
# No Mummified History in New York Schools

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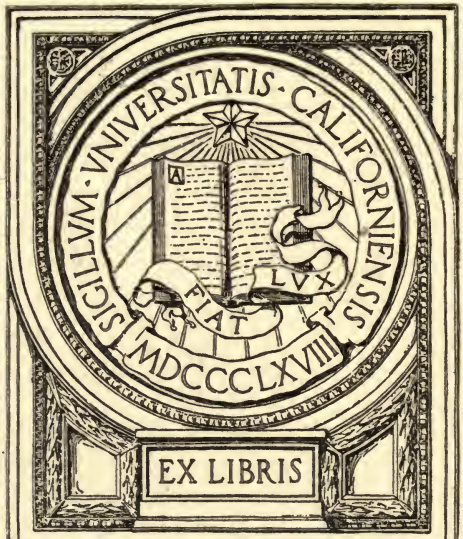

# No Mummified History in New York Schools

BY

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The last Legislature did the inevitable thing and made the office of the State Historian a division in the Education Department. It went further and created a division in the Department to supervise the manner in which all public records of the State and of the counties, cities, and towns thereof are made and cared for. Of course these plans articulate together and are expected to conserve, and cherish, and magnify our history. They are expected to make the vital history of the country, and particularly of the State,

available to all the people in attractive and realistic forms. One of the early expressions of the movement ought to appear in quickening and improving the teaching of history in the schools.

There is no state with a more resplendent history than New York. The story of the first settlements, of the progress of pioneer farming, of the dealings and conflicts with the Indians, of the upbuilding of our commerce and manufactures, of the development of our religious and political institutions, of the old roads which foreshadowed the newer and greater ones, of the habits and customs of early generations which have influenced the doings of the present generation, of the deadly

battles fought and the political policies established by our fathers which settled the character of the State and nation, is an inheritance which is not exceeded by that of any people in the world. All of this splendid story can not be understood by the children in the schools, for that requires long lives and mature minds, but we may have the satisfaction of knowing that if we teach little parts of it so children become readily interested in them, they will go on and learn about other parts without other helps than such as they will find on their own account. The story truly told is so fascinating that it is irresistible.

The point of this little paper is not so much to extend the courses in history

as it is to make the teaching vital and the history irresistible.

There are now two quite distinct schools of history writers and teachers. One of these, which we may call the old school, assumes that one who has participated in great events and can write well, can write the history of those events. It assumes that one who had no actual part in the events but is an educated man and an accomplished writer, may qualify himself for writing and history of them by reading all that others have written about them, by searching out old documents bearing upon them which have escaped the earlier writers, and by going over the grounds where the events occurred, occupying the point of view and entering

into the feeling of the actors, and working himself into a frame of mind which will express the story as the original participants in the events might if they could speak.

The other and newer school is the rather natural outgrowth of the universities. It occupies the critical attitude of the universities. It is more destructive than creative. It is more professional and pedantic than original and inspiring. Its work is done in the study rather than by searching fields and following streams. Its particular satisfaction is in calling down some old hero because he told a story with a little too much enthusiasm. It assumes that having had a part in the events, and having actual sympathy with

one side or the other in those events, disqualifies from writing about them. It even assumes that no one has any business to write history unless he has been trained by the professors of history in the universities to question everything and to have no actual feeling about any historical fact. It pretends to treat judicially matters which are wholly outside of and apart from judicial interpretation. It makes more of mummies than of life.

Let us illustrate. A professor of history at Dartmouth College, if he were a disciple this school, might write what he would call a judicial history of the battle of Gettysburg. He would disregard the motives and ignore the enthusiasms of the contending armies. He would say

that the partisanship which would lead a man to offer his life to his country would make him unable to appreciate the accepted cannons of historical criticism or understand the underlying principles of historical documentation. He would deal only with generalities, i. e. the written orders, the generals, the divisions and army corps, the grand movements, the figures and the result; and to make sure that no one would think him prejudiced, or any more interested in one side than the other, he would very likely leave it to the reader to come to his own conclusions about it all, just as a circuit judge leaves it to a jury to decide what the facts are when the evidence is circumstantial and conflicting and he is not

himself sure of what happened. He could tell us that the battle of Gettysburg was fought on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, July 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, in 1863; that the weather was probably hot; that there were 201,817 men engaged; that they marched 33¼ miles the day before the battle, and that 41,714 were killed; and that all this was the unnecessary consequence of something that our fathers mistakenly let slip into the Constitution on a Saturday or a Sunday in October, 1789. It would be as interesting to boys and girls and their fathers and mothers as a railway track or a tow of canal boats when they had seen hundreds of them.

That *might* happen. I do not believe it would, for I do not believe Dartmouth

would stand for it long. It is all speculation. Now let us see something that *did* happen. In 1854 a fine young fellow by the name of Frank Haskell graduated from Dartmouth College. He was born in Vermont, taught school to get the money to go to college, and was late in getting through, for he was twenty-six. But he quickly made up for his delayed college course. He was a classical scholar, intent upon work, ready for a frolic and not afraid of a fight. He played square with the world, formed opinions and had unusual gifts in narrating facts and expressing himself. He went to Madison, Wisconsin, studied law, gained admission to the bar, and was soon in successful practice and a citizen who was regarded

and respected. At the opening of the Civil War he enlisted in the Sixth Wisconsin regiment and soon gained reputation as a sagacious and daring soldier. He was a mounted aide to General Gibbon at Gettysburg, and carried orders and information to far points on the field.

