

George Bancroft: Master Historian

GEORGE ATHAN BILLIAS

I'M HAPPY that Ellen Dunlap, John Hench, and Jim Moran invited me to speak here because it gives me an opportunity to repay in a small way the great debt I owe the Society. My indebtedness is profound both personally and professionally. Speaking personally, I first saw Margaret, who is now my wife, in this great hall. We were married in the First Baptist Church across the street, and through Marcus McCorison's good graces held our wedding reception in the Goddard-Daniels House. Here I have also made many good friends: Joanne Chaison, Nancy Burkett, Gigi Barnhill, Stan Shapiro, Marie Lamoureux, Tom Knoles, and others who helped me over the years. Professionally, I wrote my Elbridge Gerry biography back in the stacks—that is, when a reader could go into the stacks. At my retirement in 1989, a symposium was held in my honor under what Esther Forbes called this 'generous dome.' My debt to the Society is enormous, and my effort tonight constitutes only a modest repayment.

Two hundred and eighty paces from where we are sitting, there stands a tiny tablet on Salisbury Street. It marks the birthplace of George Bancroft, whose two hundredth anniversary we celebrated last year. Symbolically, the plaque is too small to reflect his

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stature as the greatest scholar of United States history of his day. Bancroft Tower on nearby Bancroft Hill would be more fitting. He 'towered' above his fellow scholars and remained the master historian of America's past during the last five decades of the 1800s.¹

Bancroft went through several successful careers in his lifetime of ninety-one years. He became an important Democratic politician, rising rapidly from the Massachusetts state level to national prominence. While serving as secretary of the Navy, his greatest achievement was to found the Naval Academy. He represented the United States on two separate diplomatic missions, to Germany and Britain. Peers recognized his remarkable talents as a historian: they elected him to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in 1838 and to the presidency of the American Historical Association in 1885. The assignment given me, however, is not to cover his many different careers, but to concentrate on one—his work as a historian.

First, let me say a word about his Worcester background. His father, Aaron, a Harvard graduate and holder of an honorary doctorate of divinity, was an important intellectual in his own right. He arrived in Worcester in 1783 as a substitute to assist the ailing minister, Thaddeus Maccarty, of the First Parish Church. When Maccarty died the following year, the church—contrary to custom—refused to give Aaron the position. He promptly led an exodus of members and founded the Second Congregational Society.

More was involved in the church controversy, however, than a pulpit post. Aaron's faith was identified with Arminianism, whose doctrine taught that man could play an important role in his own salvation. Orthodox Calvinists, however, insisted that many were predestined for either salvation or damnation. Aaron rebelled against the Calvinist orthodoxy of his day and became one of America's first Unitarians.² Although he served later as president

1. In a major oversight, Bancroft was not even listed among America's greatest historians in Marcus Cunliffe and Robin Winks, eds., *Pastmasters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

2. See Conrad Wright, *The Beginning of Unitarianism* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1955), 83-89, 112-13.

of the American Unitarian Society, his theological radicalism was quite tempered.³

A born leader, Aaron was active in community affairs. In 1812, along with Isaiah Thomas, he petitioned the legislature to incorporate the American Antiquarian Society. He later served as vice president of this institution dedicated to gathering useful knowledge about America's past. Aaron anticipated his son's career in other ways: collecting historical materials, writing a solid biography of George Washington, and incorporating a deeply religious point of view in his writings. Unlike his father, however, George Bancroft became an avowed Trinitarian and emphasized God's guiding Providence.⁴

Bancroft's ancestry on his maternal side was likewise conflicted, but in a different way. His mother, Lucretia, was the daughter of Judge John Chandler, popularly known in Worcester as 'Tory John.' Before the Revolution, the Chandlers were rich: they had servants, including one black girl; held Crown offices; and staunchly supported Britain.⁵ During the war, however, Chandler's property was confiscated, his wealth wiped out, and he was forced to flee to England. He never returned. But his daughter joined the Second Parish Church and married its minister, Aaron Bancroft, in 1786. Without a dowry, Lucretia was forced to run a frugal household while raising a large family on an impecunious preacher's salary.

Their son, George, was born in 1800, the eighth of thirteen children. At the tender age of eleven he was packed off to Phillips Exeter Academy. Because part of his tuition was paid by the Academy, fellow students mocked young George as a charity case. This

3. Louis Kern, 'Aaron Bancroft: An Intellectual Biography,' M. A. thesis, Clark University, 1967. Bancroft's manuscript sermons may be found in the American Antiquarian Society and the New York Public Library.

4. These ideas were expressed in an oration that was delivered before the New-York Historical Society on November, 20, 1854, and published the following year. George Bancroft, 'The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of Progress of the Human Race,' *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1855), 504.

