

# *Every Man His Own Biographer*

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AMONG THE solid if not liquid assets of the Society's library is a substantial body of material whose true value is only now beginning to be generally recognized. This is the large collection of county histories which previous directors and librarians were sagacious enough to acquire in the days when the shipping charges were a major part of the cost. I do not use the term 'solid' lightly, for the works in question are usually ponderous quartos, and often in multi-volume sets.

Derisively described as 'mug books,' they were little esteemed by either the academic historian or the Americana collector. As recently as twenty years ago, large numbers of them could be bought for ten or twelve dollars, or even less, provided the buyer paid the postage. Today it is a rare one, that is to say only a common one, which can be bought for under fifty dollars, and many of the California county histories are now well established at over two hundred. It is gratifying to note that this not only confirms the foresight of the Society in collecting them but also its financial acumen in acquiring them while they were still reasonably priced.

The present price levels, which at first glance seem to be high indeed in relation to the intrinsic worth of the books concerned, have been brought about by a variety of causes. There is the factor of scarcity. Most of these were subscription books, and editions, if not what we would today call limited, were not very large. Nevertheless, as that dean of the antiquarian book trade, Richard Wormser, has pointed out, there are many books

which are deservedly rare, and their market price reflects their deserts rather than their rarity.

There is the fact that professional historians and the librarians who serve them have recently become more aware of the research value of these once-scorned volumes. And if academic historians are of less consequence in the book market today than they were a century ago, academic libraries have become correspondingly more so.

However, I would venture to say that the largest part in the rapid price rise for this class of books has been the demand on the part of genealogists eagerly seeking the volumes to which their grandparents subscribed and which their parents discarded.

What then are these works which were yesterday's 'dogs' and today's 'best of breed?' Ostensibly they are simply histories of one or more of the three-thousand-odd counties which form what the Census Bureau terms 'minor civil subdivisions' of the United States. For strange as it seems to a New Englander, in most of this country, particularly the West and Middle West, it is the county rather than the town which is the significant unit of local government. There are indeed many county histories which are just that and no more—local histories varying in quality from the merely anecdotal to the truly scholarly.

But these are not 'mug books.' The 'mug book' may and usually does contain a history of the county. It may be a pure scissors and paste job, or hack-written by someone on the publisher's staff, or a scholarly work compiled by a devoted and probably amateur local historian. But the reason for being of the 'mug book' is not the history it contains but the biography. Unlike the average local history, it is neither produced nor published by a local organization or historical society, but by a commercial publisher who specializes in this field. Usually it is a subscription book, and its subscribers' biographies are then included as those of the prominent and notable citizens of the county.

Perhaps the classic comment on this is found in Peter G. Thomson's Bibliography of the State of Ohio. Under his entry for the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century*, the annotation reads:

'A handsomely bound volume, containing the biographies of many of our distinguished men, and of many more who were never heard of outside their own county, until they paid their money and got their names in this weighty book. Each subscriber paid for his volume \$25, and was allowed to write his own opinion of himself, and of all the great acts of his life, as well as the numerous insignificant ones. The gentlemen who adorn the book with their intellectual phizzes, paid for this great privilege \$150. The modesty of some of these gentlemen in showing up their virtues is remarkable; had they been wise, they would, before writing so glowingly of themselves, have read and pondered over the words of "Bobbie Burns":

"O wad some pow'r the giftie gie us,  
to see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,  
And foolish notion."

Mr. Thomson's judgment is a little harsh. The biographies were rarely written by their subjects, usually by the publisher's staff. Within certain limitations of space, a subscriber might indeed decide which of the 'great acts of his life as well as the numerous insignificant ones' were to be included. The staff writer, however, usually followed a fixed outline. The standard elements of the biography were then assembled, a suitable number of laudatory phrases and adjectives added, and then the work was ready for publication. Occasionally the result was ridiculously pompous, as witness the following:

'Descended from one of the prominent pioneer families, Morton Lindley occupies his position as a representative citizen both through inheritance and the possession of ability

of a high order, these giving him the right of entree in the select circles of the social, business and financial world.'

In general, however, the puffing was merely conventional. All husbands and wives were 'devoted,' every soldier 'brave,' elected office was held only from a sense of public duty, and every man a 'leading member' of his trade or profession. On the whole it was the sort of thing you might expect to hear today in the chairman's introduction of a Rotary Club or P.T.A. speaker. Seen in cold print, however, it tickles our risibilities or excites our derision.

I will come back to this matter later, but first a general overview of the history of 'mug-book' publishing. I have not made any detailed search for the earliest appearance of this type of literature, but it seems to have begun appearing in significant quantity in the 1870s and 1880s. It is quite likely that its growth was stimulated by the Centennial Exposition of 1876, for the Centennial Commission made a conscious effort to spur the writing of local history. In any case, the form was well established by the 1880s, flourished through the rest of the Nineteenth Century and continued through the first few decades of the twentieth. An occasional example still appears, but the popularity of this type of work has definitely waned.

In the half-century or more that 'mug books' flourished, a great many publishers ventured into the field. Some of them indeed specialized almost entirely in this field. Among the more prominent names are Thompson and West, of Oakland, California, the Lewis Publishing Company of Chicago, and S. J. Clarke of the same city. Chicago was for many years a center of this type of publishing.

This is not surprising in view of the fact that the five states of the Old Northwest:—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin produced a larger number of county histories than any comparable area of the country. This area of heavy concentration extended into Missouri, Iowa, eastern Kansas and Nebraska, north to Minnesota. A second area of almost equal

importance was the West Coast, particularly California. This phenomenon seems linked to a number of factors. One of them of course is population. To make a 'mug book' profitable there ought to be from five hundred to a thousand 'prominent citizens' willing to subscribe. In some cases, however, as many as half a dozen counties were covered in a single work. In the more thinly populated Western states, a whole state, such as Nevada or Arizona might have only a single work of this type.