Such a young man in such a place made the most of his unparalleled opportunities for seeing and doing things. He messed with the generals and mixed with the men, and freely offered his life to his country by doing whatever he could find to do, without regard to peril, that would help her in her crucial hour. He was wounded enough to put most men out of commission for a month, and he had two horses shot under him, but he never let

go of his job. He was among the first to see the advance of Pickett's division for the grand charge on the afternoon of the third day. He rode along the crest looking for the weakest place in the Union lines. The Confederates had looked for it also. He found the thinnest ranks where Webb's brigade was in a moment to meet the fiercest onset at the "bloody angle". He looked for Hancock and Gibbon, but they had both been wounded. He looked for anybody with authority to give orders which would mend the break. Finding no one, he flew about and gave the orders himself just as though all the straps and stars in the army were upon or behind him. He rushed a couple of fairly fresh regiments into the breach,

and when the blow fell he was right there to help them meet it. They met it so that they lost half their number, but what was left gathered in four thousand prisoners. Meade and Hancock and Gibbon and the Congress said that he had done as much as, if not more than, any other one man for the triumph of the Union arms at Gettysburg. He was only a lieutenant. It made him a colonel at once.

In the next thirty days he wrote a full account of the battle from first to last. He had no thought of writing for publication. He wrote what fills a book. Without any self-laudation he told his young brother at home what he saw and heard, how he felt and what he did, what the

officers and men did and said. He dealt with men and things and events in particular. He described movements and incidents so that the reader thrills and shivers. He expressed his feelings with the ardor and freedom of youth. He gave credit with a generous hand and without regard to rank, and he handed out criticism in the same way. For example, he said that Hooker was a "scoundrel", which he was not; that Sickles was only a "political general" seeking popularity when he moved the third corps to the other ridge, which was putting it too strong; and that the eleventh corps was a "pack of cowards", which was probably overstating the matter. But all came hot "off the bat" of a gentleman, a scholar,

and a soldier, who had been all over the field and knew and could tell what had happened and how it had happened. The excitement of the battle doubtless gave him some opinions which he would have modified in later years if he had lived, but all the same he wrote actual history. That makes his story of Gettysburg very real; and he consecrated it all by giving his life to his country when leading his new regiment at Cold Harbor the next summer.

I am with Professor Mahaffy of Dublin when he says "Unless we have living men reproduced with their passions and the logic of their feelings, we have no real human history." I am with Gibbon who believed that history must be rich in

imagination and not wanting in eloquence. I am with Froude with his inaccuracies, rather than with any other who avoids positive statements and reduces human interest in the subject to the vanishing point. I am with Parkman who went over the ground and mixed with people who knew or had heard. I am with Lord Macaulay when in his history of England before the Restoration he says that he will cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history if he can succeed in placing before the English of the nineteenth century a true picture of the life of their ancestors.

No one is for ignoring or straining the truth of history. Honest and intelligent imagination that adheres to essential

facts but takes the loves and hates of actual men and women into account, comes nearer the truth than does the pessimist who rejects everything but positive evidence, necessarily misinterprets much of that, and insists that partisans are hardly capable of giving evidence at all.

One who helped make history, if he has the other accomplishments, can write it better than those who had no part in making it; and no one can hope to write history well unless he can put himself in spirit and sympathy with those who made it. He must have their point of view, their enthusiasm, and their grief or exultation over results, before he can make it very effective in the lives of human

beings. Even those who are not in sympathy with the writer prefer the writings of one who has feelings in his theme, rather than of one who takes pride in his remoteness and indifference. The Confererate veterans would rather read the story by Colonel Haskell of what happened on the Union side at Gettysburg; and the Union veterans, that by General Pickett, of what happened on the Confederate side, than any story by an historical philosopher who was not there and who tries to write judicially, when the whole thing was one of arms and had gone beyond the possibility of judicial determination.

The thing we are speaking of is not an exclusive trade at all: it is to be saved

from being professionalized; it is far more a matter of knowledge, of intelligent interest and literary accomplishment, than of balancing evidence or of expert training. History consists of facts infused with life rather than of mere opinions. Of course there is such a thing as a philosophy of history, a treatment of causes and effects, a connecting of results and an explaining of consequences, but that is wholly beyond the children in the elementary or secondary schools; and, aside from that, it is in the province of historical or philosophical speculation, and not in the field of historical fact at all.

The same considerations govern the teaching as the writing of history. To be effectively taught it will have to be

done by partisans, whose hearts quicken with the teaching and are quickened by it as it progresses. The thing taught will have to be within a compass which pupils can grasp, and it will have to be made so clear, so full of human action and interest, will have to move in such an orderly and convincing way, that normal children must be enlightened, entertained, and convinced by it.

