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NOTES

ON

Recent Work in Southern History.

*A paper read before the Virginia Historical Society
Monday, December 21, 1891,*

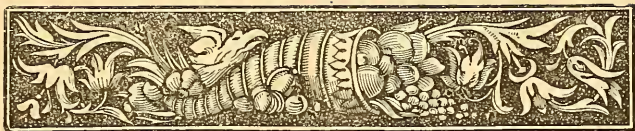
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NOTES

ON

Recent Work in Southern History.

Just two years ago I had the honor of reading before the American Historical Association at Washington, a paper similar in character to the one I am about to present. In that paper I endeavored to give a fair statement of what was then being done for the cause of Southern history, and the description I gave of the conditions under which our historical scholars had to work could hardly have been considered cheerful. I ventured to predict, however, that it would not be long before the South would awake to the necessity of encouraging the study of her own history, and it is because I believe there are signs of this awakening already visible around us that I have ventured to put together these brief and incomplete "notes."

To one who is at all acquainted with the history of the South the present comparative indifference of her people to strictly historical matters is no matter of surprise. The paucity and the thinness of the South's contributions to early American literature have been acknowledged by all competent investigators; and the chief reasons therefor have been correctly assigned. The same reasons that told so heavily against the creation of literature proper, told also against the inception and completion of much sound and extensive historical work. Here and there a gentleman of special qualifications or of leisure and ability would pro-

duce a valuable biography, or a conscientious State history. Witness for example, Marshall's "Life of Washington," and Ramsay's "History of South Carolina." Sometimes a wider, sometimes a narrower field than a single State would be attempted; more rarely a well-trained scholar like Judge Gayarre would give up the best part of his life to gathering materials for an exhaustive work. But when all is said, it has to be confessed that the number of real historical students in the old South was very small. The smallness of their numbers, as well as foreign example, naturally suggested the advisability of co-operation, and so the various State Historical Societies arose, our own being the first.¹ None of these societies, however, did any very serious work before the war, and none has ever approximated a full measure of usefulness. The Georgia Society did induce Bishop Stevens to write his history of that State, and the South Carolina Society early turned its attention to the colonial documents deposited in the State paper office in London; but it must be owned that upon the whole the Southern societies have collected no very valuable libraries; that they have not rendered such collections as they do possess thoroughly accessible; that, with the exception of our own Society of late years, they have been very irregular in their publications. It would not be hard to name more than one Northern society that has done more for historical science in a decade than all the Southern societies have done since their inception.

✓ The reasons for this condition of things are, as I have said, not far to seek. The immaturity of the country, the scattered nature of its population, the absorption of the leading intellects in politics, the free and easy-going life led by the upper classes, finally, the depressing effects of the presence of an institution which had survived its uses—all these causes operated in the ante-bellum South to depress literary and scientific work. But historical work was subjected to further drawbacks. It was possible for a gentleman of means to collect a sufficient library for

¹The Virginia Society was founded in 1831 (chartered 1834), that of Georgia in 1839, that of North Carolina in 1840 (chartered 1875), that of Tennessee in 1847 (chartered 1877), that of Alabama in 1851, that of South Carolina in 1855. The Louisiana Historical Society was incorporated in 1860.

ordinary purposes—sufficient even for the purposes of the classical scholar or the *litterateur*—but it was not possible for him to collect a library large enough to serve the purposes of the historian, certainly not the historian of recent times. This difficulty might have been overcome in part had the South possessed cities with large public libraries, or had the separate States done their duty with respect to the publication of their own archives. But throughout the South public libraries were—and are now—practically non-existent, the public archives were in a state of “confusion worse confounded.” What wonder, then, that the historical work done by our ancestors was limited in quantity and old-fashioned in quality? We ought rather to consider it a matter for congratulation and praise that they did any historical work at all, especially when we remember that the scientific study of history is not many years old, even in England itself.

I am of course far from denying that they read and studied history—few Americans know more about history, at least about that of their own country, than Southern men—but I am afraid that they regarded it chiefly as a study ancillary to their favorite pursuit of politics. That they sometimes made queer use of their historical acquisitions is abundantly evident from Calhoun’s praise of the Constitution of Poland. But when all is said, we still owe a debt of gratitude to the early Southern historians. From the days of Stith to the present hour, they have been a much-enduring class of men. They have had little encouragement, and they have always got their full share of criticism. No one ever forgets to say that their works are, as a rule, decorously dull; but a good many people forget to give them credit for their single-hearted zeal.

