹⁵⁴

Political theorists have not failed to notice the significance of this dual timeline in American history. In his book *Sacred Discourse and American Nationality*, for example, Eldon Eisenach distinguished between the two timelines, as well, but used slightly more conventional language than the terms diachronic and synchronic—which actually originated in the twentieth century with Ferdinand de Saussure. “This typology, however,” Eisenach wrote, “is two-edged and has always been read in two distinct registers.” He went on to undertake a taxonomic division: “The first register,” Eisenach wrote, “I call a ‘providential reading’—the working out in ordinary time and through ordinary actions and understandings the larger plan of an omniscient and moral God—a sort of tame, almost secular Enlightenment reading of time.”¹⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the other dimension required a more abstract and flexible understanding. “The other, more apocalyptic, edge of this typology is not only full of dialectic and paradox, it is also full of darkness and danger, replete with images of sin, failure, suffering and death. This second register I will call ‘prophetic’—a way of being grounded in a covenantal relationship to a God who intervenes in history in ways that are outside both ordinary time and ordinary understandings of how the world works.”¹⁵⁶ Eisenach’s delineation clarifies what Mather—and later Bancroft—did to the narrative of American origins. The two thinkers acknowledged that there were alternative narratives in the past, but

¹⁵⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975).

¹⁵⁵ Eldon Eisenach, *Sacred Discourse and American Nationality* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 4.

¹⁵⁶ Eisenach, *Sacred Discourse*, 5.

asserted that only one story was really true. It was an understanding of time that proved remarkably pervasive in successive American ideologies, as Bancroft eventually demonstrated.

Indeed, Mather's was a powerful idea: the notion that America represented a break in time—an exceptional moment—proved to be a lasting influence in American culture, perhaps most significantly for Mather's nineteenth century historian heirs. However, Mather was not really a historian; only the most cynical observer of historiography could seriously place the hagiography that was Mather's writing alongside the narratives of historical events that began appearing in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The “chaps and maps” historical writing characteristic of history before the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries that succeeding social and cultural historians have scorned was, notwithstanding its limitations, on face value an attempt to rationally reconstruct what had happened in a given place during a given time, and to provide interpretations of events that located the historical subject matter in the continuum of reality, precisely the opposite of what Mather hoped to achieve by lifting real people and places into sacred time. No, the closest analogues to Bancroft were actually the people who came between he and Mather, a collection of locally and biographically minded historical writers who wrote about subjects that Bancroft would later synthesize into the grand narrative of America's origins.

Biography was a major component of the historical literature written by what one could call the Revolutionary generation of historical authors. Two individuals stand out as representatives of this genre, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall, and the minister, Jeremy Belknap. Marshall's biography of George Washington, which

appeared in five volumes between 1804 and 1807, was a monumental analysis of the man and his times. A survivor of the rough winter that Washington spent with his troops at Valley Forge, Marshall brought personal insights to bear on America's greatest general and first president. However, his love for Washington and his ability to recollect many of the actual events that he wrote about served to discredit him to later generations of historians. And, in any event, his biographical work, although about perhaps the most American of subjects, was far from a synthesis of national history—even though Washington hagiography occupied a prominent place in Bancroft's narrative.

Jeremy Belknap's biographical compositions, on the other hand, expressed broader themes and a deeper chronology, making it more of a precursor for Bancroft. A two-volume series of essays published in 1794 and 1798, Belknap's aptly named *American Biography* provided a chronologically based study in the development of the European habitation of the Americas through examination of a few supposedly seminal individuals from different phases of the colonization process. Belknap surveyed an amazing number of people. He began with Biron, a Norman, Madoc, a Welshman, and then proceeded to Columbus, Cabot, and the other explorers of the Early Modern Era. He placed the individuals in question along a timeline that stretched from the year 1001 A.D. with the Normans, to the year 1620 with the Puritans.¹⁵⁷

But Belknap did not actually begin his narrative with the Normans—as impressively deep in time as that in itself may seem; rather, he started with Ancient

¹⁵⁷ Jeremy Belknap, *American Biography: or, An historical account of those persons who have been distinguished in America, as adventurers, statesmen, philosophers, divines, warriors, authors, and other remarkable characters: Comprehending a recital of the events connected with their lives and actions* (1794), 31-46.

chronology. “The first navigators, of whom we have any account,” Belknap wrote, “were the Phoenicians. As early as the days of Moses, they had extended their navigation beyond the pillars of Hercules.”¹⁵⁸ He thus began his narrative very early, indeed. Belknap continued to discuss the Egyptian voyages that he thought had taken place around Africa, the Hebrew navigation of the Red Sea, early connections with India, and other examples of trans regional travel from the Ancient Period. Belknap stopped short of firmly endorsing the idea that the settlement of the Americas occurred as a consequence of these ancient Mediterranean voyages, but he did write: “The credibility of the Egyptian or Phoenician voyages, round the continent of Africa, being admitted, and the certainty of the Carthaginian voyages and colonies on the Western shore of Africa being established; we may extend our inquiry to the probability of what has been advanced by some...[that] the population of some part of America [was] from beyond the Atlantic.”¹⁵⁹ Doubt might overshadow the idea that peoples long familiar to the story of the West had settled the Western hemisphere—a point that Bancroft addressed more scientifically a mere two generations later—but the concept was intriguing enough that Belknap devoted the first portion of his work to exploring the notion.

If Belknap’s history was less ecclesiastical and thereby less overtly a dialectic of Eisenach’s providential and prophetic timelines that Mather’s work embodied, then it was still grounded in the same ethos of creating a story that made America part of European history long before the land’s discovery by Europeans. In this vein, Belknap’s lack of overtly religious themes proved perhaps even more important as a precursor to Bancroft than had Belknap actually used the concept of theological teaching to

¹⁵⁸ Belknap, *American Biography*, 5.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

coordinate his narrative. For, Bancroft's narrative only worked as an ideology because it made similar claims on the land that eventually became the United States, yet it did so not through the ideological apparatus of absolutism—Protestant religion—but through the ideological apparatus of the democratic nation state—historical narrative.

Another major genre that writers of the Revolutionary generation produced was regional history. In his widely read *History of New Hampshire*, Belknap created a detailed account of the colony's history from the landing of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts to the late-eighteenth century. By extending his narrative back in time to before the actual establishment of the state of New Hampshire, Belknap anticipated what Bancroft would later do for the entirety of the United States. However, by confining his narrative to the development of a single state, Belknap produced historical literature on an inherently smaller scale than what Bancroft later accomplished.

Benjamin Trumbull, another minister, also wrote highly regarded regional history. His *History of Connecticut* focused on the ecclesiastical foundations of the colony, reflecting Trumbull's Congregationalist beliefs. Like Belknap's work, Trumbull's was circumscribed in scope and intended primarily to establish the significance of his colony in the United States at around the same time that the United States was forming. Trumbull did create a plan with several other ministers for a more comprehensive national history, but the plan's aim was never really realized until Bancroft began publishing his volumes in the 1830s. And, although themes of divine inspiration and guidance permeated Bancroft's *History*, the later work was less directly a product of a religious vocation than what Trumbull had proposed during the Revolutionary Era.

The second to last historian worth mentioning here was David Ramsay. Although born in Pennsylvania, Ramsay, a politician and physician, relocated to South Carolina early in his career and remained there for the rest of his life. The history he wrote of his adopted state had the characteristics of Belknap's and Trumbull's work, but, even more directly than Trumbull, Ramsay served as a stepping stone for the discussion of national themes, because he also wrote a history of the American Revolution. Ramsay's history of the American Revolution placed South Carolina in the context of a larger epic.

A leader in a generation of younger founders, Ramsay represented a road not taken by Bancroft in his narrative. The former wrote what was rather a testament to the lofty, yet practical democratic sentiments of the Revolutionary Era. Contrary to Bancroft and a long line of thinkers on the subject of Native American rights in the New World prior and after the Revolution, Ramsay wrote, "The right of the Indian nations to the soil in their possession was founded in nature. It was the free and liberal gift of Heaven to them, and such as no foreigner could rightfully annul." If that clear refutation of European seizures of Indian land was not enough, Ramsay continued to expound on the false ideas of the Europeans that had led to such land seizures as occurred in New England and elsewhere: "The blinded superstition of the times regarded the Deity as the party God of Christians, and not as the common father of saints and savages." Ramsay concluded that things had, thankfully changed. "The pervading influence of philosophy, reason, and truth, has, since that period, given us better notions of the rights of mankind, and of the obligations of orality. These unquestionably," Ramsay wrote, "are not confined to particular modes of faith, but extend universally to Jews and Gentiles, to Christians and Infidels."¹⁶⁰ Clearly, the universal ideals of religion could aspire to

¹⁶⁰ David Ramsay, *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Macmillan, reprinted in 1896), 11.

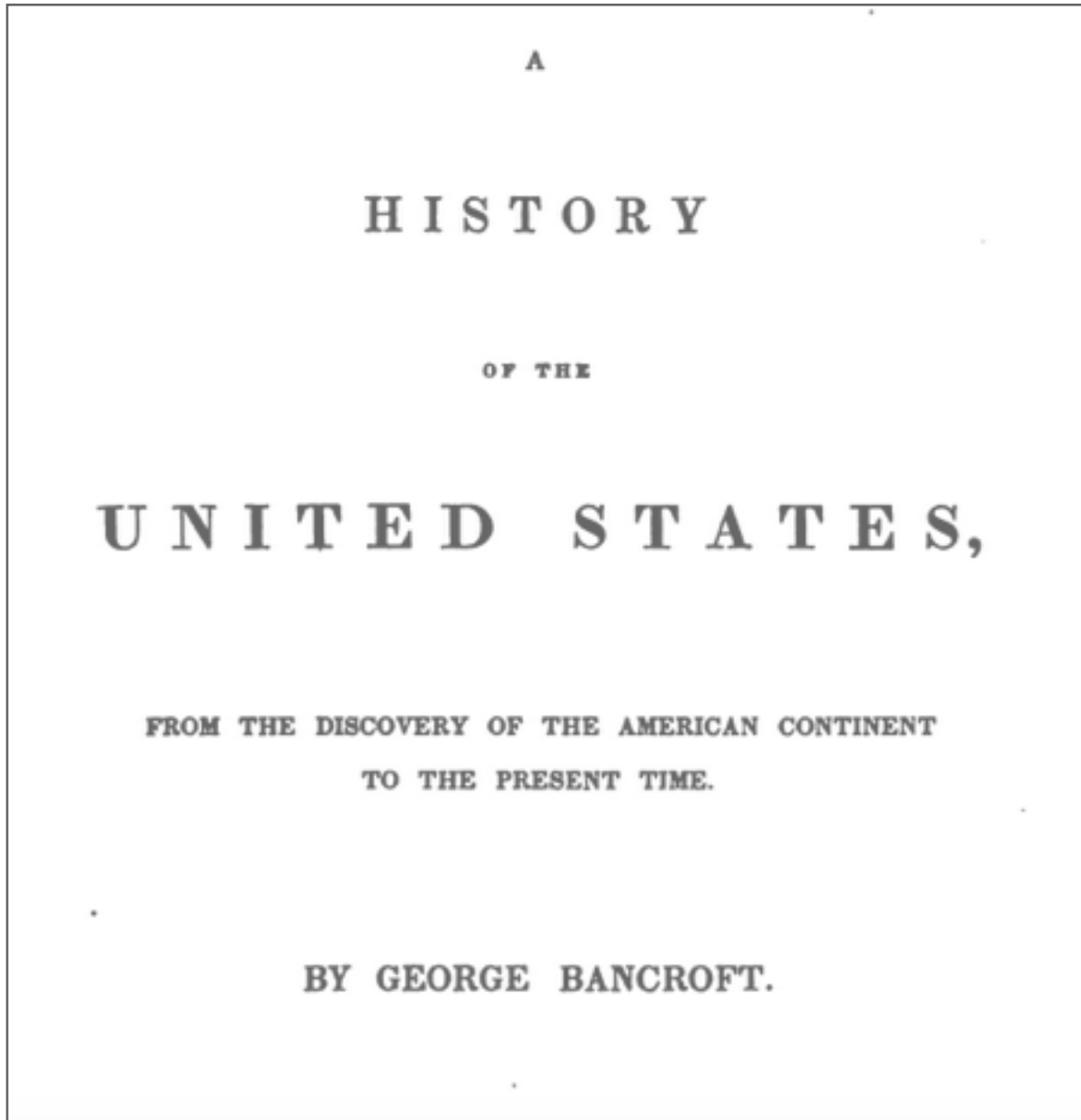
different ends than the territorial conquest of the Early Modern Period. Perhaps the Revolutionary Era marked a sea change when universal rights would replace partiality in visions of the relationship between the divine and humankind.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the situation proved more complex. Due to the intellectual genealogy of Bancroft's narrative with the likes of Mather and Bradford, the universal rights rhetorical of Ramsay meant something else. Instead of demonstrating the future of the democratic nation state, Ramsay's words underscored the failure of absolutism's ideology to uphold the state apparatus. Ramsay wrote that "the Deity," "nature," and in his tone, common sense, substantiated the claims of Native Americans to their land. He thus invoked the ideological apparatus associated with absolutism—religion. In the process of making his assertion that Indians had a right to territory in the New World, Ramsay demonstrated, above all else, not the future of relations between Anglo Americans and Native Americans, but rather the end of religion's ability to serve the interests of the state apparatus as the chief ideological apparatus. But something else usurped religion as the ideological apparatus of the state apparatus bequeathed to the world by absolutism. This new ideological apparatus was the discipline of history, the development of which in America Bancroft played a profoundly important role.

