

HISTORY
AS A
LITERARY ART

by

Samuel Eliot Morison



History As a Literary Art is reproduced with the generous permission of
Samuel Eliot Morison's daughter, Emily Morison Beck,
to whom the publisher is indebted.

§

The mission of the **Serenus Press** is to promote the study and use of history and the liberal arts, demonstrating their application in nonacademic settings. We also encourage employers in all sectors of the economy to provide insight on how to strengthen education that connects good scholarship with professional success. To this end we publish **Road Map Publications**, freely downloadable material for educational distribution.

Serenus publications have many applications. They help students choose a college major, reinforce reasons for diligent study, and provide concrete career options. They also aid college administrators in recruiting high school students, and show parents as well as teachers the value of their children's liberal arts education. To date, our material has been used in nearly half the colleges throughout the United States, as well as numerous schools, historical associations, and libraries.

While many of our publications deal with history, we believe that history – rigorous history – can not be written, studied, or applied without due regard to other core subjects: English, science, mathematics, and geography. Nor can mastery be achieved of English, science, mathematics, or geography without an attentive focus on history.

—THE SERENUS PRESS · ROAD MAP PUBLICATIONS—

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved below, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this guide.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this guide via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law.

Copyright © 1997 by The Serenus Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

History As a Literary Art

– From *By Land and by Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), Chapter XIII.

In the period between the two world wars, I became exercised over the bad English used by students of history, especially graduate students, and over the dull, pedantic manner in which many historical monographs were being presented. The hortatory essay that follows was first composed for my seminar in American history. In 1946 my friend Walter Whitehill asked me to contribute something toward starting a new series of Old South Leaflets. I offered him this, he accepted it, and to our astonishment it had an unexpected success as a twenty-five-cent pamphlet. You can still buy it at that price from the Old South Meeting House, Boston. It was even reviewed in *The Saturday Review Of Literature* and mentioned in *The American Historical Review*!

Since the essay incorporates a major part of my message to readers, students, and writers of history, I have included it here.

Exploring American History has been a very absorbing and exciting business now for three quarters of a century. Thousands of graduate students have produced thousands of monographs on every aspect of the history of the Americas. But the American reading public for the most part is blissfully ignorant of this vast output. When John Citizen feels the urge to read history, he goes to the novels of Kenneth Roberts or Margaret Mitchell, not to the histories of Professor this or Doctor that. Why?

Because American historians, in their eagerness to present facts and their laudable concern to tell the truth, have neglected the literary aspects of their craft. They have forgotten that there is an art of writing history.

Even the earliest colonial historians, like William Bradford and Robert Beverley, knew that; they put conscious art into their narratives. And the historians of our classical period, Prescott and Motley, Irving and Bancroft, Parkman and Fiske, were great literary craftsmen. Their many-volumed works sold in sufficient quantities to give them handsome returns; even today they are widely read. But the first generation of seminar-trained historians, educated in Germany or by teachers trained there, imagined that history would tell itself, provided one was honest, thorough, and

painstaking. Some of them went so far as to regard history as pure science and to assert that writers thereof had no more business trying to be “literary” than did writers of statistical reports or performers of scientific experiments. Professors warned their pupils (quite unnecessarily) against “fine writing,” and endeavored to protect their innocence from the seductive charm of Washington Irving or the masculine glamour of Macaulay. And in this flight of history from literature the public was left behind. American history became a bore to the reader and a drug on the market; even historians with something to say and the talent for saying it (Henry Adams, for instance) could not sell their books. The most popular American histories of the period 1890–1905 were those of John Fiske, a philosopher who had no historical training, but wrote with life and movement.

Theodore Roosevelt in his presidential address before the American Historical Association in 1912 made a ringing plea to the young historian to do better: “He must ever remember that while the worst offense of which he can be guilty is to write vividly and inaccurately, yet that unless he writes vividly he cannot write truthfully; for no amount of dull, painstaking detail will sum up the whole truth unless the genius is there to paint the truth.”