5. Andrew McFarland Davis, *The Confiscation of John Chandler's Estate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 10-11.

experience, Lilian Handlin suggests in her superb biography, may have left psychological scars. It helped form the rather contentious personality Bancroft developed later in life.⁶

George entered Harvard at thirteen—a not unusual age for freshmen at the time. The Harvard he went to, however, differed from the college his father had attended. President John Thornton Kirkland had raised standards, restructured the curriculum, and expanded both the faculty and the library. Bancroft received a sound education—reading the classics in Greek and Latin, learning rhetoric and logic, and studying a smattering of sciences. Moral philosophy, however, was the core of the curriculum, consisting of a mix of Lockean rationalism and Scottish common sense philosophy.⁷

A serious student, Bancroft refused to indulge in college high jinks. In this respect, he was unlike his Worcester classmate and lifelong friend, Stephen Salisbury II, whose son Stephen built the Bancroft Tower. George studied so hard, in fact, his fellow students nicknamed him 'Doctor.' That title was actually conferred on him when he received a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Göttingen in Germany in 1820.

Bancroft joined the small pioneering band of New Englanders who travelled abroad to expose themselves to the rigors of German scholarship. German universities, using the demanding seminar method instead of rote student recitations, ranked among the best in the world. Comparing his European training with that in the United States, Joseph Cogswell, a fellow Göttingen graduate, observed: '[I]t appalls me when I think of the difference between an education here and in America.'⁸

Upon returning to Cambridge, young Bancroft shocked his old teachers with his newfound European mannerisms. Sporting a

6. Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 23. This superb study is notable for its intellectual and psychological interpretation as well as its mastery of Bancroft's life and times.

7. Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 28–30.

8. T[homas] W[entworth] Higginson, 'Göttingen and Harvard Eighty Years Ago,' *Harvard Graduates Magazine* 6 (1897–98): 10.

black beard and spouting German and French phrases, he planted a moist kiss, continental-style, on both cheeks of his startled professors. One was so shocked that he swore never to support Bancroft for a Harvard teaching post.⁹

Relying on outward appearances, the professor failed to notice significant inner changes that had taken place. Germany gave Bancroft the transforming intellectual experience of his life. His mental landscape had changed: he was less provincial and more cosmopolitan. His courses in biblical criticism, philology, German, and French, along with Oriental languages and modern history, expanded his intellectual outlook. Most importantly, his German training deepened his grasp of history.

Bancroft's education continued outside the walls of the three universities he attended: Göttingen, Berlin, and Heidelberg. During his subsequent two-year grand tour of Europe, he met some of the greatest men of his day: Goethe, Hegel, Guizot, Lafayette, Macaulay, and Byron. Bright, enterprising, and armed with letters of introduction, he exchanged ideas with Europe's leading intellectuals. While in Germany, Bancroft began thinking about his future. He wrote President Kirkland, 'I must become either an instructor at . . . [Harvard] University, or a clergyman, or set up a high school.'¹⁰ In fact, he eventually pursued all three careers. Each of them revealed some German influence.

For ten years, he was a tutor at Harvard. His favorite professor at Göttingen had been Arnold Heeren, who specialized in ancient Greek history. Bancroft translated or arranged for translations of two of Heeren's works in the mid-1820s, hoping to get them adopted as texts to replace those in the Harvard curriculum.¹¹ He

9. Robert Canary, *George Bancroft* (New York: Twayne, 1974), 10. The reference is to Andrews Norton, who had previously encouraged Bancroft's European studies.

10. Bancroft to John Thornton Kirkland, January 17, 1819, Mark DeWolfe Howe, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1908), 1: 54.

11. Bancroft translated Heeren's *Reflections on the Politics of Ancient Greece* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Co., 1824); *History of the States of Antiquity* (Northampton, Mass.: S. Butler and Son, 1828); and *A History of the Political System of Europe and Its Colonies, from the Discovery of America to the Independence of the Continent* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1829). The last work is not usually attributed to Bancroft, but internal evidence reveals he probably supervised the work. Canary, *George Bancroft*, 15.

argued that Heeren's writings were in 'the spirit of philosophical criticism' and would advance 'a most important department of human knowledge'; moreover, they served as texts not only in Germany, but in Holland and France.¹² The move was part of Bancroft's campaign to broaden Harvard's intellectual horizons as well as to teach history from a more philosophical point of view. His efforts to secure the backing of Harvard's President Kirkland failed, however, and led to Bancroft's increasing disenchantment with Harvard.¹³

Bancroft's next proposal was of far greater importance: it contained the germ of an idea that eventually resulted in another career—that of a publishing scholar. He proposed in 1828 an ambitious manual of world history—he would write a history of the Middle Ages, translate Heeren's manuals of ancient history and modern Europe, and prepare original outlines for an American history. Bancroft promised that the projected four volumes would be dedicated to President Kirkland, 'as a small monument of what I owe you.' Kirkland had been responsible for sending Bancroft to study in Germany, but he failed to respond to the intended compliment.¹⁴ By the late 1820s, Bancroft's teaching career at Harvard was drawing to a close: he had failed to secure an appointment either as professor of philology or theology, and he lost hope of getting a professorship in history.¹⁵

As the son of Aaron Bancroft, he received invitations to pulpits throughout Massachusetts that enabled him to test a possible calling to the ministry. But he soon rejected a career in the church. Parishioners found his sermons heavy-handed, pedantic, and sprinkled with too many references to Germany.