Chapter 3

The *History* as a Narrative Structure



The key ideological message in Bancroft's narrative,¹⁶¹ something implicit in the structure of the *History*, was the idea that the midsection of North America, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, was the United States from the beginning of European discovery of the continent. Indeed, the idea that the United States was a continent more than merely a country was a key point that readers were to reach. From as early in the text as the table of contents, Bancroft sent this message. He neatly divided the first sections of the first volume into chapters on different European nations' colonization initiatives—which was actually not unlike twenty first century historians' accounts. See, for example, the organizing structure of Alan Taylor's *American Colonies*, which proceeds according to the geographic area of North America, and to the European country responsible for claiming the territory in question.¹⁶² But, whereas Taylor was careful to avoid a teleology to the eventual rise of the United States and pitted various groups against each other in meaningful contests for control of spheres of North America, struggles in which all parties possessed meaningful agency and all had at least the potential to succeed in imposing their worldview on others, Bancroft presented as inevitable not only the rise of Anglo America but the domination of the then colonial interests over the metropole as the victors in revolution.¹⁶³ In Bancroft's North America, the United States ruled the past, as well as the present and the future.

The assertion that the United States had virtually always existed allowed Bancroft to mark America's importance in world history. He claimed as exceptional the

¹⁶¹ Image of George Bancroft's *History*, Vol. I. Public Domain: https://books.google.com/books?id=WIRujgEACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁶² Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

¹⁶³ Eliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, K.S.: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

idea that: “Domestic peace is maintained without the aid of a military establishment; public sentiment permits the existence of but few standing troops, and those only along the seaboard and on the frontiers.”¹⁶⁴ Bancroft made this point despite the fact that as he wrote a struggle was unfolding in the Southwest along the Northern borderlands of Mexico for control of the central plains and mountains, as well as dominance in the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Coast. Bancroft also neglected to take into account the violence perpetrated against Native Americans—events like the removal of the Cherokee from Appalachia to the Great Plains. The idea that American expansion occurred without violence, or any real resistance for that matter, formed part of a mutually reinforcing axis of the ideas of territorial change and political timelessness. It was this axis of diachronic and synchronic time that enabled Bancroft to make the sweeping claim that the United States represented the fulfillment of liberty, in the classical and modern senses, despite a contemporary context of bitter struggle and oppression.

Arguments and Orientations

Bancroft began his *History* by establishing his intent. And the effort he put into articulating his purpose in writing remained influential in the succeeding volumes. At the beginning of the project, Bancroft wrote, “I have formed the design of writing a History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent to the present time...I am impressed more strongly than ever with a sense of the grandeur and vastness of the subject.”¹⁶⁵ Promising himself to “authenticity” in his narrative, which he planned to ascertain by painstakingly comparing competing accounts of events, Bancroft

¹⁶⁴ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. I, 1.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., v.

acknowledged the difficulty of his task. “Such an investigation on any country would be laborious; I need not say how much the labor is increased by the extent of our republic, the differences in the origin and early government of its component parts, and the multiplicity of topics, which require to be discussed and arranged,” Bancroft wrote.¹⁶⁶ Regarding the topics, Bancroft enumerated regions and subjects that required examination. He explained his choices by writing, “I have dwelt at considerable length on this first period [colonization], because it contains the germ of our Institutions. The maturity of the nation is but a continuation of its youth.”¹⁶⁷ Bancroft then made his overarching conclusion and argument clear: “The spirit of the colonies demanded freedom from the beginning.”¹⁶⁸ America had a telos to develop into a nation state that embodied a timeless ideal of liberty.

Historians after Bancroft have—appropriately—called this type of historiography the “germ theory” of history.¹⁶⁹ Steeped in neoplatonism, as we can see in Bancroft’s case from his doctoral education in Germany, germ theory maintained that the point of history writing was to ascertain the basic characteristic of a given subject, and then to explain the manifold events comprising the general topic as the unfolding of a single phenomenon. Because the historical development in question was that of an object so absolute in its manifestation as to only require articulation of its impact on events rather than as a thing in and of itself, germ theory historiography maintained a distinct essentialism. And, indeed, although Bancroft claimed to understand little of what Hegel

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., vi.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., vii.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ David Levin, *History as a Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (Palo Alto, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 1959).

had wrote in the lectures that the former attended and the latter gave in Berlin, Hegel's theory of history appeared strikingly salient in Bancroft's work.

In Bancroft's *History*, although the events unfolded under the umbrella of the development of the United States, the real object in question was modern freedom or liberty. And thus, Bancroft, as much as he was in intellectual conversation with other historians of America, was truly, at the most essential level, in dialogue with people of letters in the West in general, for whom the most pressing concern was, as Alexis de Tocqueville best articulated around the same time, the nature and fate of modern democracy. By writing the history of America as an alternative path for a post-feudal civilization in a serendipitously non-feudal historical context, Bancroft not only presented his country as exceptional, but in the act made the United States seem integral to the development of modern politics—despite its existence in the early-nineteenth century on the margins of global affairs.

Bancroft wrote that he aimed to give “a full picture of the progress of American Institutions.”¹⁷⁰ He intended to capture the progressive development of liberty in America by examining the civil and political organization of life through government and social structures, as well as through the ideas of consensus that supported these more concrete entities. Indeed, to Bancroft—and we may assume to his readers, as well—the ideas informing social and government structures represented as fertile and necessary a field of investigation as the practices that appeared on the surface of human activity.

For, Bancroft also opened the *History* by placing the United States in the context of world events. He wrote: “The United States of America constitute an essential portion

¹⁷⁰ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. I, viii.

of a great political system, embracing all the civilized nations of the earth.”¹⁷¹ In an age defined, according to Bancroft, by “the defence [sic] of the equal rights of man,” in the United States, “the sovereignty of the people is...a conceded axiom.”¹⁷² In the same passage, he distinguished America from Europe by ascribing change to Europe and timelessness and stability to the United States. He wrote: “While the nations of Europe aspire after change, our constitution engages the fond admiration of the people, by which it has been established. Prosperity follows the execution of even justice; invention is quickened by the freedom of competition; and labor rewarded with sure and unexampled returns.”¹⁷³ In Bancroft’s analysis, paradoxically, America, despite undergoing a major redefinition of its territorial borders and an expansion of suffrage to include ordinary white men, changes that of course followed on the heels of the world’s first modern revolution, was constant and stable, with the steady hand of the people charting a safe course through rough waters. Europe, meanwhile, was turbulent, rocked by discontent, struggle, and the ensuing revolutionary tenor of its politics.

Bizarre as we might find Bancroft’s assertion that the United States was stable during the Age of Jackson, we must look at his perspective and judge it by its own logic if we are to maintain any hope of making sense of what he was saying and of what that meant to his readers. For Bancroft, expansion in territory and suffrage were natural, appropriate, and indeed inevitable outgrowths of a fixed principle of America: the ascendancy of the timeless ideal of freedom in the form of modern democracy. Even more importantly, we must realize that Bancroft could make this claim that the

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁷² Ibid., 2.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 1.

revolutions, by all but name, that occurred during his time in the United States, as it transformed from an Atlantic Republic to a trans-continental imperial democracy, were not signs of upheaval and change but instances proving the stability and consistency of American development because Bancroft had carefully positioned American history between two timelines in his scholarship.

Territorial change and political stability could coexist in Bancroft's worldview because the narrative of America in time existed upon a bifurcated temporal axis of diachronic events and synchronic purpose. The Puritan historians, Mather in particular, had established a precedent that used a typology that integrated secular—diachronic—and divine—synchronic—time to explain their community's mission in their new world. On the one hand, tangible events unfolded in a distinct chronology: the Puritans left England for the Netherlands, then the Netherlands for New England, fought with the Indians, and carved a space for their way of life. But these events possessed meaning not in the specific content of the struggles but rather in the way that the material concerns coincided with sacred imperatives in the ongoing chronology of Biblical typology. The Puritans were God's chosen people; John Winthrop was their Nehemiah; and New England was a promised land.¹⁷⁴

Bancroft was no Puritan. He was descended from Puritans, but he was raised a Unitarian and then educated as a scientific historian in the late-Enlightenment German university system. So, his conflated time axis acquired a different name. Bancroft called it not theology, but history. For Bancroft wrote, "It is the object of the present work to explain, how the change in the condition of our land has been accomplished; and, as the fortunes of a nation are not controlled by blind destiny, to follow the steps, by which

¹⁷⁴ Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*.

a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory.”¹⁷⁵ Study change over time in order to understand insoluble and ultimately transhistorical principles, ideas located in the unchanging institutions of the United States. Thus, the temporal axis Bancroft worked with was dialectical, but not materialistic: the expansion of America did not define American liberty; liberty remained inviolable, unsoiled, and unchanged as the driver of expansion. It was an idea classically expressed by Hegel’s neoplatonism: ideas drove history; history did not make ideas.

Bancroft’s *History* thus revealed something distinct about the modern nation state. Nationalism was, anthropologically, a theology—a conflation of timely change and timeless chronology, in all that idea’s bizarre glory. But it was a new theology, only possible in the age of Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, a way of organizing human passion, autonomous individual agency, and a still spiritual culture around a state that had been breathed into being on the lips of a rejection of anthropomorphic divinity. Nationalism retained the temporal axis of theological political institutions, but without the clear identification of God; in history, the state became the nation, and received the sanction and the power of divinity, which took the form of popular sovereignty, something justified by the sacred right of the individual to pursue freedom of conscience. History writing, exemplified in Bancroft’s *History*, was spiritual glue for a secular state responsible for ruling a habitually theocratic culture—or cultures, as Bancroft made clear was the case in the geographically and demographically diverse United States.

Ernest Belief in the Progress of the Race

¹⁷⁵ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. I, 4.

Indeed, Bancroft, for his part, wrote his *History* without any sense of the irony that White mentioned, or that lurked in Tocqueville's undercurrent of apprehension in *Democracy in America*. Bancroft firmly believed in his purpose, writing the definitive narrative of his country's origins, and he had fervently committed to the notion that what he wrote was the truth. And Bancroft's optimistic devotion extended beyond his craft to include his subject: for him, the United States was abjectly good, and its growth the fulfillment of a sacred destiny.

To succeeding generations of historians, those following the ironic turn in historiography and, however blindly, the heirs to Tocqueville's conservative horror at the excesses of democracy, Bancroft has appeared naive. His *History* embodied, and to some extent actually constituted, the very positivistic yet mythic nationalism that most twentieth-century historians wrote against. Bancroft, however, was far from obtuse. His writing encompassed reflection, self awareness, and a daunting erudition that demands recognition. The fact that his conclusions appear essentialistic to the point of childishness in later historians' eyes indicates not a misstep or mistakenness, but a kind of dauntless conviction. Bancroft was more than a patriot when he wrote history; he was an epistemological zealot for the nascent historical discipline.