And although American historians cannot hope, as Theodore Roosevelt did, to “watch the nearing chariots of the champions,” or to look forward to the day when “for us the war-horns of King Olaf shall wail across the flood, and the harps sound high at festivals in forgotten halls,” we may indeed “show how the land which the pioneers won slowly and with incredible hardship was filled in two generations by the overflow from the countries of western and central Europe.” We may describe the race, class, and religious conflicts that immigration has engendered, and trace the rise of the labor movement with a literary art that compels people to read about it. You do not need chariots and horsemen, harps and war-horns, to make history interesting.

Theodore Roosevelt’s trumpet call fell largely on deaf ears, at least in the academic historical profession. A whole generation has passed without producing any really great works on American history. Plenty of good books, valuable books, and new interpretations and explorations of the past; but none with fire in the eye, none to make a young man want to fight for his country in war or live to make it a better country in peace. There has been a sort of chain reaction of dullness. Professors who have risen to positions of eminence by writing dull, solid, valuable monographs that nobody reads outside the profession, teach graduate students to write dull, solid, valuable monographs like theirs; the road to academic security is that of writing dull, solid, valuable monographs. And so the young men who have a gift for good writing either leave the historical field for something more exciting, or write more dull, solid, valuable monographs. The few professional historians who have had a popular following or appeal during the last thirty years are either men like Allan Nevins who were trained in some juicier profession like journalism, or men and women like the Beards who had the sense to break loose young from academic trammels.



William H. Prescott
1796-1859

In the meantime, the American public has become so satiated by dull history textbooks in school and college that it won’t read history unless it is disguised as something else under a title such as *The Flowering of Florida*, *The Epic of the East*, or *The Growth of the American Republic*. Or, more often, they get what history they want from historical novels.

Now, I submit, this is a very bad situation. The tremendous plowing up of the past by well-trained scholars is all to the good, so far as it goes. Scholars know more about America’s past than ever; they are opening new furrows and finding new artifacts, from aboriginal arrowheads to early twentieth-century corset stays. But they are heaping up the pay dirt for others. Journalists, novelists, and freelance writers are the ones who extract the gold; and they deserve every ounce they get because they are the ones who know how to write histories that people care to read. What I want to see is a few more Ph.D.’s in history winning book-of-the-month adoptions and reaping the harvest of dividends. They can do it, too, if they will only use the same industry in presenting history as they do in compiling it.

Mind you, I intend no disparagement of historians who choose to devote their entire energies to teaching. Great teachers do far more good to the cause of history than mediocre writers. Such men, for instance, as the late H. Morse Stephens, who stopped writing (which he never liked) as soon as he obtained a chair in this country, and the late Edwin F. Gay, who never began writing, inspired thousands of young men and initiated scores of valuable books. Thank God for these gifted teachers, I say; universities should seek out, encourage, and promote them far more than they do. My remarks are addressed to young people who have the urge to write history, and wish to write it effectively.

Of all that extensive empire which once acknowledged the authority of Spain in the New World, no portion, for interest and importance, can be compared with Mexico; – and this equally, whether we consider the variety of its soil and climate; the inexhaustible stores of its mineral wealth; its scenery, grand and picturesque beyond example; the character of its ancient inhabitants, not only far surpassing in intelligence that of other North American races, but reminding us, by their monuments, of the primitive civilizations of Egypt and Hindostan, or, lastly, the peculiar circumstances of its Conquest, adventurous and romantic as any legend devised by Norman or Italian bard of chivalry.