12. Bancroft proposed Heeren's *Reflections on the Politics of Ancient Greece* to replace John Potter's work in the Harvard curriculum, and Heeren's *Manual of Ancient History* instead of Robert Adam's *Roman Antiquities*. See Edward Everett, 'Heeren's Reflections on the Politics of Ancient Greece,' *North American Review* 18 (April 1824): 390-406; George Bancroft to Edward Everett, July 31, 1824; August 23, 1825; and November 16, 1827, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

13. Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 100-1.

14. George Bancroft to John Thornton Kirkland, February 3 and March 5, 1828, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

15. Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 101.

He also founded Round Hill, a high school for boys near Northampton in 1823. Bancroft had been greatly impressed with the German *gymnasium*, which prepared young boys for the university. Many German university graduates, excited by new educational theories, took teaching posts in the *gymnasia*. Bancroft followed in their footsteps. At Round Hill he introduced novel ideas based on progressive German-Swiss theories of education. He carried out his Northampton experiment with the help of Joseph Cogswell—his fellow graduate of both Harvard and Göttingen. His tenure at Round Hill lasted for eight years. Happy at first, Bancroft gradually grew bored and left in 1831.

His departure may have had something to do with his marriage to Sarah Dwight in 1827. She was a member of a wealthy Springfield family. The marriage assured Bancroft's financial future, but it was a love match as may be seen from their correspondence. With money from the sale of Round Hill and earnings from occasional duties in the Dwight family enterprises, he undertook two new careers—those of historian and politician.

Bancroft, it should be noted, was a scholar-activist. While he was writing his magisterial *History of the United States from the Discovery of the Continent*, he was vigorously involved in state and national politics. He joined the Democratic Party and, although he failed to win elections for a seat in the House of Representatives and as governor of Massachusetts, he held a position in the cabinet of President James K. Polk, and served successfully as a diplomat overseas. That he could achieve so much in two fields was a tribute to his brilliance.

Bancroft's *magnum opus* was a monumental work of ten volumes. Originally, it covered the years from the discovery of America in 1492 to 1782, and was published over four decades from 1834 to 1874. Bancroft kept revising his *History*, however, and eventually wrote two additional volumes to include the Constitution.¹⁶ When first published, the *History* created a sensation.

16. See Bancroft, *The History of the United States of America: The Author's Last Revision*, 6 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1882-84). In this last revision Bancroft concluded with the year 1789.

It remained a best seller throughout the nineteenth century, making him a wealthy man.

Having now sketched in part of Bancroft's background, I should indicate to you how I plan to proceed in explaining Bancroft's interpretation of American history. I shall first analyze the central themes that he dealt with in his *History* and then trace them through the ten volumes of his major work. Before I do so, however, I should like to call your attention to an overarching problem in understanding Bancroft's interpretation.

The problem lies in trying to reconcile an inherent contradiction in his historical approach. Bancroft, on the one hand, believed in the universality of human nature. He held, in other words, that everywhere on earth and in every culture man's nature was the same. On the other hand, Bancroft also believed that nations developed their own distinctive values or ethos. These values differed from one nation and culture to the next. Bancroft seemed to want it both ways: Americans shared a common human nature with all others, and yet they became something quite different historically. How could this be? Was it possible to reconcile these two contradictory points of view?

When Bancroft attended Göttingen, he encountered a group of outstanding German historians who were wrestling with the same problem. Their solution was ingenious. It is also the answer we find in Bancroft's *History*. Both Bancroft and the Germans assumed that human societies progress through certain common stages because they share the same human nature. But their experiences as they proceeded through common historical stages became quite different. Each society or nation gradually developed a different set of values as an overlay to their common human nature.

When we analyze Bancroft's themes and his periodization of American history, we shall see how he binds these two approaches together. He was forever dealing with American experiences that produced a distinctive American ethos or spirit. But at the same

time, he indicated as he went along that these values were only one expression of a common human nature. Bancroft would not have been Bancroft, of course, if he had not concluded that the American expression was the best of all.