The use of a religious signifier to depict Bancroft's intellectual professionalism is gravely appropriate. The faith infused rationalism that inflected Bancroft's prose revealed that the historical discipline originated as a late Enlightenment religion. If the Romantic Era of aesthetics reconciled passion with reason, then history glued together neoclassical populism and the absolutist state apparatus, and, in the process, formed the modern state. History writing was the epitome of ideology. Under the auspices of

scientific fact, the narrative form preserved emotional attachment to the state in an age defined by invocations against power. Just as religious dogma in Christian thought mystically bound the trinity into a singular God, and thereby reconciled semitic monotheism with classical paganism,¹⁷⁶ so history writing rendered compatible modern notions of liberty with the modern mastery of authoritarianism—in Montesquieu’s and Locke’s conception, the “tyranny of the majority.” In his brilliant analysis of the German “Aufklärung,” *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*,¹⁷⁷ Peter Reill recognized that, in “an era of intellectual crisis,” when the bonds knitting the culture of society to the order of the state frayed, “truths that once were unquestioned now were assaulted; reality as traditionally conceived proved inadequate,” and history writing emerged as a new way of thinking to re-bridge the gap between people and their institutions—fictive but paradoxically self-evident creations. The concept of a “universal” history was Christian, but the German Enlightenment divorced it from its theological moorings. “The process, begun with the founding of the University of Halle, received added impetus from the establishment of the University of Göttingen and reached fruition with the opening of the University of Berlin,” precisely the course that Bancroft’s early education ran.¹⁷⁸ Historiography thus illuminates more than the study of the past; it sheds light on the conundrum of modern politics: namely, the religiosity of mass belief in mass freedom in the midst of the reality of the tyranny of the masses.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton and company, reprinted 1995).

¹⁷⁷ Aufklärung is the German concept of enlightenment.

¹⁷⁸ Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 5-9.

¹⁷⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, reprinted 1994).

To substantiate the self evidence of the connections between culture and the new state, Bancroft approached the question of modern politics comparatively, and in a way that recognized key contemporary events, namely revolutionary instability and the great movements of peoples across the world. Citing a statistic that continues to appear in twenty first century undergraduate seminars and high school textbooks, Bancroft recognized that his country's population doubled, "every period of twenty-two or twenty-three years."¹⁸⁰ True to his affiliation with the Democratic Party, Bancroft claimed that this tide of immigration was, far from negative, the "immense concourse of emigrants of the most various lineage," proof of America's transcendence of secular time—in this moment, defined by revolutionary turmoil due to the expansion of liberty. According to Bancroft's analysis, "the principles of liberty, uniting all interests by the operation of equal laws blend the discordant elements into harmonious union." In contrast, "Other governments are convulsed by the innovations and reforms of neighboring states; our constitution, fixed in the affections of the people, from whose choice it has sprung, neutralizes the influence of foreign principles, and fearlessly opens an asylum to the virtuous, the unfortunate, and the oppressed of every nation."¹⁸¹ Foreign principles were the contaminants of secular time, and the revolutionary upheavals in Europe that were the product of the challenge of democracy to the old regime were washed clean from the people who carried their pasts with them to the new world.

But it was not that simple, and Bancroft's narrative succumbed to the contradictions in his worldview once deeper into his text. In Volume Two of the *History*, Bancroft apparently reversed his opinion that the great concourse of nations with

¹⁸⁰ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. I, 2.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 3.

immigrants from many backgrounds was the story of the United States. Much as he disliked European cultural baggage, Bancroft nonetheless wrote: “Of the nations of the European world, the chief emigration was from that Germanic race.” And, in Bancroft’s mind, this fact was important, because: “The Anglo-Saxon mind, in its serenest nationality, neither distorted by fanaticism, nor subdued by superstition, nor wounded by persecution,” Bancroft waxed, was also “ [not] excited by new ideas, but fondly cherishing [in] the active instinct for personal freedom, secure possession, and legislative power, such as belonged to it before the reformation, and existed independent of the reformation, had made its dwelling-place in the empire of Powhatán.” The situation in America, according to Bancroft was exceptionally fortuitous. Without any of the constraints that held back their progress in Europe, the American people, “were Anglo-Saxons in the woods again,” but this time, “with the inherited culture and intelligence of the seventeenth century.”¹⁸² These statements, on the same page, were inherently conflicted. How could the new world be free of European constraints—a good thing—and yet intrinsically positive only because it was the ideal growing ground for the seeds of European liberty?

To answer this question, we must examine Bancroft’s concept of history, specifically his belief that he wrote universal history. Late in the third volume of the *History*, the last volume examined in this study, Bancroft discussed the historian’s search for truth as he saw it. For Bancroft, the primary concern in history writing was with what he called the “moral world,” and the “general laws” that “swayed” it. “Events succeed events,” Bancroft wrote, “truth alone, is permanent.”¹⁸³ This statement exposed

¹⁸² Bancroft, *History*, Vol. II, 454.

¹⁸³ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. III, 397.

another apparent contradiction in the text that Bancroft created: Bancroft's *History* was, in essence, a litany of events, carefully described by the author. "Research must be unwearied," Bancroft wrote on the same page, "for the historic inquirer to swerve from exact observation would be as absurd as for the astronomer to break his telescopes."¹⁸⁴ But why would the author of history bother at all, consumed as he was with the search for general laws and moral principles, much less in as painstakingly linear a fashion as Bancroft, with something as ephemeral as a single event? "The selfish passions of a party are as evanescent as the material interests involved in the transient conflict: they may deserve to be described; they never can inspire."¹⁸⁵ It was the composition of a truth, however, that vindicated the method's madness: "Facts," Bancroft wrote, "faithfully ascertained, and placed in proper contiguity, become of themselves the firm links of a brightly burnished chain, connecting events with their causes, and marking the line along which the electric power of truth is conveyed from generation to generation."¹⁸⁶ The concept of "contiguity," thrown into the text as a subordinate clause, almost like an afterthought, explained everything. It was not the events themselves that were intrinsically important; it was the binding between one event and another that revealed something worthwhile.

No one should be surprised that the contiguity binding individual events together for Bancroft was "progress," or, "the superintending providence of God."¹⁸⁷ But, to step back for a moment, we must also examine the literary form that Bancroft's narrative

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 397-398.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 398.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

assumed, something that according to White was necessarily poetic, and discern the specific metahistory at work. It was obviously race. Bancroft believed, and sought to demonstrate through his *History*, that races and the institutional political germs they allegedly carried, were the links between events. In this capacity, contiguity functioned differently as a method from the lenses of later generations of historians, uniting what Peter Gay once called the form and function of the historical method into a single “style.”¹⁸⁸ It is no wonder that White called the era of historical writing that Bancroft embodied—if not defined—a “golden age;” substance and vehicle were one and the same. History, in Bancroft’s words, was a “science.”¹⁸⁹

And what the science proved was that “the trust of our race has ever been in the coming of better times.”¹⁹⁰ For Bancroft’s Jacksonian Democracy, the trust was that the confluence of peoples in North America would result in something better. It was a faith that set Bancroft apart from his Harvard peers in New England, most of whom were Whigs and believed that racial diversity in the United States was bound to pervert the ideals that had founded the republic. But, in anticipation of the “borderlands” paradigm that has defined the writing of Early American history since the 1990s, Bancroft found meaning and hope in the chaotic clashes on his native soil.

To find hope in the mixing of races in North America, one needed only look to the precedent of the Colonial Era. Truly, there was nothing new occurring in the mid-nineteenth century. For, at the tipping point of the American Revolution, “England, France, and Spain, occupied the continent,” and “had they been united, no colony could

¹⁸⁸ Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, reprinted 1988).

¹⁸⁹ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. III, 398.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

have rebelled successfully.” Indeed, it had been mightily fortuitous because “one colonial power [had] encroached on another,” greedily attempting to incorporate its rivals’ resources. Pithily, for once, Bancroft wrote: “Thus the metropolitan monopolists were divided against themselves.”¹⁹¹ The situation on the continent in which Bancroft wrote would resolve itself; something good would seize the divisions and assert itself. It would be progress, and would take the form it had always assumed—the expansion of liberty through the development of free political institutions. And, as in the Colonial Era, this force would be the coming of the United States, which was, inherently, the Anglo Saxon peoples free again in the woods, what Nietzsche would later call the “blonde beast,” except this time run rampant not in Europe but in North America.¹⁹²

Whereas the borderlands paradigm articulated by Stephen Aron and Jeremy Adelman saw contingency in the events of the mid-nineteenth century, Bancroft, caught in the midst of that “American confluence,” perceived opportunity.¹⁹³ Divided between peoples, North America was ripe for the taking. Comprised of a multitude of immigrants, the United States was prepared for harvest by its chosen people. What Bancroft believed his *History* did—what it did in the end do—was to forge the Democratic expansionism of the 1830s and 40s into a chain of contiguity with the American Revolution—the unyielding expansion of Democracy that Tocqueville feared was, for Bancroft, the divine guidance of providence.

Tocqueville claimed that the French Revolution was an ongoing process that had never ended, and for Bancroft the American Revolution operated under the same laws,

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 400.

¹⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecco Homo* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

¹⁹³ Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington, I.N.: Indiana University Press, 2006).

except that it also extended backward in time. What interested Bancroft was establishing a system of contiguity stretching across history, uniting the United States with the moral laws that Bancroft believed comprised God's will for his creation. It was a significant ambition, one that Bancroft sought to address systematically in his historical scholarship.

Organization

Bancroft began his *History* in Volume I with the earliest explorers. He proceeded chronologically, discussing the possible Viking expeditions to the New World around the year 1000 C.E., and then continued to a discussion of Spain and its territories in the New World. However, while Bancroft was diligent to chronicle what he perceived to have been the key events of each stage, he was equally mindful of the broader themes he wished to unite with his narrative, most importantly the foreshadowing of the American Revolution into North America's deep colonial past. Bancroft left the hint of the illegitimacy of Latin Americans' claims to what would in his day still be contested territory at the end of his section on Spain's empire in the early modern era. Speaking of Florida, in particular, Bancroft wrote: "Spain grasped at it, as a portion of her dominions, and, if discovery could confer a right, her claim was founded in justice."¹⁹⁴ The word, "if," however, signaled a rhetorical question, the answer to which turned out, of course, to be a resounding, "no." Discovery granted Spain no rights to the land it—and its descendants—claimed. But what then, would confer legitimate ownership?

Bancroft provided an answer to the question of legitimate sovereignty over land when he discussed the English settlements in North America. The theme of sovereignty was one that Bancroft returned to time and again in his narrative. Legitimacy of

¹⁹⁴ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. I, 82.

ownership of territory, in his mind, was inextricably connected to the character of a society's political institutions. Speaking of the case of the Puritans, Bancroft wrote: "The colonists of Plymouth had exercised self-government, without the sanction of a royal patent. Yet their claim to their lands was valid, according to the principles of English law, as well as natural justice."¹⁹⁵ The legitimacy of one's sovereignty over territory depended upon the legitimacy of the sovereignty in one's political institutions. In the case of the English colonists, the people had sovereignty, which made their territorial claims legitimate, regardless of whether a monarch had sanctioned their activities.

It was the Puritans, for Bancroft, who most exemplified the potential of English political institutions to reflect progress in the seventeenth century. Although, at first glance, the overtly religious mission aspect of the colony founded in Massachusetts would appear to suggest otherwise, Bancroft made it clear that there was no "ecclesiastical tyranny" in New England: "Puritanism constituted, not the Christian clergy, but the Christian people, the interpreter of the divine will. The voice of the majority was the voice of God; and the issue of puritanism was therefore popular sovereignty."¹⁹⁶ Thus, the church and the democratic political institutions of New England did not exist in conflict, but rather comprised a mutually reinforcing relationship that furthered the interests of civilization by striking a closer earthly embodiment of divine will in human affairs, something achieved not through religious ceremony so much as by the self organizing principle of government.

But what of the other colonies? Did Bancroft try to incorporate them into the American narrative from the early stages of colonization? Yes. When he discussed

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 346.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 502.

Virginia, Bancroft used language similar to what he employed in the analysis of New England. Speaking of how the House of Burgesses originally suffered persecution, Bancroft wrote of the Virginians' resilience: "The indomitable spirit of personal independence, nourished by the manners of Virginia, could never be repressed." Bancroft's emphasis on "manners" was significant, similar to Tocqueville's use of the amorphous and allegedly ubiquitous category of "mores" in his great analysis of democracy that he wrote during the 1830s. "Unlike Rome," Bancroft wrote, "Virginia placed the defence of liberty, not in municipal corporations, but in persons. The liberty of the individual was ever highly prized; and freedom sheltered itself in the collected energy of the public mind."¹⁹⁷ Bancroft continued to speak positively of a "turbulent spirit" that pushed progress forward in Virginia. The English governor, unable to impose his will on the colony without the use of military force, which he lacked, had to moderate his position and allow Virginians their autonomy. Bancroft concluded his section on Virginia by triumphantly stating: "Virginia was always 'A LAND OF LIBERTY'."¹⁹⁸ In Bancroft's narrative, the spirit of liberty persevered outside New England in the colonies. Free from its shackles in the Old World, liberty grew unabated in the new.