— from *History of the Conquest of Mexico* by William H. Prescott

There are no special rules for writing history; any good manual of rhetoric or teacher of composition will supply the rules for writing English. But what terrible stuff passes for English in Ph.D. dissertations, monographs, and articles in historical reviews! Long, involved sentences that one has to read two or three times in order to grasp their meaning; poverty in vocabulary, ineptness of expression, weakness in paragraph structure, frequent misuse of words, and, of late, the introduction of pseudoscientific and psychological jargon. There is no fundamental cure for this except better teaching of English in our schools and colleges, and by every teacher, whatever his other subject may be. If historical writing is infinitely better in France than in America, and far better in the British Isles and Canada than in the United States, it is because every French and British teacher of history drills his pupils in their mother tongue, requiring a constant stream of essays and reports, and criticizing written work, not only as history, but as literature. The American university teacher who gives honor grades to students who have not yet learned to write English, for industrious compilations of facts or feats of memory, is wanting in professional pride or competence.

Of course, what we should all like to attain in writing history is style. “The sense for style,” says Whitehead in his *Aims of Education*, “is an aesthetic sense, based on admiration for the direct attainment of a foreseen end, simply and without waste. Style in art, style in literature, style in science, style in logic, style in practical execution, have fundamentally the same aesthetic qualities, namely, attainment and restraint. Style, in its finest sense, is the last acquirement of the educated mind; it is also the most useful. It pervades the whole

being. . . Style is the ultimate morality of mind.”

Unfortunately, there is no royal road to style. It cannot be attained by mere industry; it can never be achieved through imitation, although it may be promoted by example. Reading the greatest literary artists among historians will help; but do not forget that what was acceptable style in 1850 might seem turgid today. We can still read Macaulay with admiration and pleasure; we can still learn paragraph structure and other things from Macaulay; but anyone who tried to imitate Macaulay today would be a pompous ass.

Just as Voltaire’s ideal curé advises his flock not to worry about going to heaven, but to do right and probably by God’s grace they will get there, so the young writer of history had better concentrate on day-by-day improvement in craftsmanship. Then, perhaps, he may find someday that his prose appeals to a large popular audience; that, in other words, he has achieved style through simple, honest, straightforward writing.

A few hints as to the craft may be useful to budding historians. First and foremost, *get writing!* Young scholars generally wish to secure the last fact before writing anything, like General McClellan refusing to advance (as people said) until the last mule was shod. It is a terrible strain, isn’t it, to sit down at a desk, with your notes all neatly docketed, and begin to write? You pretend to your wife that you mustn’t be interrupted; but, actually, you welcome a ring of the telephone, a knock at the door, or a bellow from the baby as an excuse to break off. Finally, after smoking sundry cigarettes and pacing about the house two or three times, you commit a lame paragraph or two to paper. By the

time you get to the third, one bit of information you want is lacking. What a relief! Now you must go back to the library or the archives to do some more digging. That's where you are happy! And what you turn up there leads to more questions and prolongs the delicious process of research. Half the pleas I have heard from graduate students for more time or another grant-in-aid are mere excuses to postpone the painful drudgery of writing.

There is the "indispensable beauty in knowing how to get done," said Carlyle. In every research there comes a point, which you should recognize like a call of conscience, when you must get down to writing. And when you once are writing, go on writing as long as you can; there will be plenty of time later to shove in the footnotes or return to the library for extra information.

Above all, *start* writing. Nothing is more pathetic than the "gonna" historian, who from graduate school on is always "gonna" write a magnum opus but never completes his research on the subject, and dies without anything to show for a lifetime's work.

Dictation is usually fatal to good historical writing. Write out your first draft in longhand or, if you compose easily on the typewriter, type it out yourself, revise with pencil or pen, and have it retyped clean. Don't stop to consult your notes for every clause or sentence: it is better to get what you have to say clearly in your mind and dash it off; then, after you have it down, return to your notes and compose your next few pages or paragraphs. After a little experience you may well find that you think best with your fingers on the typewriter keys or your fountain pen poised over the paper. For me, the mere writing of a few words seems to point up vague thoughts and make jumbled facts array themselves in neat order. Whichever method you choose, composing before you write or as you write, do not return to your raw material or verify facts and quotations or insert footnotes until you have written a substantial amount, an amount that will

increase with practice. It is significant that two of our greatest American historians, Prescott and Parkman, were nearly blind during a good part of their active careers. They had to have the sources read to them and turn the matter over and over in their minds before they could give anything out; and when they gave, *they gave!*