When it comes to the question of whether or not Bancroft was primarily influenced by the German historians in coping with the contradiction inherent in his *History*, the answer is problematical and may never be resolved.¹⁷

There are four central themes in Bancroft's *History* and certain of his lectures, and I shall describe them under four headings, each beginning with the letter 'P.' They are: *Providence*, *Progress*, *Patria*, and *Pan-Democracy*.

First and foremost in his *History*, Bancroft expresses the belief in *providence*, meaning that God provides for the world that is the object of His care. Bancroft's is a God-centered history focusing on the idea of a Divine Providence. It holds that America's destiny depended more on God than on human will. Bancroft's God was a Protestant God, however, for he believed in the old Puritan notion that America was a nation of God's 'elect.' America had a special mission in world history, and the country was somehow the instrument of providence. The historian's task, Bancroft wrote, was to reveal and to justify God's ways to man.¹⁸

17. The comments by Harvey Wish on Bancroft's identification with German ideas are completely wrong-headed, in my view. He writes, 'Few took so readily to the speculative Teutonic ideas as Bancroft,' in *The American Historian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 72. Fred Burwick comes to a somewhat similar conclusion in his article 'The Göttingen Influence on George Bancroft's Idea of Humanity,' *Jahrbuch für Amerika Studien* 11 (1966): 194-212. Burwick holds that the most important among the influences on the mind of young Bancroft were those of three Göttingen professors: Arnold H. L. Heeren, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.

Lillian Handlin, at the other end of the spectrum, comes to an opposite conclusion. She says of the first volume of Bancroft's *History*: 'This profoundly anti-individualistic and conservative approach originated in Bancroft's native background, which no amount of German education could obliterate.' *George Bancroft*, 133. See also Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 215-20. Reill argued that the idea of historicism—i.e., the emphasis on 'development' and 'particularity'—was well-developed by 'liberal' historians like Heeren at Göttingen, the best example of an *Aufklärung* university, before 'conservative' historians such as Ranke and others gave it wider currency.

18. Canary, *George Bancroft*, 4.

To Bancroft, history was the progressive unfolding of God's will.¹⁹ Providence as an abstract idea remained in the realm of final cause, or teleology, inexorably working toward a given end. Immediate causes, however, were assigned to events arising from the particular motives of men and of groups involved in carrying them out.

But Bancroft's interpretation of providence was international as well as national. It took into account other peoples on earth. Other nations also were capable of becoming like America, if they so desired, for there was a 'world spirit' of liberty. All they had to do was to discover and follow America's example. Then, they, too, could be among the elect.

Bancroft's idea of providence included as well the element of discovery. People in other nations had to discover themselves in order to discover the universalism within them. The notion of discovery was based on Bancroft's belief that there was a universal human nature at work in the world. Universalism was, in fact, one of Bancroft's most deeply held views. The whole human race tended toward universality and unity. Therefore, the organization of all human society had to conform more and more to a single principle—that of freedom. A 'society or nation, before it could be constituted correctly, had to observe itself and the laws of its existence, and become aware of its own capabilities.'²⁰

We move to Bancroft's second 'P,' which was *progress*. The idea of progress was one of the givens in the intellectual world of the nineteenth century. It was a holdover from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This idea held that through reform, a better, more rationally planned society was humanly possible. The essential nature of men might not change, but much could be done for them through good government and education.

Bancroft believed that progress in America was on an ever upward gradient. The country was moving toward some future golden age that was God's plan for the whole human race. In this plan, America was destined to play a crucial role.

19. Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, 491-92.

20. Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, 514.

One major element in Bancroft's idea of progress was the law of continuous development. He announced this theme in the introduction and preface of his first volume. '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 have dwelt at considerable length on this first period, because it contains the germs of our institutions. The maturity of a nation is but the continuation of its youth.'²¹ That last sentence is an excellent statement of Bancroft's belief in continuous historical development.

Bancroft believed also in the so-called germ theory of his day. This theory held that American institutions represented the flowering of ancient Teutonic folkways in the Old World. He believed the germs of American institutions had originated in the forests of Teutonic Germany, matured in Anglo-Saxon England, and then were transplanted to the New World. The germ theory represented not only the law of continuous historical development, but also Bancroft's somewhat racist belief in the glory of the Anglo-Saxon mind.

Bancroft's idea of progress was linked also to the theme of self-government. He believed the history of a people could be explained best in terms of its spirit. In America's case, that spirit could be found in its powerful drive for self-government. In his first volume, for example, he took up the founding of the colonies within this rubric. When discussing the colonization of Virginia, he observed that its first constitution had practically freed the colony from control of parliament, while maintaining an allegiance to the Crown at the same time. To Bancroft, the process of colonization was one of continual progress toward self-government and ultimately the achievement of American independence.²²

Bancroft's next 'P' stood for *patria*, or love of country. Bancroft's American patriotism, however, was uncritical and exces-

21. Bancroft, *The History of the United States from the Discovery of the Continent*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1834-74) I: v-vii.