The colonies between New England and Virginia occupied a more complicated position historically for Bancroft, since the Netherlands had colonized New York before the British. Bancroft, however, rolled his analysis through what might have been an obstacle, instead using the earliest territorial conflicts between Europeans in North America to foreshadow the United States. "Nor let the first tendencies to union pass unnoticed," Bancroft wrote at the beginning of this section in the *History*. "The spirit of

¹⁹⁷ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. II, 254.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 255.

the age was present when the foundations of New York were laid.” Indeed, in Bancroft’s mind, “every great European event affected the fortunes of America,” and the Dutch occupied a pivotal role in Bancroft’s story, opposite to but in complementary development with British activity.¹⁹⁹

Bancroft conflated English and Dutch interests during the colonial era under the umbrella of the United States’s eventual development during the eighteenth century. “The Netherlands,” Bancroft wrote, “divide with England the glory of having planted the first colonies in the United States.” And furthermore, Bancroft asserted that the Netherlands, “also divide the glory of having set the examples of public freedom.” For, in Bancroft’s words: “If England gave our fathers the idea of a popular representation, Holland originated of the the principle of federal union.”²⁰⁰ When Europe found America, the Netherlands occupied a unique position in relation to the other European nations. Bancroft positioned the Dutch as a sort of important bridge between Europe’s old order and the new modernity that Bancroft claimed certain English peoples brought to the New World—where liberty could flourish without serious impediment. “At the discovery of America,” Bancroft wrote, “the Netherlands were in possession of the municipal institutions which had been saved from the wreck of the Roman world, and of the feudal liberties which the middle ages had bequeathed. The power of the people,” Bancroft continued, “ was unknown to the laws; but the landed aristocracy, the hierarchy, and the municipalities, possessed political franchises.”²⁰¹ This fact was important because Bancroft’s point about the importance of incorporating Dutch positions in North America

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 256.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

during the seventeenth century was: “If England gave our fathers the idea of a popular representation, Holland originated for them the principle of federal union.”²⁰² The Netherlands complemented England, the two European powers delivering to the people of America necessary components of the United States’s future institutions.

Incorporating the Netherlands into his analysis of the progress of liberty in colonial North America allowed Bancroft to kill two birds with one stone and head off another problem that his narrative would later face, namely, the anti-democratic sentiments of the founding generation. Bancroft, a Jacksonian Democrat, faced a degree of scorn from his Harvard educated peers, not for his historical activities, which received far ranging praise across political party and regional section, but for his interest in the politics of the Democratic Party. During the time that he wrote the earliest volumes of the *History*, Bancroft’s relationship with Edward Everett, in particular, grew rocky. Everett, one of the most important early proponents of the advancement of Bancroft’s career, instrumental in sending him to Europe to obtain a doctorate, could never see eye to eye with Bancroft over his support of the common people. Although Everett’s denunciation of Bancroft’s political positions never seemed to extend to his opinion of the history that Bancroft wrote—which was nevertheless informed by his relationship with the Democratic Party—he never shied from informing Bancroft of his wrongheadedness when it came to nineteenth-century affairs. The issues that Everett and the other Whigs had with the Democratic Party were manifold, but consistently revolved around the Democrats’ support of expanding suffrage. True to the views of the founding generation, Whigs like Everett—elites from the Boston Brahmin class—wanted to keep the business of governing within the group of people who—allegedly—knew

²⁰² Ibid.

how to govern through education and social standing. The story that Bancroft wove into the *History* about the incorporation of New York into the British colonies—what Bancroft teleologically kept calling the United States—subtly addressed the issue of aligning the Democratic Party of the 1830s and its support for expanded suffrage—among white men—with the intentions of the founders, whose legacy they claimed to more purely represent than the Whigs, many of whom actually maintained positions that were more similar to the founding generation’s attitudes toward representation, sovereignty, and government.

Federalism was the key to discussions about these issues, and in the case of the colonies of the Netherlands Bancroft seized the opportunity to reconcile the past with a movement in the present that he supported. By claiming, “the spirit of the age was present when the foundations of New York were laid,” Bancroft brought the Netherlands, or, more importantly their territory in the New World, under the wing of Providence, which was to say under the protection of sacred history.²⁰³ More than mere events that contained only their face value, the processes by which New Amsterdam entered the British Empire contained important seeds of liberty that were necessary to the United States’s emergence. By invoking providence, the spirit of liberty, the same power that motivated early Virginia, Bancroft brought the antidemocratic sentiments that existed in the Netherlands—at least compared to what was happening in New England—within the fold of his Jacksonian conception of progress. Territorial expansion had always been, in Bancroft’s belief system, integral to American progress. And federalism provided the key to understanding why and to bridging the intellectual and cultural

²⁰³ Ibid.

distances that one might perceive between the otherwise disparate events of the Early Modern world.

Liberty was a complex entity for Bancroft, as sophisticated in its operation in the world as it was simple and direct in its unfolding as part of God's plan. This relationship between parts and wholes in the case of freedom was not dissimilar to the core implicit assertion of history as a discipline: events are more than isolated happenings; they are steps along the way to something greater and more significant. Just as a single occurrence could never hold the full measure of a dynamic and far ranging historical process, so the individual aspects of political institutions in the United States would only, at least for Bancroft, stand accountable as pieces of liberty once completely incorporated into Bancroft's—and the Jacksonian Democrats'—vision.

True it was that the founders and the Jacksonians disagreed over how far sovereignty should venture in the New World. But consistent American freedom was, nonetheless. Federalism, no one could deny, was integral to the function of democracy in the United States. Without representation and the division of national and local power, a complex political organism like American democracy could never function. So, although the aristocratic origins of New York appeared to bely incorporation into the narrative of American freedom from the beginning of its European settlement, "the nobles, cherishing the feudal right of resisting arbitrary taxation, [had] joined the citizens in defending national liberty against encroachments."²⁰⁴ Seigneurial aristocracy was anathema to America, but in the interests of creating a cohesive story of linear institutional progress, Bancroft incorporated feudalism, at least in the form it took in early modern North America, within the story of the United States's development. And,

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 257.

in the process, Bancroft was able to foreshadow both the development of the American Revolution in the cooperation of various states in rebellion against the British Empire, as well as in the revolutionary character of expanding suffrage to ordinary white men as stages in the progress of his country. Bancroft's narrative was powerful precisely for the inconsistencies he rubbed away by melding together disparate aspects of the past.

After discussing the seventeenth century foundations of the colonies that would one day comprise the United States, Bancroft presented his conclusions. Chief among his contentions at the end of the second volume of the *History* was: "The elements of our country, such as she exists today, were already there." But Bancroft had more to say. Establishing that the United States in its essence existed from the seventeenth century with the foundations of the earliest colonies, he continued to assert the momentous nature of the settling of North America by English speaking peoples. "The emigration of the fathers of these twelve commonwealths, with the planting of the principles on which they rested, though, like the introduction of Christianity into Rome, but little regarded by contemporary writers, was the most momentous event of the seventeenth century."²⁰⁵ The comparison of the United States to, not only Rome, but to the Christianization of Rome, was telling. For, it was one of Bancroft's key messages that the American nation represented the redemption of Europe, and therefore of civilization.

This contention about the redemptive character of the United States, specifically in relation to European civilization—which Bancroft imagined was the only true civilization—brought into the foreground again the problem of emigration. What came from Europe to America that transformed the latter into a productive, wholesome

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 452-53.

territory, while avoiding the former's errors? Bancroft minced no words on this account. "Nothing came from Europe but a free people," he wrote.²⁰⁶ Enumerating the parts of Europe that remained behind, Bancroft was also clear. "The feudal aristocracy had accomplished its mission in Europe; it could not gain new life among the equal hardships of the wilderness." Feudalism and its class stratification had served a purpose for a time, in Bancroft's mind, safeguarding the spirit of liberty in some bizarre way. But there was no room for feudal institutions in the New World and its new world order. "Priestcraft did not emigrate," Bancroft claimed. "To the forests of America, religion came as a companion."²⁰⁷ Guilds were equally absent. And there were no "baronial castles." In Bancroft's words, there was just the people. And Bancroft referred to the people in the singular; they were, for him, a monolithic presence. "The people, separating itself from all other elements of previous civilization; the people, self-confiding and industrious; the people, wise by all traditions that favored popular happiness—the people alone broke away from European influence, and in the New World laid the foundations of our republic. The people alone were present in power."²⁰⁸ Bancroft compared the American people to the Israelites. He wrote that they were granted a kind of enlightenment—"the pattern of the tabernacle...the new gospel of freedom"—and that America was the site of this new building, this message of revelation.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 453.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 454.

Thus, Bancroft lay the foundations for his broader contention that the United States represented the literal word of God—divinity come down to earth, not as man, not as word, but as political institution. This transfiguration of the divine was key to Bancroft's narrative about the United States, and a perfect example of the conflation of diachronic and synchronic, or providential and prophetic time. And the people were central. They were the political institutions. And embodying the politics of God enabled the Americans, from the first settlers, to have a right to the territory of the New World, so that they might make the United States fulfill the wishes of providence. At this juncture, Bancroft took the opportunity to assert the racial character of "the people." "The immense majority of American families were not of 'the high folk of Normandie,' but were of 'the low men,' who were Saxons." Bancroft clarified that "this is true of New England; it is true of the south." And, lest his reader grow confused, Bancroft specified what exactly being an Anglo Saxon meant. "The Anglo-Saxon mind," he wrote, "in its serenest nationality, neither distorted by fanaticism, nor subdued by superstition, nor wounded by persecution...but fondly cherishing the active instinct for personal freedom, secure possession, and legislative power...had made its dwelling place in the empire of Powhatan."²¹⁰ The American people were an Anglo Saxon people, and this meant a purity of ideas and institutions that justified the seizure of land from those with inferior ideas and institutions, who were thus of an inferior race.

Bancroft listed topics that he was preparing to address in the second volume of the *History*. He mentioned the Quakers, the Dutch, and the slave trade. But, he

²¹⁰ Ibid.

professed, “The general topic of the Indian race wins me most of all.”²¹¹ Bancroft’s interest in Native Americans as central subjects of his historical narrative had origins in his upbringing in the United States, yes, but also in his education in Europe, which had prepared him to place non-Western civilizations in a deep historical context.

After the publication of the first volume of Bancroft’s *History*, Everett wrote a positive review in the *North American Review*. Bancroft appreciated the effort. He later wrote Everett to tell him how much the latter’s words meant to him. “If I had not steeled my heart against all weakness, I should have shed tears of delight as I read it [the review].” Bancroft continued in the same letter to explain to Everett why praise from him meant so much. In essence, Bancroft provided a history of the two men’s relationship. “From my earliest years,” Bancroft proclaimed, “you have been a sort of good genius to me.” Bancroft credited Everett’s intelligence and example with inspiring him to aspire to greatness. Indeed, Bancroft claimed that he remembered discussing with Everett during the former’s Göttingen days, “devoting myself to the pursuit of history,” something that Bancroft maintained had since singularly occupied him: “and for sixteen years my main purpose in life has been unchanged.”²¹² Clearly, Everett’s example and Bancroft’s friendship with the slightly older man had proved instrumental in promoting the importance of letters in Bancroft’s life.

After reading Everett’s review of Bancroft’s work, one could excuse Bancroft for his enthusiastic reception of Everett’s words. The review offered extremely strong praise. “The work of Mr. Bancroft is one of the ablest of the class, which has for years

²¹¹ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 29 December 1834, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²¹² George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 8 January 1835, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

appeared in the English language...it compares advantageously with the standard British historians...it does such justice to its noble subject as to supersede the necessity of any future work of the same kind.” To assert that no one would need to write another history of the United States because Bancroft had done such a fine job was perhaps the highest congratulations to Bancroft that anyone could possibly offer. But Everett continued, arguing that “if completed as commenced, [it] will unquestionably forever be regarded both as an American and as an English classic.”²¹³ The most interesting aspect of Everett’s praise for Bancroft’s work was his repeated assertion that Bancroft had written something that not only served American audiences well, but that also competed on comparable merit with any work done in the English language—i.e., with British writing. That Bancroft would appreciate such a comparison despite his history of discounting English letters in contrast to German intellectual work was curious. Yet, the praise clearly resonated with Bancroft.