We have 2,000,000 children in our New York schools. Large numbers of them are the children of parents who are new in the State and know little of the facts and the spirit of our history. We had 1,800,000 souls added to the population of New York State, and 1,300,000 added to the population of New York city,

betwēen 1900 and 1910. In other words, the decade's increase alone would make great cities and states as the world goes. And there are vast numbers of children descended from early settlers in the State who know little of the facts and feel little of the inspiration of our history. It is very vital to the State that they shall know these facts and feel this inspiration. No civilization lives unto itself alone. It is a matter on intelligence, of feeling, and of relations and outlook. A civilization treasures what its fathers did for it, and it is urgent about what it aspires to do for its children and their children. Indeed, loyalty to and intelligence about this line of teaching in the homes and in the schools goes farther than anything

else to determine the power and the right of a civilization to endure.

The schools of all peoples are expected to attend to the matter. Frankly, I do not think we attend to it as well as we ought. We are as prodigal of our history as of our lands, and woods, and waters, and children. We need to conserve and care more for all of them. The people need to help the schools to do it better. Recall the books, the statues, and columns, and arches, and art galleries, and great buildings dedicated to statesmen, and soldiers, and scholars, and artists in Rome and Madrid and Zurich and Berlin and Amsterdam and Paris and Edinburg and London, and every other city in the Old World. St. Petersburg is so full of them

that it is mere display without the discrimination in selecting subjects or that balance between show and understanding which is the vital basis of any patriotism or any civilization that is of much worth. Stockholm, one of the fine cities of the world, goes all lengths in making the display without subjecting herself to any criticism for ignorance or grossness. Her well-made streets and her clean squares express her appreciation of the intellectual and martial history of Sweden. Opposite the palace of the democratic king an art gallery of great merit expresses the history of the nation to a people that is free from the burden of illiteracy. The arts and industries and the intellectual and constitutional evolutions of Sweden are all

admirably represented. Under the great dome there is the magnificent painting of the military guard bearing home on their shoulders through the deep snows, the body of King Charles XII, killed in battle with the Norwegians after Peter the Great had been brought to his reckoning: as the Swedish women look upon it they flush with indignation and the men clinch their fists and renew their oaths of loyalty to the fatherland. A few blocks away is the unparalleled Thorwaldsen collection of marbles known of all who can appreciate the beautiful. And a mile or two away, at Skansen, in the park, are the many structures which hold the products and prortay the actual life of Swedish generations, from the mud

hut of the barbarians down to the fine city which is the abundant fruitage of the high civilization that has resulted from the ambition, industry, valor and honor of Sweden. And, by the way, the military guards at Skansen are in the buff and blue, the leather breeches and top boots, the great coats and three-cornered hats of Washington's army, which we must have borrowed from Gustavus Adolphus.

That we have not done these things very largely or always with the best of judgment is not because we are lacking in events to portray or history to teach. The history of Holland and Britain, indeed the history of all intellectual and constitutional progress in all lands, is

our inheritance. But we have to go no farther back than the first settlements upon the Hudson River to find both great and picturesque events to illustrate the evolution of the material state, and fascinating stories to quicken the commercial, scholarly, political, and military doings of the people. We are plutocrats in the materials that must touch the pride, quicken the heartbeats, and enlarge the sense of responsibility of every one who is worth his salt and lives upon New York soil.

There is hardly a town in the State that is without its historic episodes and traditions. There is hardly a county that has not a shrine made sacred, not a stream that has not been crimsoned by

blood spilt for the rights of man. To say nothing of the names of men, think of what Morningside Heights, and Fort Lee, and Stony Point, and Albany, and Schenectady, and Schoharie, and Cherry Valley, and Wyoming, and Oriskany, and Oswego, and Saratoga, and Fort Edward, and Lake George, and Lake Champlain, and Ticonderoga, and Crown Point, and Plattsburg, and many others, signify in the cause of human opportunity and American nationality. And it is not all a matter of soldiers by any means. We had in every part of this State, at a very early day, as fine a pioneer farming civilization, as successful manufacturing and commercial accomplishments, as the world has ever seen. We have had as brave and fascinating

struggles for the stability of political institutions, as much self-sacrifice for the upbuilding of churches and for their freedom and harmony, as intelligent and generous and abiding a faith in schools, as ever honored the life of any people in the world. It is all in our history, it is expressed in our institutions, and it bears upon our life.

It is our business to see that the children in the New York schools, for their own good and for the country's sake, get their proper share in all this. They are to get the parts of it that they can assimilate, and get it at times and in forms and quantities that will be good for their patriotic health. If they become really concerned about some part of it, they

will be about other parts of it. If their love of it begins to grow, it will keep on growing. The generalities, the high points, the speculations, or the philosophy of history, are not of much concern to young people. They want the facts, the action, of it. They want the poetry and the glamour of it. They will come to understand something of the reason and the result of it. It is to be hoped that the Division of History in the Education Department and the teachers in the schools will realize their opportunity to serve the State by refusing to have their faith settled by professional critics and by teaching history to the children by realistic pictures and by inspiring words.