22. Bancroft, *History* (1882-84 ed.), I: 132-33.

sive. He was utterly convinced of America's goodness and greatness. He believed that everywhere America's influence spread, it would bring the blessings of liberty and freedom. In short, it was a perfect rationalization for the idea of America's manifest destiny: to be a continental power stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Bancroft's *patria*, moreover, reflected a democratic bias. It came from America's experience with the ideal of self-government. In his welcoming address to the American Historical Association in 1886 entitled 'On Self-Government,' Bancroft discussed this ideal and its worldwide ramifications. He implied that 'government by the people,' exemplified by the United States, represented the wave of the future.²³ He quoted Lincoln, and described the United States as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people.'²⁴ Reviewing the international scene of his day—the rise of republican governments in France and Switzerland as well as the recent ascendancy of the House of Commons in Britain—he concluded that the entire world was moving in that direction.²⁵

Finally, Bancroft's last 'P' represented *pan-democracy*. I am using pan-democracy to suggest the broadest possible implications of this term. First, to address democracy itself: Bancroft's democratic bias was reflected in his profound belief in the common man. He was involved in the democratic Jacksonian movement and believed that the yeomen and workingmen in American society should march at the head of civilization. His *History*, as has been observed countless times, was a vote for Andrew Jackson on every page.²⁶

But Bancroft's emphasis on people was on race rather than the individual. In other words, he believed that the main actor in the historical drama was the nation-state and not the individual. The fate of the nation-state had already been determined by the

23. 'Mr. Bancroft on Self-Government,' *Papers of the American Historical Association* 2 (1887): 7-13.

24. 'Mr. Bancroft on Self-Government,' 9.

25. 'Mr. Bancroft on Self-Government,' 11-12.

26. Michael Kraus, 'George Bancroft, 1834-1934,' *New England Quarterly* 7: 680.

'germs' of remote Teutonic ways and racial characteristics, yet all peoples would ultimately become democratic.

As for pan-democracy, Bancroft linked his democratic idealism to a sweeping worldwide concept. To him America embodied the fundamental ideas of the eventual unity of the entire human race. He expressed this idea most clearly in a speech he gave at the New-York Historical Society in 1854. In his talk, Bancroft made the radical assertion regarding the essential equality of all men: 'Every man is in substance equal to his fellow man.'²⁷ No country could advance further than the collective genius of its people. As men grew wiser, he believed, they would inevitably recognize the benefits of democratic institutions. One day the whole world would build political structures like America's—structures that would 'rest on the basis of equality and freedom.'²⁸

In his talk, Bancroft equated the progress of American civilization with the reality he saw all about him. To support his thesis, he pointed to the advances in American science and technology, as well as developments in transportation such as railroads and canals. At the same time, he saw the promise of moral progress. His evidence was the 'mighty strides' he saw being taken to abolish slavery in the North, as well as the advancement of women who had reached, in his words, the 'uniform enjoyment of domestic equality.'²⁹

Such optimism was possible because Bancroft believed that universality, unity, and freedom had been promised to the entire human race. He could have such an optimistic view because he was convinced that progress was the manifestation of both the laws of history and the will of God. He believed in certain historical laws akin to certain scientific laws. These laws determined the rise and fall of empires, but he confessed such laws were difficult to discern because human motives were so complex.

27. Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, 483.

28. Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, 514.

29. Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, 497-501.

Let me now turn to a discussion of Bancroft's ten volumes, pointing out along the way how the four 'P's' worked. Bancroft's first volume focused mainly on the settling of several colonies. Although he provided specific details about each settlement, his overarching theme was that of popular sovereignty. He was bent on showing that settlers in each instance wanted to set up their own governments: 'The spirit of the colonies demanded freedom from the beginning. . . . Virginia first asserted the doctrine of popular sovereignty. . . . The people of Maryland constituted their own government. . . . New Plymouth, Connecticut, New Haven, New Hampshire, [and] Maine rested their legislation on the popular will, . . . [and] Massachusetts declared itself a perfect commonwealth.'³⁰

What about the Puritans? What did Bancroft think of them? 'Puritanism was Religion struggling for the People,' he wrote, 'a war against tyranny and superstition.' The Puritans, he continued, had 'planted . . . undying principles of liberty.'³¹ But how could such statements square with the well-known intolerance of the Puritans against those who opposed them? To address this contradiction, Bancroft used the phrase 'democratic liberty' in a double sense. Roger Williams, the outstanding opponent of the Puritan regime, he said, stood for 'soul-liberty'; in other words, 'liberty' as an absolute. At the same time, however, Williams was a threat to 'self-government,' the very principle on which Massachusetts was based. Hence, Bancroft conceded that the Puritans were intolerant when they drove Williams out of the colony, but he justified their intolerance on purely political, and not religious, grounds.³²

Puritanism, to Bancroft, represented a superb example of the law of continuous development as well as progress. He traced the seeds of Puritanism back to the Reformation and to Calvin.