Francis Parkman
1823-1893

Now, the purpose of this quick, warm synthesis between research, thinking, and writing is to attain the three prime qualities of historical composition – clarity, vigor, and objectivity. You must think about your facts, analyze your material, and decide exactly what you mean before you can write it so that the average reader will understand. Do not fall into the fallacy of supposing that "facts speak for themselves." Most of the facts that you

excavate, like other relics of past human activity, are dumb things; it is for you to make them speak by proper selection, arrangement, and emphasis. Dump your entire collection of facts on paper, and the result will be unreadable if not incomprehensible.

So, too, with vigor. If your whole paragraph or chapter is but a hypothesis, say so at the beginning, but do not bore and confuse the reader with numerous "but"s, "except"s, "perhaps"s, and "possibly"s. Use direct rather than indirect statements, the active rather than the passive voice, and make every sentence and paragraph an organic whole. Above all, if you are writing historical narrative make it move. Do not take time out in the middle of a political or military campaign to introduce special developments or literary trends, as McMaster did to the confusion of his readers. Place those admittedly important matters in a chapter or chapters by themselves so that you do not lose your reader's attention by constant interruption.

That brings us to the third essential quality – objectivity. Keep the reader constantly in mind. You are not writing history for yourself or for the professors who

For untold ages Maine had been one unbroken forest, and it still was so still. Only along the rocky seaboard, or on the lower waters of one, or two great rivers a few rough settlements had gnawed slight indentations into this wilderness or woods, and a little further inland some dismal clearing around a blockhouse or stockade let the sunlight to a soil that had lain in shadow time out of mind. This waste of savage vegetation survives, in some part, to this day with the same prodigality of vital force, the same struggle for existence and mutual havoc that mark all organized beings, from men to mushrooms.

— from *A Half Century of Conflict* by Francis Parkman

are supposed to know more about it than you do. Assume that you are writing for intelligent people who know nothing about your particular subject but whom you wish to interest and attract. I once asked the late Senator Beveridge why his *Life of John Marshall*, despite its great length and scholarly apparatus, was so popular. He replied: “The trouble with you professors of history is that you write for each other. I write for people almost completely ignorant of American history, as I was when I began my research.”

A few more details. Even if the work you are writing does not call for footnotes, keep them in your copy until the last draft, for they will enable you to check up on your facts, statements, and quotations. And since accuracy is the prime virtue of the historian, this checking must be done, either by the author or by someone else. You will be surprised by the mistakes that creep in between a first rough draft and a final typed copy. And the better you write, the more your critics will enjoy finding misquotations and inaccuracies.

The matter of handling quotations seems to be a difficult one for young historians. There is nothing that adds so much to the charm and effectiveness of a history as good quotations from the sources, especially if the period is somewhat remote. But there is nothing so disgusting to the reader as long, tedious, broken quotations in small print, especially those in which, to make sense, the author has to interpolate words in brackets. Young writers are prone to use quotations in places where their own words would be better, and to incorporate in the text source excerpts that belong in footnotes or appendices. Avoid ending chapters with

quotations, and never close your book with one.

Above all, do not be afraid to revise and rewrite. Reading aloud is a good test – historians’ wives have to stand a lot of that! A candid friend who is not an historian, and so represents the audience you are trying to reach, is perhaps the best “dog” to try it on. Even if he has little critical sense, it is encouraging to have him stay awake. My good friend Lucien Price years ago listened with a pained expression to a bit of my early work. “Now, just what do you mean by that?” he asked after a long, involved, pedantic, and quote-larded paragraph. I told him in words of one syllable, or perhaps two. “Fine!” said he. “I understand that. Now write down what you said; throw the other away!”