The praise Everett lavished upon Bancroft’s work proved especially striking in light of the political differences between the two men. Everett, like most of the Boston Brahmin class to which Bancroft belonged by birth and education, was a Whig, indeed, a leader in the party. Bancroft, meanwhile, had rebelled from his roots, friends, and mentors, and become a Democrat. Bancroft, in an oration in 1835, offered the public a partisan attack against what he called, “Whiggism.” Calling the difference between Whiggism and Democracy “a difference as great as between pride and benevolence,” Bancroft claimed that “The Whig rests for his support on material interests, Democracy on morality and mind.” Always an opponent of materialism, Bancroft continued to depict

²¹³ “Review: Bancroft’s History of the United States,” *The North American Review* 40, no. 86 (1835): 99-122.

the whigs as a party of wealth and privilege, anti-humanistic in values and purpose: The Whig rests for his support on material interests.” Meanwhile, Democrats depended on “morality and mind.” In other words, “The Whig respects men with their possessions; Democracy cherishes naked humanity.” Bancroft called the Democratic Party the party of “hope and reform.” He allied his political convictions to his vision of historical progress that he clearly laid out in his historical work. Yet, Everett praised the *History*. National themes of American greatness transcended Jacksonian Era partisanship.

Bancroft’s enthusiastic reception of Everett’s positive comparison of his work with English authors revealed a dynamic relationship between American and British letters. America was an upstart nation. Barely half a century old at the time of the publication of Bancroft’s *History*, the United States had, in the not too distant past, suffered a territorial invasion at the hands of the British. For a young country still attempting to demonstrate its distinctness and separation from its former colonial metropole, producing products of a comparable quality was important. And, just as American manufacturing competed with British counterparts, so American literary production existed in a competitive relationship with British letters. Bancroft’s dismissal of British works during the previous decade when he had formed the idea of writing a history of the United States thus appeared not so much as a forthright assessment of English scholarship, but rather as a somewhat anxious and competitive positioning.

Bancroft advised others to avoid the trappings of their immediate surroundings, and to instead consider the broader contours of history when they made decisions. In a speech before students at Brown University in 1839, Bancroft claimed, “Life is but an eager pursuit of present advantages...And thus it comes that social intercourse

degenerates into an exchange of vices; and existence itself is made the victim to the avidity for personal advancement.” Denouncing selfishness, Bancroft wrote that he was sure his audience would agree with him that intelligence was superior to wealth, and mind to material power. He asked the young men to be champions of inquiry, and Bancroft grounded these concepts in his overarching theory of “freedom of mind.”²¹⁴

In Bancroft’s explanation of freedom of mind to his young audience, he brought together intellectual themes from his biography, demonstrating a coherent view or philosophical perspective on the world. “Freedom of mind,” Bancroft wrote, “implies the existence of a spiritual power in man.” He continued, “It implies already from its very nature an emancipation from the despotism of the senses.” What Bancroft meant by these remarks was that freedom of mind was mental activity on a high level. “Freedom of mind,” he proclaimed, “implies the spirit of active inquiry, busy in every direction, sending itself forth into the wide universe, scanning things visible, and communing with things unseen. Honor,” Bancroft concluded, “shuns all but those who struggle for the prize.” The part about “communing with things unseen” was especially important, since Bancroft also remarked that freedom of mind meant having faith and looking inward for the true source of morality. Indeed, far from being averse to religion, freedom of mind was its “sincerest ally.”²¹⁵ Bancroft believed, as he believed in the power of democracy and the movement of the people’s will, that “emancipating the soul” from all other concerns save for free exploration would lead to the right conclusions. For Bancroft, therefore, freedom of mind was not exactly belief in multiple and equivalent truths, but

²¹⁴ George Bancroft, “A Plea for Freedom of Mind, in an oration delivered before the Philemenian Society in Brown University,” 4 September 1839, George Bancroft Papers, New York Public Library.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

rather an act of faith in Providence to reveal the truth to those who listened and worked to understand.

A year later, at the New York Lyceum, Bancroft gave another oration that connected his view of freedom of mind with his philosophy of history. In his lecture on a universal history, as the papers labeled the address, Bancroft discussed “the idea of a universal history—that is, a history not merely of individual and distinct nations, but embracing the fortunes, progress and destinies of the human race, as of one family.”²¹⁶ Bancroft united his vision of freedom of mind with his characterization of historical progress by periodizing the breadth of human history. He began with an analysis of mankind before the Biblical flood, depicting the era as one of selfishness and materialism. Next, came the Greco Roman period, a time of force and war. Then, there was the age of Christ, when “true religion” became established. The Anglo-Saxon race and the advent of modern commerce followed. And the most recent stage had begun with the discovery and colonization of the Americas. “From all this he deduced,” and the papers reported, “an argument to show the gradual development of reason, and a tendency towards perfect freedom of mind which will surely promote truth, justice, social order, and purity of religion.”²¹⁷ Bancroft bound up his concept of freedom of mind with a linear vision of historical progress. It was an achievement that his contemporaries viewed as farsighted, yet timely as well, since the United States clearly, in their minds, embodied the latest and most advanced stage of history and thus of human development.

Conclusion

²¹⁶ “Mr. Bancroft’s Lecture Upon Universal History,” in *The New York Sun*, 24 December 1840.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

During the same decade that Bancroft published the first three volumes of his history, the texts that most closely fixated on the origins of the United States in a deep, largely European past, Alexis de Tocqueville summarized the situation for his generation with brilliantly clear diction. In the introduction to the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835, Tocqueville wrote: “A great democratic revolution is taking place among us: all see it.”²¹⁸ Furthermore, Tocqueville, like Bancroft, credited America with a unique role in the unfolding democratic revolution. “Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States,” Tocqueville wrote, “none struck my eye more vividly than the equality of conditions.”

Tocqueville called equality of conditions “the generative fact from which each particular fact seemed to issue,” which, for the French author and statesman, meant that all the institutions in America proceeded from the inexorable progress of the “democratic revolution” that Tocqueville claimed, “appeared to me to be advancing rapidly toward power in Europe.”²¹⁹ The United States, in Tocqueville’s analysis represented the future of history. For Bancroft, in the earliest volumes of his long, overarching study, America was the future, yes, but only because it ruled the past in its inevitable rise. And the seeds, the germs, of that ascendancy lay in Europe’s feudal past, while their manifestation was in the present. The past was diachronic time; the present, a timeless, synchronic moment. Together, the past and the author’s perspective in writing about that past, if, as Bancroft wrote he intended in true Tacitian fashion, *sine ira et studio*, formed a complete dialectic, the view of God that Tocqueville ultimately used to judge his generation. For the French aristocrat, “what seems to me decadence

²¹⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 3.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

is therefore progress,” because “what most satisfied the regard of this creator [of history]...is not the singular prosperity of some, but the greatest well-being of all... Equality is perhaps less elevated; but it is more just, and its justness makes for its greatness and its beauty.”²²⁰ Bancroft, a regular correspondent with Tocqueville, could not have agreed more earnestly—although, he did so without any of Tocqueville’s regret. The next chapter explores how this lack of doubt in democracy unfolded politically in the United States with the benefit of Bancroft’s *History* as an ideological tool.

²²⁰ Ibid., 674-675.

Chapter 4

The *History* as a Political Tool

Bancroft's *History* created a deep precedent—institutional context and justification—for political institutions in nineteenth century America. Once crafted into a narrative, the events that formed the basis for Bancroft's writing were available to politicians of every persuasion for use to justify their causes. And, although there was a broad liberal consensus in America, there were significant differences in the interpretations of capitalism, especially over the form that capital should take, and over the dynamics between capital and labor. Bancroft existed at the nexus of political disputes as a person of means and action, energetically engaged in many aspects of life during the Jacksonian Era.

The *History* received broad approbation, but Bancroft's inclinations brought him into a particularly close relationship with one party, in particular—the Democrats. Bancroft's transition from a son of Boston to a proponent of populism in American life brought him into conflict with his peers in New England, but also presented him with the opportunity to wield considerable leverage as an oddball politician and man of letters. What Bancroft did in his writing above all provided a legitimacy to the expansion of Germanic language democracy and economics in North America, at the expense of the interests of Latin Americans and Native Americans.

The Structural Effects of Bancroft's Thought

How did George Bancroft's *History* function as a text in its original context?

Answering this question requires considering the dynamics of what historians refer to as the Second Party System of the United States. Texts are, perhaps above all, political entities, the docile counterparts of hard power, and, despite pretensions to the contrary on his part, it was in the midst of politics that Bancroft's historical method originated.

Ironically, although historians of the early 19th century had more faith than any other historians since that they wrote without bias, Bancroft wielded his pen with what was in fact considerable prejudice. The text that Bancroft created amounted to the political conscience of an era. Bancroft's *History* appealed to members of the Democratic as well as the Whig Party because he encapsulated the concerns of the American state at that moment in time into a narrative about the country's past.

What were these imperatives that occupied Bancroft and his contemporaries? Despite considerable disagreement about the period, historians of the Second Party System agree that three fundamental forces shaped the era: the rise of mass democracy, the struggle to define racial ideology, and the intensifying development of capitalism. Disputes occur when historians subordinate one process to another in terms of primacy, but these categories have stood out in the period's secondary literature as the major problems for discussion.

During the Age of Jackson, the American state developed from a neoclassical republic into a modern capitalist power. The state shifted from at least nominally defending the civics of Enlightenment republican thought to explicitly structuring the growth of modern capitalism. The interests of capital pervaded the United States. Indeed, even the internal differences that led to the Civil War unfolded as rival forms of

capitalism—competing modes of labor. Northern interests centered on protecting what was ostensibly a free form of work: the pursuit of a wage in order to avoid destitution, starvation and, ultimately, death. While Southern interests defended a slave system that involved work for a master in order to avoid familial separation by being sold, the lash, or execution. The slave system was explicitly racialized, but both labor ideologies—although, to be sure, slavery was categorically more brutal—relied on similar racial hierarchies. American citizens believed that Germanic language peoples would inevitably be the owners and managers in the capitalist economy. Structurally, democracy in America amounted to the method for choosing the specific rulers who would supervise the actualization of this racial ideology in forms of work. Thus, in the final analysis, there was a preponderant conclusion that the American pursuit of surplus value required the exclusive ability of the United States to exploit or remove Native American and Latin American peoples from power in North America—if not remove them from the land, period.

According to this model, the work of the American state was to deploy the mechanisms necessary to obtain the physical and moral capital that capitalism required in order to evolve. Fundamentally, this meant three things: the monopoly of resources along racial lines through competition with foreign powers; the making and maintenance of the internal improvements necessary to extract surplus value from these resources; and the institutionalization of the racial hierarchy that was ultimately responsible for creating the structural possibility of surplus value through an exploitative labor system.

In the end, the reproduction of racial hierarchy during the Second Party System required the creation and entrenchment of a particular historical consciousness, and it

was here that Bancroft intervened. The racism in the United States responsible for maintaining the relations of production in American capitalism had to appear natural and inevitable in order to prevail—at least in Americans' consciences. Of course, the United States was hardly exceptional in this regard; it had simply coopted the racial worldview common to all Western imperialisms. The racial ideology of the nineteenth century's nascent nationalism was intensely historical in nature, and George Bancroft's *History of the United States* manifested this historicism to his American, as well as European, audiences. According to Bancroft, the extension of democratic and capitalist political economy Westward was the glorious duty of Germanic peoples who would replace Native Americans and Latin Americans in North America. He referred to this process as Providence's seeding of the Americas with the germs of Teutonic political institutions.

But how could one ever reconcile revolutions of progress in industrial capitalism and participatory democracy with the institutionalization of racism? For historians, as well as nineteenth century people like Bancroft, the concern has been how to deal with the victims of racism. Whether progress took the form of a narrative fable about the past's movement toward some utopian future, or whether progress amounted to a journalistic description of the present as the realization of a utopian vision, victims of racial ideology were obstacles to the clean representation of progress.