30. Bancroft, *History* (1834-74 ed.), 1: vii.

31. Bancroft, *The History of the United States of America, A Centenary Edition* (1876-79), 1: 370.

32. Bancroft, *The History of the United States of America, A Centenary Edition*, 1: 372.

Calvinism created a revolutionary doctrine—a religion without a prelate, a government without a king. He was able, therefore, to draw a direct line of descent from the Reformation to the American Revolution through those Puritan descendants who led their countrymen in the drive for independence.³³

Turning to *patria*, another ‘P,’ Bancroft demonstrated how fierce his love of country was. He labeled one chapter in the first volume on settlement, ‘England takes possession of the United States.’³⁴ Although Bancroft’s patriotism had a belligerent edge, he was not violently anti-British—in spite of the prevailing conventional wisdom to that effect.

In his second volume, Bancroft dealt mainly with the settling of the middle and southern colonies. He continued his major theme that colonization represented freedom and equality and did so by comparing two colonies—Pennsylvania and New York. Sympathetic to the Quakers, he commented favorably on William Penn and his ideas of equality. But he contrasted Pennsylvania’s relative freedom and prosperity with the controversial rule of royal government in New York.³⁵

Bancroft’s third volume brought the story of the colonies down to the middle of the eighteenth century—to 1748. In this volume he struggled with the issue of slavery. How could slavery exist in this land of freedom and equality? Bancroft’s answer was in part to excuse Americans. The South supported slavery, so he did not blink from that truth. But Americans were not totally to blame because slavery had been foisted upon them: first, by the Dutch who brought in the initial shipload of slaves; second, by the British who wanted to monopolize the slave trade to America. The home government simply refused to allow the colonists to restrict that trade. Bancroft was well ahead of his time in his anti-slavery views, and one can see him wrestling desperately with the slavery issue. He found it hard to reconcile the moral progress he

33. Bancroft, *History of the American Revolution*, 3 vols. (London, 1852), 1: 171–79.

34. Bancroft, *History* (1876–79), 1: 63.

35. Bancroft, *History* (1834–74), 2: chs. 16 and 17.

believed American civilization was making with the fact that human beings were living in slavery in the United States.³⁶

Bancroft's first three volumes, running from 1492 to 1748, focused on colonization. The next three volumes took up the coming of the American Revolution and covered the years 1748 to 1774. The last four volumes carried the Revolution down to 1782.

The second three-volume set was shaped by the time period in which the books were written. They were completed during the 1850s. Sensing the coming of the Civil War, Bancroft's overarching theme was unity, which he saw in providential terms. He announced this theme first on a grand scale by focusing on the unity of the whole human race. '[C]learly,' he wrote, 'the unity of mankind was the distinctive glory of Christian religion.'³⁷

He continued the theme of unity on a more mundane level by showing that Americans came together after Britain passed the Stamp Act. They called an intercolonial Congress, the first meeting of its kind involving almost all the thirteen colonies. To Bancroft, the Stamp Act heralded the coming of independence, and he called it 'The Day-Star of the American Union.'³⁸

His last four volumes focused on the American Revolution. In Bancroft's eyes the Revolution was 'radical in its character, yet achieved with benign tranquillity.'³⁹ That conclusion rings true. 'Radical in character,' the Revolution changed the course of American and world history, accomplishing this by means of 'benign tranquillity.' And yet, Bancroft recognized that the Revolutionary War was a 'civil war,' pitting men of the 'same ancestry against each other.'⁴⁰ It was Englishmen fighting fellow Englishmen. There was, moreover, considerable confiscation of Loyalist property. Bancroft's mother Lucretia recounted that she and her mother watched as the Chandler property—including the very chair on which the old lady was sitting—was auctioned off

36. Bancroft, *History* (1834-74), 3: 42, 278.

37. Bancroft, *History of the American Revolution* (1852), 1: 5.

38. Bancroft, *History of the American Revolution* (1852), 2: 306.

39. Bancroft, *History of the American Revolution* (1852), 1: 12.

40. Bancroft, *History of the American Revolution* (1852), 1: 12.

before their eyes.⁴¹ America did not experience the bloody terror of the French Revolution. Loyalists were not slaughtered, as they were subsequently in France. In fact, those who remained quickly re-entered the mainstream of American life after the war was over.