Undoubtedly the writer of history can enrich his mind and broaden his literary experience as well as better his craftsmanship by his choice of leisure reading. If he is so fortunate as to have had a classical education, no time will be better spent in making him an effective historian than in reading Latin and Greek authors. Both these ancient languages are such superb instruments of thought that a knowledge of them cures slipshod English and helps one to attain a clear, muscular style. All our greatest historical stylists – notably Prescott, Parkman, Fiske, and Frederick J. Turner – had a classical education and read the ancient historians in the original before they approached American history.

If you have little Latin and less Greek and feel unable to spare the time and effort to add them to your stock of tools, read the ancient classics in the best literary translations, such as North’s Plutarch, Rawlinson’s Herodotus, Gilbert Murray’s Euripides, and, above all,

Jowett's or Livingstone's Thucydides. Through them you will gain the content and spirit of the ancient classics, which will break down your provincialism, refresh your spirit, and give you a better philosophical insight into the ways of mankind than most of such works as the new science of psychology has brought forth. Moreover, you will be acquiring the same background as many of the great Americans of past generations, thus aiding your understanding of them.

The reading of English classics will tend in the same direction, and will also be a painless and unconscious means of improving your literary style. Almost every English or American writer of distinction is indebted to Shakespeare and the English Bible. The Authorized Version is not only the great source book of spiritual experience of English-speaking peoples; it is a treasury of plain, pungent words and muscular phrases, beautiful in themselves and with long associations, which we are apt to replace by smooth words lacking in punch, or by hackneyed or involved phrases. Here are a few examples chosen in five minutes from my desk Bible: I Samuel 1: 28: "I have lent him to The Lord." What an apt phrase for anyone bringing up his son for the Church! Why say "loaned" instead of "lent"? Isaiah 22:5: "For it is a day of trouble, and of treading down, and of perplexity." In brief, just what we are going through today. But most modern historians would not feel they were giving the reader his money's worth unless they wrote: "It is an era of agitation, of a progressive decline in the standard of living, and of uncertainty as to the correct policy." Romans 11:25: "Wise in your own conceits." This epigram has often been used, but a modern writer would be tempted to express the thought in some such cumbrous manner as "Expert within the limits of your own fallacious theories."

Of course much of the Biblical phraseology is obsolete, and there are other literary quarries for historians. You can find many appropriate words, phrases, similes, and

epigrams in American authors such as Mark Twain, Emerson, and Thoreau. I have heard an English economist push home a point to a learned audience with a quotation from *Alice in Wonderland*; American historians might make more use of *Huckleberry Finn*.

The historian can learn much from the novelist. Most writers of fiction are superior to all but the best historians in characterization and description. If you have difficulty in making people and events seem real, see if you cannot learn the technique from American novelists such as Sherwood Anderson, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Margaret Mitchell. For me, the greatest master of all is Henry James. He used a relatively simple and limited vocabulary; but what miracles he wrought with it! What precise and perfect use he makes of words to convey the essence of a human situation to the reader! If you are not yet acquainted with Henry James, try the selection of his shorter novels and stories edited by Clifton Fadiman, and then read some of the longer novels, like *Roderick Hudson* and *The American*. And, incidentally, you will learn more about the top layers of American and European society in the second half of the nineteenth century than you can ever glean from the works of social historians.

What is the place of imagination in history? An historian or biographer is under restrictions unknown to a novelist. He has no right to override facts by his own imagination. If he is writing on a remote or obscure subject about which few facts are available, his imagination may legitimately weave them into a pattern. But to be honest he must make clear what is fact and what is hypothesis. The quality of imagination, if properly restrained by the conditions of historical discipline, is of great assistance in enabling one to discover problems to be solved, to grasp the significance of facts, to form hypotheses, to discern causes in their first beginnings, and, above all, to relate the past creatively to the present. There are many oppor-



George Bancroft
1800-1891

For the United States, the war, which began with a few husbandmen embattled on Lexington Green, ended with their independence, and possession of all the country from the Saint Croix to the south-western Mississippi, from the Lake of the Woods to the St. Mary. In times past, republics had been confined to cities and their dependencies, or to small cantons; and the United States avowed themselves able to fill a continental territory with commonwealths.