Structurally, therefore, in the context of American capitalism the victims of racial ideology were in the way. Or, put more precisely, their agency was in the way. African Americans resisted being enslaved. Native Americans and Latin Americans wanted to stay on land that Anglo-Americans coveted. And the issue of internal improvements served as the catalyst for major disputes about these issues. Knitting the country

together more tightly forced greater numbers of people into the same space. This exacerbated the potential for ethnic conflict. The reach of steam-powered travel and Atlantic capital into the lands of the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw, for example, created the circumstances necessary for Indian removal to achieve traction as a national policy

The History in the Midst of Second Party System Politics

The Democratic Party, in general, favored expansion. Its leader, Andrew Jackson, implemented Indian removal even after the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional. Whigs generally opposed Native American removal and expansion into territory claimed by Latin Americans. Instead, the Whig Party favored a policy of consolidation of national resources by implementing the core ideas of Henry Clay's American System: protective tariffs to encourage manufacturing; infrastructure investment to increase the efficiency of transportation throughout the country; and a national bank to create a stable and universal currency.

Bancroft's life came to embody the struggles of the era. Once Bancroft married into the Dwight banking family in the late 1820s, he found himself living national political disputes. In his capacity as the family agent to the city of Washington, as well as to the nation's Western hinterland, Bancroft experienced the different imperatives that shaped the period. He knew the reluctance that some private entrepreneurs felt about adopting a national bank, but he also understood that stronger infrastructure within the republic would spur economic growth.

By the early 1830s, Bancroft had sided with the Democratic Party. Doing so brought him into conflict with his in-laws and alienated him from his father's Unitarian

friends and from most of his former classmates at Harvard. And Bancroft was unique in his intellectual background for choosing the Democrats over the Whigs. Indeed, one of his later biographers titled his book, *George Bancroft, Brahmin Rebel*, and another biography's title was, *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat*. However, what these works allowed to go unnoticed was the fact that Bancroft's politics, while different from those of many of his neighbors and colleagues, were hardly ironic when paired with his intellectual labors. Bancroft's historical sensibilities, his parallel teleology of racial and political development, in particular, shaped his reactions to contemporary events.

Bancroft's education in the German states during the late 1810s and early 1820s, as well as the significant amount of time he spent in Paris, inflected his education in Harvard Unitarian moral philosophy with German historicism. In the early nineteenth century, historicism encompassed ideas about human origins that would later find their way into the disciplines of anthropology and geography. Bancroft's sense of history also included a fascination with linguistics. Growing from his relationship with Wilhelm von Humboldt, whom he met while studying at the University of Berlin, Bancroft's interest in what languages revealed about a people influenced his views on North American politics.

Once he set his sights on writing a narrative of American origins, Bancroft's writing garnered significant attention. For example, in a letter to Bancroft in 1834, John C. Calhoun, a complicated figure in American governance who sided with his region more than with a political party, wrote, "I am gratified to learn that you are engaged in the history of our country. It is a noble theme; and worthy of a life of labour and study to

be executed in a manner suitable to its dignity.” Calhoun continued, expounding on the importance of American history as a subject. He wrote, “Our political history is, as yet, unwritten. It affords matter of the profoundest interest, not only to ourselves, but to the world.”²²¹ High praise and serious notice from one of the leading men in America during the 1830s.

Calhoun’s remarks revealed something important about the role of Bancroft’s *History*’s place in American life when, in the same letter, Calhoun mentioned speeches he had given a few years prior. Calhoun’s interaction with Bancroft thus warrants closer examination. There was an idea implicit in Calhoun’s words that the history Bancroft was writing would serve Calhoun well. From its inception, Bancroft’s *History* had intellectual consumers who placed importance on the volumes, publicly praising the scholarship in hopes that the history revealed therein would vindicate their political positions.

The speeches that Calhoun mentioned concerned the controversies over the limits of federal and state powers that erupted to the fore of national politics during Jackson’s first presidential term. In the *South Carolina Exposition*, Calhoun famously defended the interests of Southern staple producing and exporting states against the attempts by the federal Congress to impose tariffs in order to protect the young manufacturing industries in Northern states. In an attack on Henry Clay, Calhoun’s senatorial nemesis, Calhoun wrote that the attempts to impose a federal order that benefitted Northern states on the backs of Southern states, “may be comprehended under three heads, the custom house, the appropriations and the monopoly of the

²²¹ John C. Calhoun to George Bancroft, 29 June 1834, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

manufactures...all of which are so intimately blended as to constitute one system, which its advocates, by a perversion of all that is associated with the name, call the American System.”²²² An obvious attack on Clay, Calhoun made it clear that there was no conflict in his mind between allegiance to nation and to individual state.

Indeed, it was in Calhoun’s concern over the use of the term, “American,” by his opponents that Calhoun thought that Bancroft’s *History* might prove particularly useful. Calhoun worried about a betrayal of America: “In the absence of argument drawn from the Constitution itself the advocates of the power have attempted to call in the aid of precedent,” Calhoun wrote. But, he continued, “ours is not a government of precedents, nor can they be admitted except to a very limited extent and with great caution in the interpretation of the Constitution, without changing in time the entire character of the instrument.”²²³ In Bancroft, Calhoun hoped to find a source of surety about the character of the United States—from the nation’s deepest beginnings—that would support his conclusions about the exercise of federal and state powers.

There was an interesting contradiction, though, in Calhoun’s dismissal of “precedent” and in his belief in a historically accurate understanding of the Constitution—which was to say, of America. To understand how the dichotomy made perfect sense to Calhoun, as well as why he looked with hope to Bancroft’s historical scholarship, we must look to the conflated temporal axis of diachronic and synchronic time that characterized Bancroft’s *History*. Diachronically, there were events, events, and still more events—what Calhoun recognized as precedence. Enough events existed to

²²² John C. Calhoun, quoted in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun, Vol. X, 1825-1829*, ed. by Clyde N. Wilson and W. Edwin Hemphill (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), page 462.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 446.

provide historical justification for virtually any position. But when placed alongside the singular synchronic narrative of American national development, only some events—a pattern—emerged as viable objects to invoke in the name of political authority.

The banking debates of the early-nineteenth-century offered an excellent example of the distinction Calhoun drew between mere events and steps in the path of history's true course. Calhoun confronted a situation that virtually every politician faces eventually: he needed to ignore or undo precedent that the opposition had established in order to enact his agenda. The bifurcated temporal axis of diachronic and synchronic time was a useful tool for Calhoun—and in this he was only exemplary—to employ in the pursuit of his own, different agenda. Specifically, in regard to the national bank, Calhoun in theory supported the financial security offered by a system of centralized, national finance. His support of the sub treasury bill of 1838 illustrated this point. But in one of his most famous speeches, a retort to Daniel Webster in defense of the sub treasury bill, Calhoun relied on the conception of split time that Bancroft's narrative modeled. Distinguishing between ordinary events, mere happenings, and real events of monumental importance because they indicated the march of progress allowed Calhoun to recognize the victories that his opponents had enjoyed in the bank wars—most notably in the Nullification Crisis of 1833 when Calhoun's home state, South Carolina, suffered the indignation of a federal fiat to comply with national financial policy in the form of tariffs—while at the same time giving Calhoun the excuse to insert his own views of striking a balance between national financial security and states' rights as the truly just cause.

And, indeed, Calhoun—like virtually anyone with political conviction—believed that the bank wars constituted a monumental moment in time. In a letter he wrote to Bancroft during the spring of 1838, the apex of the political debate that culminated in a vote on a revised subtreasury bill that contained provisions Calhoun inserted to protect slavery, Calhoun expressed his sense of the importance of his actions. “The struggle in which we are engaged,” Calhoun wrote, “is one of the greatest civil contests in modern time...It bears on all the relations and interests of society, moral, intellectual, political, and commercial.”²²⁴ Calhoun in effect notified Bancroft that there was more at stake than mere politicking; in the proceedings in Congress, the men witnessed history unfolding.

Calhoun marked the bank wars as historically significant using Bancroft’s historical logic. Only because the banking legislation affected America’s political institutions did the struggle constitute a true historical moment—an event. Calhoun wrote that what his opposition had achieved in their earlier victories and sought to realize in the present was “Not simply the going out of one party and the coming in of another; not merely the expulsion of the administration and the induction of the opposition; but a great political revolution, carrying with it the fundamental principles of the government and a permanent change of policy.”²²⁵ By this revolution, Calhoun meant that the nature of the American Republic was under threat of radical change. Victory for his opposition—in this case, Webster—according to Calhoun, “would have brought in the senator and [emphasis on and] his consolidation doctrines, which regard

²²⁴ John C. Calhoun to George Bancroft, 14 April 1838, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²²⁵ John C. Calhoun, *Speeches of John Calhoun: Delivered in the Congress of the United States from 1811 to the Present Time* (Harper and Brothers, 1843), 330.

this government as one great National Republic, with the right to construe finally and conclusively the extent of its own powers, and to enforce its construction at the point of the bayonet.” His opposition’s victory, Calhoun feared, would, “at a blow sweep away every vestige of state rights, and reduce the states to mere petty and dependent corporations.”²²⁶ It was the change in the character of government in America, of the temporal embodiment of the timeless ideal of liberty, that signaled to Calhoun—or, rather, that allowed him to signal to Bancroft—that history, more than happenstance, was afoot.

Racial Ideas in a Political Context: Displacing Indians and Mexicans

The key domestic issue of the 1830s, in addition to the national bank, was Indian removal. The Cherokee, in particular, sat on land that Anglo Americans coveted. However, while other tribes had refused or had been unable to fully adapt to European horticulture, the Cherokee—along with their sister tribes—had mastered plantation agriculture. Cherokee planters lived in handsome brick houses. Cherokee property included mills and other industrial forms of labor. Cherokee people owned African American slaves. The argument that Indians were savages thus failed to explain the Cherokee, even at the crudely visceral level that European Americans used to justify other displacements of indigenous populations—by remarking on the material differences between the races.

It was at this point that Bancroft’s historicism became important to the proponents of Native American relocation. Bancroft’s first volume of the *History* appeared during key years of the Jacksonian Democrats’ Indian removal program. When Bancroft first mentioned Native Americans, discussing the initial contact with Europeans that had

²²⁶ Ibid.

taken place in the 15th and 16th centuries, he wrote that they were a people without a future. Bancroft thus implicitly lumped all native peoples together into a common and pejorative category. During the same time, Bancroft was in correspondence with German men of letters who were doing work with Indian languages. Bancroft devoted space in the *History* to discussion of Native American language, describing it as overly “synthetic” in character, and thus innately inferior—which he read as proof that the people who had created the language were lesser beings. Over a decade earlier, Bancroft had written in his journals from Gottingen and Berlin that Native American language lacked the vigor and strength of the Germanic and even of the Latin languages. Echoing some of his German instructors, Bancroft indicated his acceptance of the theory that all thought and intelligence developed from the sexual passions and that Native Americans were therefore incapable of understanding higher forms of knowledge. If the economics of the Cherokee peoples failed to embody European notions of racial hierarchy that placed Indians in a lower form of existence, then German romantic philosophy proved capable of serving as the basis for a theory of Native American inferiority.

For, Bancroft was more than another politician in the Democratic Party. He served as a source of moral advice, beyond the mere discussion of advantages and disadvantages involved in jockeying for power at the state and national levels. The distinction that Bancroft held appeared prominently in discussions of slavery during the 1830s and 40s. In late 1837, Marcus Morton, the Democratic governor of Massachusetts, wrote to Bancroft to discuss appointments in the state—of which Bancroft became the beneficiary once he was made collector of the port of Boston—and

at the same time solicited Bancroft's advice about what he referred to as "a matter merely personal." Morton revealed that he had received questions from the press about slavery, and he wanted Bancroft's help in articulating and, even more fundamentally, in deciding on a response. In Morton's words, "I wish for your advice as to the time and manner of doing it [giving his answer to the questions about slavery]."²²⁷ Morton was specific about what he wanted to discover from Bancroft, breaking the topic of slavery into component questions:

1. The influences of slavery.
2. The right of petition and the freedom of speech of the press.
3. The powers of Congress to abolish slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia and the territories.
4. The power of Congress to prohibit the slave trade between the several states.
5. The propriety and expediency of the immediate exercise of these powers.
6. The admission of new states with the power to hold slaves.
7. The admission of Texas into the Union.
8. The propriety and expediency of instructing...our senators and representatives upon these subjects.

The comprehensiveness of Morton's questions for Bancroft indicated that the latter was regarded as a true authority on the subject, not merely as an issue of pressing concern, but as a historical and moral question.