But to Bancroft the Revolution was more than a national movement: it was a pan-democratic movement boundless in its scope and timelessness. It embraced Bancroft's abiding theme of the unity of humankind. As he wrote, 'it was the assertion of right . . . made for the entire world of mankind and all coming generations without any exception whatsoever.'⁴²

Like most historians of his day, Bancroft heavily emphasized political and military history. The centerpiece of his eighth volume featured the Declaration of Independence. 'It marked,' he said, 'the beginning of new ages.'⁴³ Bancroft included its entire text in his *History* and then concluded: 'The heart of Jefferson in writing the declaration . . . beat for all humanity . . . and . . . astonished nations, as they read that all men are created equal.'⁴⁴ The Declaration, in other words, belonged to the world as well as to America.⁴⁵

In his last four volumes, Bancroft recounted also the military history of the two warring nations. On the British side, he dealt with the policies of the royal government, political opposition in the parliament, and generals in the field in America. From the American perspective, he took up the activities of the Continental Congress, the labors of American diplomats in Europe, and the campaigns of the Continental Army.

41. Davis, *The Confiscation of John Chandler's Estate*, 22. The note on this episode was especially poignant: Lucretia watched her mother, 'While her furniture was sold in her house, and the very chair on which she sat bid off from her purchase. She bore it well and never put herself down by losing her dignity.'

42. Bancroft *History* (1882-84), 4: 450.

43. Bancroft, *History* (1876-79), 5: 335.

44. Bancroft, *History* (1876-79), 5: 330. Modern historians are well aware that Jefferson was not the sole author of the Declaration; see Pauline Maier, *American Scripture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 97-99.

45. Later historians such as Carl Becker looked upon the Declaration as a nationalistic propaganda ploy aimed at securing diplomatic recognition and foreign aid. Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922).

The great hero of these pages was George Washington, whom Bancroft considered a demigod. He was pictured both as an individual and as the embodiment of the American people. Washington was portrayed as a lawgiver—the highest role to which any human being could aspire. Since ancient times, the lawgiver had been the great man who founded a nation, formulated its laws, and then placed the fate of his country ahead of his personal life. Washington was viewed as such a statesman. Washington, in Bancroft's words, was the epitome of *patria*—one whose heart was 'purified by the love of his kind,' one who sought 'to lift his country out of the inferior sphere of its actual condition into the higher sphere . . . nearer to ideal perfection.'⁴⁶ Bancroft ended his *History* with a ringing peroration: 'For the United States, the war, which began by an encounter with a few husbandmen embattled on Lexington green, ended with their independence, and possession of all the country from the St. Croix to the south-western Mississippi, from the Lake of the Woods to the St. Mary's. In time past, republics had been confined to cities and their dependencies, or to small cantons; . . . [but] the United States avowed themselves able to fill a continental territory with commonwealths.'⁴⁷

Not content with his *magnum opus*, Bancroft continued writing, publishing the two-volume *The History of the Formation of the Constitution* in 1882. The Constitution volumes, in my estimation, are even greater than the *History*. They are more focused, objective, and thoughtful. The theme of unity celebrated in the *History* reached its climax in the Constitution. America in achieving self-government had attained both freedom and union. As Bancroft wrote in the preface, 'I have been able to trace step by step the march of the people of the United States . . . from a league of states to a perfected union.'⁴⁸

Like his *History*, Bancroft's Constitution volumes ended on a triumphant note: 'In America a new people had arisen without

46. *Miscellanies*, 487.

47. Bancroft, *History* (1876–79), 6: 484.

48. Bancroft, *The History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States of America* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1882), 1: xiv, xvi.

king, or princes, or nobles, knowing nothing of tithes and little of landlords, the plough being for the most part in the hands of free holders of the soil. . . . [Their Constitution] excelled every one known before.⁴⁹

How did Bancroft link the Constitution to the Revolution? Through George Washington, who became the linchpin connecting the two works. 'First in war' through his leadership of the Continental Army, Washington became 'first in peace,' as head of the Constitutional Convention.

Turning to the personal side of Bancroft's life, while researching and writing, he kept up a vigorous round of social activities in his three residences—New York City, Newport, and Washington. After losing his wife, Sarah, in 1837, he married again the very next year to Elizabeth Bliss Davis, a widow. Elizabeth proved to be worldly, witty, and mature, and became his loving companion for forty-eight years until her death in 1886. The Bancroft children, however, were hostile toward their stepmother, and his family life was trying at times.⁵⁰ He sought solace in his two hobbies—riding horses and growing roses.

Throughout most of his mature life, Bancroft neglected Worcester and stayed away for forty years. But in 1886 he visited his hometown for Elizabeth's interment in Rural Cemetery. He made another visit about a year later, attended a session of the American Antiquarian Society, and his presence at a concert of the Worcester County Musical Association brought a standing ovation.⁵¹ After he died on January 15, 1891, he too was buried in Worcester's Rural Cemetery, and President Benjamin Harrison ordered flags in Washington to be flown at half mast.