— from *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the American Continent* by George Bancroft

tunities in historical narrative for bold, imaginative expressions. “A complete statement in the imaginative form of an important truth arrests attention,” wrote Emerson, “and is repeated and remembered.” Imagination used in this way invests an otherwise pedestrian narrative with vivid and exciting qualities.

Finally, the historian should have frequent recourse to the book of life. The richer his personal experience, the wider his human contacts, the more likely he is to effect a living contact with his audience. In writing, similes drawn from the current experience of this mechanical age, rather than those rifled from the literary baggage of past eras, are the ones that will go home to his reader. Service on a jury or a local committee may be a revelation as to the political thoughts and habits of mankind. A month’s labor in a modern factory would help any young academician to clarify his ideas of labor and capital. A camping trip in the woods will tell him things about Western pioneering that he can never learn in books. The great historians, with few exceptions, are those who have not merely studied, but lived; and whose studies have ranged over a much wider field than the period or subject of which they write.

The veterans of World War II who, for the most part, have completed their studies in college or graduate school should not regard the years of their war service as wasted. Rather should they realize that the war gave them a rich experience of life, which is the best equipment for an historian. They have “been around”; they have seen mankind at his best and his worst; they have shared the joy and passion of a mighty effort; and they can read man’s doings in the past with far greater understanding than if they had spent these years in sheltered academic groves.

To these young men especially, and to all young men I say (as the poet Chapman said to the young Elizabethan): “Be free, all worthy spirits, and stretch yourselves!” Bring all your knowledge of life to bear on everything that you write. Never let yourself bog down in pedantry and detail. Bring history, the most humane and noble form of letters, back to the proud position she once held; knowing that your words, if they are read and remembered, will enter into the stream of life, and perhaps move men to thought and action centuries hence, as do those of Thucydides after more than two thousand years.



About the author

Samuel Eliot Morison (1887-1976), distinguished historian, teacher, public servant, and sailor, was born in Boston, and educated at Harvard University. He taught history at Harvard and the University of Oxford. From 1918-19, he was a member of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, which helped draft the Versailles Treaty. In 1964 he was awarded the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His many writings included: *Life of Harrison Gray Otis* (1913), *Oxford History of the United States* (1927), *The Growth of the American Republic* (with Henry Steele Commager, 2 vol., 1930), *Builders of the Bay Colony* (1930), *Tercentennial History of Harvard University* (1930-36), *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (2 vol., 1942; Pulitzer Prize, 1943), *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (the official U.S. Navy history of the war, 15 vol., 1947-62), *By Land and by Sea* (1953), *John Paul Jones* (1959; Pulitzer Prize, 1960); *One Boy's Boston* (autobiography, 1962); *The Oxford History of the American People* (1965); *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* (1971); and *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages* (1974).

The publisher would like to thank the Smithsonian Institution for use of the image of George Bancroft and the Wikimedia Foundation for the images of Francis Parkman and William Prescott).

COLOPHON

The text of this guide was set in Adobe Garamond®

• TEACH HISTORY • PRACTICE AS AN HISTORIAN • CONSULT AS AN HISTORIAN • PRESENT HISTORY THROUGH THE MEDIA • MANAGE & INTERPRET HISTORICAL RESOURCES • PRESERVE & CONSERVE HISTORICAL RESOURCES • PROVIDE SERVICES TO SUPPORT HISTORICAL ORGANIZATIONS • APPLY HISTORIANS' KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL, PERSONAL, & CIVIC LIFE •

www.SerenusPress.com