Bancroft's writing also informed important iconography from the period, art that visually embodied the American state's view of Indians. John Gadsby Chapman's

²²⁷ Marcus Morton to George Bancroft, 7 December 1837, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

painting, *The Baptism of Pocahontas*, created on commission for the rotunda of the Capital Building in Washington, drew directly from Bancroft's text. Indeed, Chapman was serving as the illustrator for Bancroft's first three volumes of the *History* when he painted this particular work. He had recently completed paintings of John Smith that also drew from Bancroft's depiction of events from the 16th century. The painting, which was hung in the rotunda in 1840, placed Pocahontas in a white gown in the center of a multiethnic gathering of peoples. Pocahontas devoutly knelt her head and, clothed in white, appeared to join the Europeans and to disappear from the Indian narrative. The Native Americans in the picture either gazed in awe at Pocahontas or stared



Chapman, *The Baptism of Pocahontas*, 1839

absentmindedly away from the scene. Save for the priest in the center by the Indian princess, all the European men bore arms. None of the Native Americans possessed weapons. Bancroft described Pocahontas as an effervescent, angelic creature, notable for her role in aiding European men in their conquest. Hung in the capital the same

decade as the trail of tears, *The Baptism of Pocahontas*²²⁸ represented the official enshrinement at the center of American power the story about the past that Bancroft wrote.

Bancroft wrote history with the belief that it was his duty to find and discern the absolute truth. Ultimately, truth for Bancroft transcended time and was a moral matter, but it was also inextricably linked to the historical record. Bancroft believed that in history Providence revealed its designs and its laws. The historian was thus in a unique position to discern higher meaning. Not unlike a priest or a prophet, the historian, through the pen, was an enunciator of the divine.

This belief about history and historians was intimately connected to a method of investigation commonly called positivism. Nineteenth-century historians like Bancroft understood their duty to be enumerating and ordering events through the power of narrative. There was little room for interpretation, they believed; the facts spoke for themselves. Thus, in preparing his notes, Bancroft simply listed dates and what had happened on those dates. Then, he wrote these facts into a narrative. Stylistically, the information was held together by regular references to Providence, the very reason that Bancroft felt that writing history mattered in the first place.

When the *North American Review* considered the merits of Bancroft's *History* after its publication in 1834, the conclusion was that Bancroft had written an exemplary piece of history. The reviewer, who was Edward Everett, praised Bancroft for his impartiality. He wrote: "But the classical historian, in composing the history of his own country, rises above either passion; and devotes himself to his great work, both sine ira

²²⁸ John Gadsby Chapman, *The Baptism of Pocahontas*, 1839. Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Gadsby_Chapman#/media/File:Baptism_of_Pocahontas.jpg

et studio.” Everett continued, writing, “He is elevated above both, by the generous conception, which he forms of his province; one of the most noble in the world of mind. He is the instrument of Providence, to award to good men, who in times past have served or adorned his native land, their just meed of praise.”²²⁹ The Latin phrase, “sine ira et studio,” means “without hate and zealousness.” Associated with the Roman historian Tacitus, the concept encapsulated the notions of impartiality that Bancroft embraced. This review of Bancroft’s work also underscored the importance that men of letters in the United States and Europe attached to classical precedent. The goal of history writing for Bancroft was partly to maintain through his work the same standards for letters as the great writers of antiquity. In this way, the act of writing history could itself be an agent of progress, just as the historical narratives that the author constructed chronicled the advancement of progress through the actions of others.

It is also important to remember that Bancroft was admired for his patriotism. The same article praised Bancroft for honoring his country. The reviewer wrote, “No man can write the history of a foreign country, with a sufficient passion for his theme; and it would be a degenerate people, who would leave to foreigners to write their history.”²³⁰ In writing the history of the United States, Bancroft was performing a civic function. He was serving his nation as Livy had served Rome. Indeed, the article drew a direct comparison between the national historians of the 19th century like Bancroft and the leading Roman historians of the Classical Era.

Commensurate with the Romantic ethos that permeated literature of the early nineteenth century, Bancroft was lauded for bringing passion to his work. The reviewer

²²⁹ “Review: Bancroft’s History of the United States,” *The North American Review* 40, no. 86 (1835): 101.

²³⁰ Ibid.

argued that feeling was as necessary to sound judgment as careful study. Indeed, emotion was more important: “The writer, who would produce a classical history, must carry his heart to the task.” But, just as importantly, “While learning instructs and judgment guides him, a lofty patriotism must take possession of his soul. He must embrace his whole subject with an enthusiastic love; and in this way, in the all but inspired language of Burke, ‘his passion must instruct his reason.’”²³¹ Of course, the reviewer also made clear that there was no conflict between passion, patriotism, and impartiality. Conflict of interest was in no way inevitable. The author, however, made it clear that he would not have history turned into a “panegyric.”²³² He also acknowledged that when a historian became obsessed with some little part of history and made it the object of their study the result was often biased and unsatisfactory. But these were ultimately problems that accompanied circumscribed narratives that avoided grand themes. In his *History*, Bancroft approached the United States as the front line in the struggle for civilization. America was the new Israel, and Americans were the trustees of the covenant made between God and the Hebrews. It was a story that transcended the assumptions and concerns of partisanship.

Bancroft maintained friendly relations with people across the political spectrum. While not unusual in and of itself, his willingness and ability to draw on different sources of inspiration and collaboration was striking. The Whig politician and Unitarian theologian, Edward Everett, Bancroft’s old schoolmate had always been important to Bancroft intellectually and personally. Bancroft acknowledged this in a letter written early in 1845 when he wrote that Everett had, from his boyhood been a “good genius”

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 101.

for him.²³³ Everett had paved the way for Bancroft's European studies and had mentored him during his early years as a writer. So, it was fitting that Bancroft thank Everett for writing a favorable review of his first significant work and that the praise carry considerable weight with him.

Bancroft's relationship with a mutual friend of Everett's, Ralph Waldo Emerson, further indicated the popularity of Bancroft's *History* in Whig circles. Connections with Emerson also demonstrated the trans-Atlantic extent of Bancroft's literary aspirations. Emerson approved of Bancroft's historical work. He applauded Bancroft for the same high standards of composition that Everett pinpointed in his generous review. This approbation made sense considering that Bancroft had drawn from Emerson's knowledge base to discuss a significant aspect of the *History*, namely the providential character of the Puritan settlements in Connecticut. But Emerson made another contribution as well, introducing Bancroft to the British historian and statesman Thomas Carlyle when the latter visited the United States. Bancroft's relationship with Carlyle acquired greater significance when Bancroft served as foreign minister to Great Britain during the late 1840s, but even in the mid 1830s the existence of such a relationship was in and of itself noteworthy. Carlyle, a Scot was affiliated with the esteemed literary and philosophical circles of Edinburgh, long the exemplar for Boston people of letters, and was highly esteemed in Europe for his literary efforts.²³⁴

Bancroft's participation in politics as an advocate of the potential of workingmen also served to underscore his broad appeal. His Whig friends, William Hickling Prescott

²³³ George Bancroft to Edward Everett, 8 January 1845, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²³⁴ George Bancroft to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 29 February 1836, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to George Bancroft, 6 November 1836, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

for example, disapproved of Bancroft's dabbling in politics, especially on the side of workers. Prescott encouraged Bancroft to give up political and social advocacy in any form—other than history writing, if that could be considered activism—referring to Bancroft's non-literary activities as objects beneath the historian's dignity. Prescott, a renowned historian in his own right and the son of a wealthy Boston family, saw in Bancroft's Democratic political leanings a sign of, as he put it, poor taste. But this judgment was by definition the product of an opinion that Bancroft warranted respect and serious consideration as a man of letters.

Friends of the workingmen, however, were equally enthusiastic about Bancroft's literary abilities. George Dickinson, one of Bancroft's pro-workingmen correspondents, solicited a speech from Bancroft on the nature of democracy. Dickinson sought Bancroft's help because he believed that Bancroft's historical work was completed in an exemplary manner, patriotically and intellectually.²³⁵ Orestes Brownson, perhaps the most prominent advocate for workingmen, explicitly labeled Bancroft's work as above any politics. Regarding the oration that Bancroft delivered on behalf of the workingmen in Massachusetts at the behest of Dickinson, Brownson wrote that he saw more than party politics; he perceived a social philosophy. In his words, the oration unfolded as more than the product of a politician. Brownson perceived in it "the philosopher of humanity."²³⁶ Brownson added that he was surprised that a man of Bancroft's social background would find room for workingmen in his worldview. Regardless, he was consistent in his appraisal of Bancroft's intellectual labor as the procurer of truth.

²³⁵ George Dickinson to George Bancroft, 13 April 1835, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²³⁶ Orestes Brownson to George Bancroft, 25 September 1836, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Whatever his contemporaries thought, the idea that reporting the facts at one's disposal was the means and the end of writing history influenced the kinds of evidence that Bancroft viewed. For Bancroft, the papers of certain governments and the works of certain influential people constituted the primary sources to be consulted. Bancroft's own familiarity with the English, German, and French languages, as well as his contacts in those countries, furnished him with the sources for his history. There was no questioning whether it was problematic that Bancroft failed to include more perspectives in his work. From the sources that he chose, Bancroft constructed a timeline that reflected major shifts in the march to dominance of Germanic languages in North America.

This teleology privileged not only the United States as a nation, but also a sense of race that Bancroft simultaneously constructed and invoked in his work. This was Bancroft's key claim in the writing of history. According to Bancroft's narrative, the United States was not merely a government, or the republic for which that government stood, but rather a civilizational ideal. And civilization meant more than the manipulation of a common set of technologies; in the *History*, civilization and race were inseparable. The progress of civilization and the destiny of the chosen race were one and the same in that they manifested Providence's will for creation. In essence, Bancroft self-consciously embraced circular reasoning in his historical method. Bancroft's narrative received its epistemological justification from what it ostensibly proved: the seemingly inevitable triumph of republican government and industrial capitalism in North America. It seemed appropriate to structure the past to conform to the present. But Bancroft's narrative proved more than the inevitability of technological progress. At the heart of the

story of American origins, there was an insistence that political and scientific development occurred simultaneously with racial destiny. Indeed, beyond a mere parallel relationship, Bancroft's history positioned race as a supremely important causal factor of what he perceived to be the march of civilization.

If history was the unfolding of Providence's plan for humanity's mastery over the earth through technological change, and if one of the primary agents in this process was racial destiny, then racism acquired a sacramental, as well as a scientific character. Historians have cast phrenology as the exemplar of the construction of nineteenth-century racial hierarchies. And certainly the attempt to classify races by intelligence according to the shape of individual skulls was an important factor of some Europeans' calculations. But what was then the nascent discipline of professional history also deserves notice as a method for granting credibility to racial caste systems.

Bancroft began the history by demonstrating that the United States was part of a larger civilization. He positioned America as the inheritor of West's unique role in the world. And he supported his claim for American exceptionalism with reference to America's moral power: "At a period when the force of moral opinion is rapidly increasing, they [the United States] have the precedence in the practice and the defense of the equal rights of man."²³⁷ This assertion of America's moral supremacy underlay the succeeding paragraphs and chapters, leading to a project that when considered as a whole used evidence from America's political history to support positive conclusions about its present state and likely future.

America's supreme position contrasted what Bancroft depicted as its humble and fortuitous origins. There were no ancient foundations for government in the United

²³⁷ Bancroft, *History*, Vol. I, 1.

States: “It is but little more than two centuries, since the oldest of our states received its first permanent colony. Before that time the whole territory was an unproductive waste.” Bancroft, never one to mince words, continued, “Throughout its wide extent the arts had not erected a monument. Its only inhabitants were a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians, destitute of commerce, of political connection, and of morals. The axe and the ploughshare were unknown...In the view of civilization the immense domain was a solitude.”²³⁸

According to Bancroft, the United States, in its origins, had been a state of nature. There was nothing to build upon, but equally important, nothing that required tearing down. This impression was what Bancroft left with his readers, that America was, as a later historian has put it, the world’s first new nation. Bancroft concluded that because nothing happened by accident it had been the will of Providence for America to rise. He viewed his role as a historian as being the expositor of the United States’s exceptional destiny. His text thus acquired a sacred character.