A second factor was prosperity. The books, even at their original prices, were expensive. Consequently the deep South, which was impoverished for much of the period, is represented by a relatively small number of county histories.

Finally, the 'mug book' seems to have been most popular in an area which was primarily rural with many small towns and cities. Most of the counties of the North Eastern and Middle Atlantic states do have one or more 'mug books' but nowhere near the number for the Middle West. Whether this is due to the relatively greater sophistication of their inhabitants or the anonymity of life in the more populous states remains to be determined. In fact, a serious study of this type of publishing would be worth while not only for the history of American publishing, but for social and cultural history as well.

But to return to the books themselves, who are the people included, what kind of information is given about them, and what is the usefulness of this class of literature to the historian? With the obvious limitation that few members of the working class are included, 'mug book' biographies cover a surprisingly large part of the social and economic spectrum. It should also be recognized that in rural and small-town America of the period when this literature flourished, the working class were a minority. As might be expected, farmers and small businessmen predominate. The professions, especially law and medicine, are usually well represented; teachers and the clergy not quite so well. Almost all subjects are male

heads of families, but an occasional spinster or widow is to be found.

The length of the individual biographies varies from a single paragraph to half a dozen pages. Although the interviewer in some cases seems to have had a printed questionnaire to guide him, the information included is by no means uniform. In the majority of cases however it includes the subject's parentage and in some cases ancestry. Men of New England or southern families seem to have been more apt to mention Mayflower or Revolutionary War ancestors. In many cases a brief biography of the father is included and occasionally this is longer than that of the nominal subject. This can be a useful characteristic—very often there is embedded in the biography of a California lawyer of 1900 an account of the overland journey of his 49er father in the days of gold.

Place and date of birth are usually but not always included, as is date of death. Most biographies of course are of living persons, but a devoted family often saw to it that a deceased father was written up as a prominent citizen. A sketch of the main events of the subject's life follows, including education, trade or professional background and military service. A large number of the men included in these works were veterans of the Mexican or Civil War, and fairly frequently their biographies include vivid anecdotes of that experience.

Date and place of marriage, names of and birth dates of children, and often a brief sketch of the wife's family are commonly included. In addition such items as political, religious, and fraternal affiliations, and elective or appointive offices held are usually present.

To whom is this information useful? First of all, to the genealogist, whose interest in this literature has already been noted. Secondly, to the historian. His interest may be only in a single individual who never achieved the prominence necessary for inclusion in the *Dictionary of American Biography* or some similar national compendium. Other than a newspaper

obituary, a county history may well be the only biographical source. He may be interested in a group. I have often thought, for instance, that it might be an interesting project to trace one of the organized groups from New England such as the Bay State and California Mining and Trading Company, who sailed from Boston in the spring of 1849. How many of them stayed in California? How many returned to Massachusetts? What were their subsequent careers?

In a similar vein, how many Iowa pioneers of the 1850s were Mexican War veterans claiming their government land bounties? The answer to both of these and many other questions lies in the county histories.

When we move from the historian proper to the demographer, the usefulness of these works becomes even more apparent. Here is a tremendous untapped source of information on immigration patterns, population movements, occupational shifts, religious and political patterns.

There are difficulties in getting at the material, however. One is the fact that there is no adequate bibliography of the material with national coverage. Bradford's *Bibliographer's Manual* specifically excludes them. C. Stewart Peterson in his *Bibliography of County Histories* made a valiant effort. This work first appeared in 1935 and was twice revised in the 1940s. Its coverage however is far from complete and its individual entries are so sadly lacking in bibliographical detail and method as to make it a frustrating tool to use.

There are adequate bibliographies for some of the states. Ethel Blumann's *California Local History*, of which a revised edition has just appeared, is exemplary. The Detroit Society for Genealogical Research has been issuing an excellent series of bibliographies for individual states. What is really needed however is a work which will bring together this whole literature with adequate and accurate bibliographical entry.

A more serious problem is that of locating an individual biography. Mobility is nothing new for Americans. A man may

have been born in Massachusetts, pursued business and political careers in Ohio and Kansas, and have his biography appear in a history of Maricopa County, Arizona, to which sunny spot he retired in his declining years. The biography of Colonel Jack Hays, the famous Texas ranger, appears in William Halley's *Centennial Yearbook of Alameda County, California*. Some state historical societies, such as Wisconsin, have prepared elaborate indexes to the biographical material for their own states, but what is needed is a single index to this whole body of material.

Compilation of a bibliography is within the capabilities of a single man and could be accomplished within a reasonably short span of years. Preparation of a simple biographical index would be an enormous task, but essentially a simple clerical operation. The only real problem would be in securing the financial support to carry through the project.

Quite frankly, I see no prospect of this. But since it costs nothing to dream, let me propose a project even more grandiose. For my own amusement I once sat down and worked out a system for encoding the various types of information to be found in 'mug book' biographies. It is perfectly possible to get on one 80 space IBM card a man's name, dates, place of birth, college and graduation date, military service and branch, occupation, political and religious affiliation, municipal, state or federal office held, date of migration, route, and destination.

Think what a demographer, playing with the computer, could do with that! How many complex problems would have new light thrown on them! Alas, it is only a pipe dream. Only a large foundation or the federal government would be able to finance such a project. But though I have no hope of persuading them, I trust that I may have shown you that the lowly 'mug books' have their uses, and that much curious and rewarding information may be found therein. They are too big for bedside books, but I recommend an occasional hour of browsing on a drowsy afternoon.



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