In terms of his personality, Bancroft was an elitist. There always existed, for example, a contradiction between his private life and political philosophy. He adjusted to the aristocratic ways

49. Bancroft, *The History of the Formation of the Constitution*, 2: 366–67.

50. Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 168–69.

51. Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 339–40.

of Europe, but at the same time he defended his idea of American democracy.⁵² With his long gray beard, slim frame, and piercing eyes, he looked like an aristocrat and often acted the part.

As far as his research methods were concerned, Bancroft was unusually thorough. He ransacked libraries and archives all over the world in his search for original sources. He used his secretaries to copy materials in foreign archives in Britain and Germany when he was minister there. Hiring teams of copyists, he transcribed original documents in the Library of Congress. When I was working on my Elbridge Gerry biography, I had occasion to use the Bancroft transcripts at the New York Public Library. They were the only primary source for the problem I was researching, and I was awed by the voluminous work done before the days of microfilming and photocopying. When writing his Constitution volumes, however, Bancroft went one better. By interviewing James Madison, often called the 'Father of the Constitution,' he probably was the only historian of his generation to hear a firsthand account of the Constitutional Convention.

While professional historians seldom give Bancroft's work high praise, the *History* has also been described as 'an unjustly neglected classic.'⁵³ I concur. Two of America's greatest living historians of the Revolutionary era, moreover, came to the same conclusion. Daniel Boorstin wrote that to learn what the period 'adds up to,' one must turn to Bancroft.⁵⁴ Edmund Morgan, the distinguished historian of the Revolutionary War, claimed that Bancroft knew 'the sources better than any one has since.'⁵⁵

If Bancroft's work is a classic, why is it neglected? Why does it remain unread by the public? There are several answers. Remember that the purpose of history was quite different in Bancroft's

52. Kraus, 'George Bancroft, 1834-1934,' 683.

53. Thomas Johnson, *Oxford Companion to American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 59.

54. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), 375.

55. Edmund Morgan, *Birth of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 158.

day. The aim of history then was instruction, education, and elucidation. Modern historians strive to be more objective, and resort much less to rhetoric. Bancroft's *History*, as a result, sounds strange and out-of-date to us.

A second reason is what I call the obsolescence of historians. 'Every history is contemporary history,' Benedetto Croce, the Italian philosopher, once wrote, and each generation likes to rewrite its own interpretation of events. Today's best-selling historian, as a result, is tomorrow's target for revision and reinterpretation. Bancroft represents a classic case of this truism. He died just at the time a rising new generation of historians—the so-called scientific school of historians—was arriving on the scene. Their aim was to be more scientific, rigorous, and pragmatic, and they quickly replaced the rhetorical approach that Bancroft exemplified.

Bancroft was writing also in the age of romanticism, and thought of his *History* as a work of art. He liked sweeping phrases and rhetorical flourishes. His grandiose style with its lofty sentiments and purple passages is off-putting to today's readers.⁵⁶

Bancroft's unrestrained nationalism is another reason why he is not read. His overemphasis on America's greatness and goodness makes modern Americans uncomfortable. They admire more balanced judgments and like distinctions made with more exactness.

But if we evaluate Bancroft in terms of his own time, he is much like other historians of his day. He was active in a century when history writing in a nationalistic vein was popular in both America and Europe. In America he belonged to the first post-Revolutionary War generation who, bursting with pride, wanted to recall for their countrymen the birth of the nation.

Bancroft is viewed too often in presentist terms rather than in the context of his time. This practice began with the scientific historians who ridiculed him and set the tone for the critical view that exists today. I myself was guilty on that score when I wrote about Bancroft in American historiography.

⁵⁶ David Levin, *History as a Romantic Art* (Stanford: University of California Press, 1959).

Bancroft did have his weaknesses. His interpretation is limited by his particular worldview. From a contemporary perspective he appears to look backward and seems more connected to his Puritan ancestors than to his contemporaries in terms of intellectual history. He was not skeptical enough, and remained much too innocent and trusting when describing the virtues of his heroes and the American people. He also tended to disregard economic factors—a surprising omission given the fact that his mentor Heeren was an economic historian. While reading primary sources, moreover, he often failed to notice elements of the bigger picture.

But his weaknesses were balanced by strengths. His *History* is an epic of Homeric proportions. Bancroft deserves the title of 'Father of American History' for providing his countrymen with a stirring version of America's beginnings. He produced for America a work in the tradition of the nationalistic histories being written in Europe in his day and helped to break down America's academic provincialism by placing its history in a comparative perspective. Bancroft's prescience regarding the continued rise of democracy in America was remarkable. His faith in the future of democracy as destined to become a worldwide phenomenon was well placed. In sum, we are fortunate to have had a master historian write the first truly national account of the country's beginnings, and his *History* merits its reputation as an American classic.

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