During the time of Bancroft’s composition of the history, Native Americans and Spanish-speaking people were the obstacles to national expansion. A proponent of America’s territorial growth, Bancroft consequently portrayed the groups as inferior to the people of the United States, especially when around the other group. According to Bancroft, the Indians and the Spanish colonists mixed poorly because Spain’s avarice and the primitive nature of the Native American tribes conflicted. Spain wanted to exploit the Indians and faced little resistance.²³⁹

²³⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

²³⁹ Ibid., 61.

Bancroft contrasted the Spanish colonies with the frontier in New England when the Pilgrims arrived. Spain established settlements to produce a material profit. The early British colonists—at least those in New England—came to North America to create domestic lives that emphasized husbandry and craftsmanship. Bancroft depicted these imperatives as creating a more stable relationship between Europeans and Native Americans. Bancroft also highlighted the role of disease in destroying Native Peoples in New England. Unlike the Spanish, whose avarice enslaved and destroyed the Indians, the British colonists of Massachusetts had their way cleared for them by providential design.²⁴⁰

Bancroft clearly attributed the origins of the United States to the first British settlers of Massachusetts. He recognized that Plymouth Rock stood as a monument for posterity in honor of the beginning of New England institutions in North America. These institutions were political in nature. For Bancroft, the beginnings of the United States were in the organization of government and society that the New Englanders brought with them from the Old World.²⁴¹ The development of these institutions over time was the essence of American political development, the phenomenon that had attracted his attention from the beginning.

The new Americans' institutions contrasted with what Bancroft perceived to be the Native Americans' lack of politics. Bancroft wrote that the Indians had no political connection.²⁴² For him, politics was the existence of unifying connections between different orders of society, and without the benefit of modern anthropology. When he

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 342.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 337-38.

²⁴² Ibid., 111.

looked at Native American societies he perceived disorganization. Bancroft perceived the Indians monolithically, and he could never comprehend why Native Americans lacked European socio-political institutions. The contrast between the progressive institutions of New England with the missing institutions of the Indians and the corrupt institutions of the Spanish—and the French—served as the conflict around which Bancroft structured his *History*. The United States's past was the struggle of civilization to liberate itself from the constraints of the Old World in the free but desolate space of the New World.

Polk and Bancroft began their correspondence after the latter helped secure the former's nomination in the Democratic Party for President of the United States. In a letter written during late July 1844, Polk thanked Bancroft for his help in securing the party's nomination. Polk spoke of "feelings of sincere gratitude," essentially informing Bancroft that his services would not go unnoticed. Bancroft's services before the general election, however, were far from over in the Polk campaign's mind, for he was to write Polk's campaign autobiography, an important document for elections during the nineteenth century, since for many Americans it would be the only insight they had into the candidate. That Bancroft declined to write the biography and that Polk forgave him graciously only served to indicate the value and esteem in which he held Bancroft. Indeed, Polk's closest friends, in Washington and Tennessee, had nominated Bancroft for the task without his consent, and Polk went to great lengths in the letter to assure Bancroft that this was done without his knowledge. But leaving the door open to future

collaboration, Polk wrote that after he became “President of the Continent” he would look forward to Bancroft’s advice.²⁴³

Shortly after his election, Polk requested an “interview” with Bancroft after the inauguration. It was a graciously worded solicitation. Polk wrote that he desired to “confer” with Bancroft before making any decisions, apparently seeking the latter’s feedback before offering him an “appropriate” appointment in the new administration. And, in March, Polk sent a formal invitation.²⁴⁴ Soon after, Polk appointed Bancroft Secretary of the Navy, then a full cabinet-level position.

After serving as Secretary of the Navy, Bancroft had a brief stint—about three months—as the acting Secretary of War before he became the foreign minister to Great Britain. Once in Britain, Bancroft played a role in the negotiations between the two empires over the fate of the Oregon Territory, as well as a key relay of information about the negotiations back to Washington, where Polk could make sense of what was happening. In a March 1846 letter to Polk, Bancroft also described the preparedness of the United States’s navy to deal with the countermeasures of Mexico. Were Mexico to venture to prevent the American blockades along the Pacific Coast, Bancroft assured Polk that the American naval presence would overwhelm their efforts to reassert Mexican sovereignty over these waters.²⁴⁵

In regard to Oregon, Bancroft wrote that the negotiations were complicated, largely from the American side by the many voices that represented the United States’s

²⁴³ James Polk to George Bancroft, 20 July 1844, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁴⁴ James Polk to George Bancroft, 30 January 1845 and 20 March 1845, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁴⁵ George Bancroft to James Polk, 29 March 1846, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

position on the issues. Another reason for the confusion among the American delegation over the Oregon question was Polk's deliberate ambiguity on the matter of where and how to draw the borders. Polk wanted to acquire territory key to protecting and encouraging American settlement in the region, but he also wanted to avoid hostilities with Great Britain. In the words of the historian Daniel Howe, "A peaceful settlement with Britain over Oregon would ensure that she [Britain] would not come to Mexico's aid when he forced a showdown with that country over California."²⁴⁶ Calhoun, for his part, represented a Southern Democratic presence that was unwilling to risk any altercation with Britain over extra land in the Pacific Northwest because the South could not risk losing Britain as its most valuable market for cotton. The Whigs, meanwhile, wanted to ensure the infusion of British capital into the American financial system. So, had Polk wanted to radically extend the territory occupied by the United States in Oregon, they would have faced significant domestic obstacles.²⁴⁷ Bancroft reported on the state of these domestic political developments, but within the context of the unfolding negotiations with Britain, which were further compounded in difficulty by the latter country's own internal disputes.

A letter written in December 1846 from Bancroft to Polk from London illustrated the degree to which Bancroft was attuned to developments in the negotiations with Britain, and to the care he took to consider both sides of the Atlantic in his deliberations on the issue. What was impressive and interesting was the degree to which Bancroft appeared to be able to synthesize the respective domestic concerns of America and Britain in the shaping of his opinion on the issue of the fate of the Western Coast of

²⁴⁶ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 717.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 719.

North America, a position important to Polk's own calculations. Speaking of the danger of Northern Whig opposition coming out of New York to the potential favorable settlement of the Pacific Coast issue, Bancroft wrote: "The news from New York has astonished me." He wrote that opposition to the annexation of California was most unfortunate because "Up until this time the English people and government have looked upon it as a matter of course, that California was to come to us. If the Whigs come to their aid, they may wish a different issue."²⁴⁸ The acuity of Bancroft's ability to process political events in the United States in light of developments within the popular perceptions and government of Britain made him an invaluable member of the Polk administration, and an important component of Polk's analysis of how to handle the conflicts that roiled the world during the late 1840s, to which the United States was central.

Polk's greatest fear regarding the Oregon territory was not necessarily that Britain would obtain a greater share of the land, but that the area would become independent of either imperial power—the United States or Britain. "I hope for the best but fear the worst," Polk wrote to Bancroft in 1849, at the close of his Presidency. "My apprehensions are, that if nothing be done...there is imminent danger that California may be lost to the Union." Polk went on to enumerate why he thought this might come to pass: "My reasons are, that attracted by the recently discovered mineral wealth, and the vast commercial advantages of that country, the immigration to it will be rapid beyond any former example...This mass of people of every lineage and tongue," Polk theorized, "will be congregated together, without law or government. They cannot long

²⁴⁸ George Bancroft to James Polk, 3 December 1846, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

remain in this condition. Among them will undoubtedly be men of adventure and desperate fortunes, men of talents and ambition and men of capital.” Interestingly, it was these very men of economic minds whom Polk feared: “They will naturally form a government for themselves, will establish custom houses, and may collect a large revenue. They may style themselves the California Republic, or united Oregon, the Pacific Republic.”²⁴⁹ With the Wilmot Proviso holding up legislation for annexation of the territory in Congress, Polk feared that the centerpiece of his territorial acquisitions—the purpose of his presidency, as he had told Bancroft prior to his inauguration—would ultimately be lost to the Union.

Conclusion

In the end, of course, the United States succeeded in imposing its political authority over an area in the Western United States that it had long encroached upon economically. The two visions of American capitalism that coexisted—tenuously—prior to the Civil War encountered each other in violence soon after the annexation of this territory, but Polk, with no small amount of help from Bancroft, accomplished his goals while in office. In his service to his country, Bancroft was the soft counterpart to hard power. He wrote the fate of his nation.

²⁴⁹ James Polk to George Bancroft, 5 January 1849, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Conclusion

A historian, politician, and diplomat, Bancroft profoundly influenced nineteenth-century American culture and political economy. Over the course of half a century, he wrote the first popular and professional history of the United States, giving a narrative structure to the country's colonial and revolutionary past and situating America within world history. Bancroft also supervised the planning, execution, and justification of the Mexican-American War. His literary and worldly endeavors converged in the nationalism that sustained the growth of American empire. Indeed, the major developments that defined the United States during the nineteenth century—market capitalism, national identity, and democracy—were prominent in Bancroft's experiences and structured the history that he wrote.

Although Bancroft detailed events that had occurred centuries earlier, he established a moral continuity and sense of purpose in his narrative that led readers to understand the United States of their day as the penultimate expression of progress. Subsequent generations of historians objected to Bancroft's teleology and universalism, but in his time and place Bancroft represented the cutting-edge of scholarship. He had trained with Leopold von Ranke and G.W. Hegel in the German states, and he was an ardent American patriot. For Bancroft, the purpose of writing history was to understand providence—the divine will that had established the ends of history—and to serve the progress of humanity by projecting this knowledge into the future. Bancroft believed that, like astronomers, historians could chart the trajectory of the objects that they

studied. And since Bancroft wrote about America, he sought to discover whence the nation had come and whither it would go.

Bancroft concluded that it was divine will for the United States to expand territorially. Like other nineteenth-century Americans, Bancroft believed that his country represented the vanguard of civilization. He thought that during the middle ages, the democratic spirit of ancient Greece and Rome had grafted onto the hardy hosts of the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic peoples of Northern Europe. Supposedly, Americans descended from these Nordic tribes. And because American bodies bore Teutonic seeds, the spread of the United States to the Pacific meant the extension of democracy to the world. Bancroft asserted that American history was humanity's history and that the nation's growth constituted universal progress.

Such arguments for American exceptionalism served as more than the core themes for Bancroft's History; they also influenced his career as a politician and a diplomat. After serving in James K. Polk's cabinet and planning and overseeing the beginning of the Mexican-American War, Bancroft assumed the responsibility of representing the United States to Great Britain. In London and on the European continent, most notably Paris, Bancroft defended the American invasion of Mexico and seizure of its territory. He succeeded in winning support from important figures such as Alexander von Humboldt, an honorary citizen of Mexico, because Bancroft employed racial rhetoric that owed its articulation to Humboldt and that viewed the physical variations among human groups as indicators of essential moral qualities prescribed by climate.

Bancroft's influence extended beyond the political elite; his history sold well and inspired what became classic American iconography. For example, the artwork of John Gadby Chapman that Congress commissioned for the Capitol rotunda, *The Baptism of Pocahontas*, emanated from Bancroft's description of the scene in the first volume of his History. Not coincidentally, this was a volume that Chapman had illustrated. Other examples of Bancroft-inspired art included Emanuel Leutze's famous *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.

In the field of literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote their popular poems and stories in debt to Bancroft's History. They also benefitted more tangibly from Bancroft, since he used his power of patronage as port collector of Boston during the 1830s and 40s to advance their careers.

Commercial experiences also contributed to Bancroft's sense of the past. He held the office of port collector of Boston immediately prior to serving in Polk's cabinet. And before taking the post, Bancroft had spread capital westward as a member of the Dwight banking family. The trade in animal lipids and hides from the Pacific that came through Boston shaped Bancroft's sense of the West and its role in American history. In particular, Bancroft noted the importance of navigation to the fate of the Pacific coast. He consequently founded the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, during his tenure as Secretary of the Navy. At the outset of the Mexican-American War, Bancroft also ordered the seizure of San Francisco and Monterey. Bancroft's interest in the West, and by extension trade with East Asia, emanated from his conviction that the expansion of American markets would encourage the spread of democracy, as intended by providence.

Bancroft harnessed many intellectual and political forces in his life, but during the Age of Jackson, the powers of his mind brought together the major themes in American life into a compelling narrative about the country's past. In this way, Bancroft was more than a historian, he was, as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. indicated, the American Virgil, and his *History*, was the United States's *Aeneid*. Perhaps no one since Bancroft has repeated what modern historiography would view as the cardinal sins of earnest belief in truth in the same degree, but no historian since has also captivated the national mind so singularly as did Bancroft during the 1830s when he published the first volumes of his *History*.

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