The evil effects of the late war upon Southern historical studies cannot be easily exaggerated. Long before hostilities were actually begun, these effects were very visible to all that had the eyes to see. One evil effect has been noted already. The prevalent desire to sustain certain positions held by the South in political matters, led her ablest men to look on history chiefly as a study ancillary to politics. The steps are few and easy from this natural but degrading view of history to the still more degrading view held by the pronouncedly-partisan historian. This last evil consequence of the civil strife of the generation just past is yet

visible in the historical writings of both sections, and will only slowly disappear. It will disappear at last, but long after the effects that the poverty and unsettled condition of the South have had upon her historical literature. These effects have naturally been considerable. Few men have had leisure to read and study in the South since the war, and fewer still to write. Few men have had time or opportunity to acquire the training which is now so requisite in all intellectual pursuits. Few have had the money to endow chairs of history in our colleges, to found libraries, or even to encourage by an annual subscription the various historical societies. Our State governments have been in no condition to vie with Northern States or with foreign countries in making their archives accessible. That they might have done more than they have done, that the little money they have appropriated for the purpose might have been better spent, it would be vain to deny; but they can at least plead more in their defense than our late billion dollar Congress can for its dereliction in this regard. In short, if the old South's lack of zeal for historical studies is not surprising, that of the new South is still less so.

But it is time I was bringing this introduction to a close and saying something about the recent work which gives my paper its title. This work is not very considerable in amount, but it plainly represents an advance over the state of things described in my paper of 1889.² At that time I could do little more than point out the encouraging features connected with the establishment of the Louisiana Historical Association at New Orleans, and of the Filson Club at Louisville. I could also give a hint of Mr. Hugh R. Garden's patriotic intention of presenting the Southern Society of New York with the nucleus of a collection of books relating to the South—a collection which is now an accomplished as well as a catalogued fact, and which is destined to grow. By a queer piece of forgetfulness I omitted all reference to what was by far the most encouraging fact I could have alluded to—the fact that North Carolina had put herself in line with New York by editing and publishing all the documents

² Papers of the American Historical Association, Vol. IV, Part IV, pp. 383-391.

relating to her colonial history. But if I could not say much that was favorable, I was not at a loss for subjects that required unfavorable comment. I could quote Mr. Brock, for example, as writing that so many members failed to answer his appeals that he could not say how many live members the Virginia Historical Society had. I could quote the President of the Alabama Society as writing that Alabama history could be better studied at Boston or at Washington than within the State. I could also point out that the valuable archives kept in this very building³ in which we are now holding our session, might any day be destroyed by fire. I could show, too, that I was no new Cassandra, for I quoted Charles Campbell as referring to this danger in 1859. I am not aware that we have yet saved our Troy, and if our archives may be fitly called our Palladium, I am not so sure that some wily Greek, like my friend Professor Jameson, will not ere long leave us in the lurch by carrying off the best part of their contents in his note-book. But if I indulged in pessimistic reflections in the body of my paper I allowed myself, nevertheless, to become a genial optimist in the conclusion, for I insisted upon the fact that the South would soon have a class of men having antiquarian tastes, and having the leisure and the wealth requisite to their pursuit. I showed, also, that Southern history offered a fascinating field of research to historical students of other sections; and I have reason to know that several Northern students of history have been turning their eyes of late toward the South. For example, a graduate student of history at Cornell is writing his doctor's thesis on the Ku-Klux movement. But our own recent work is growing cold.

Beginning with Maryland, which was not considered in my first paper, I desire to call attention to the proposition of the Woman's Literary Club, of Baltimore, to found a library of the works of all authors who have lived or written in Maryland. This movement deserves to be noted for two reasons—first, because it indicates a proper appreciation of the value of local history; secondly, because it shows that women are able to sympathize with the scientific as well as with the sentimental side of historical work. There is obviously no reason why women should not aid historians with their sympathy and enthusiasm;

³ The Capitol at Richmond.

there is equally no reason why women should not become historians themselves. The working force of the generations to come is likely to be doubled through the recognition of woman's capacity to use her brains about other than strictly household matters, and I cannot help hoping that the cause of Southern history will derive great future advantage from two "emancipations" instead of from one.

But Maryland has a still greater claim to our attention, from the fact that the Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore is the centre of historical investigation in this country. It is no exaggeration to say, that the work Professor Herbert B. Adams is doing with his graduate classes is likely to be *the* most important factor in the future development of historical studies in the South. Every year Dr. Adams sends out one or more young Southerners trained for historical pursuits, ready to teach history in our colleges, and eager to prosecute original researches in the history of their respective States. I know of three such students sent to Southern colleges within the past year. Besides, the John Hopkins is itself forming a valuable library of materials for Southern history. The Scharf collection recently secured, is, I am informed, full of good things, and I can testify from personal examination to the value of the Birney collection in all matters relating to slavery. Nor should the essays and treatises on topics of Southern history, written at the Johns Hopkins, under Dr. Adam's own eye, be omitted from this count, especially the educational monographs which he has edited. Attention should also be called to the publications of the Maryland Historical Society under the editorship of another Hopkins official, Dr. William Hand Browne.

Passing to Virginia, we find in this gathering an evidence of the fact that our venerable society seems to be taking a new lease of life. We find also that our Virginia women with their "Society for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities," are not a whit behind those of Maryland in their appreciation of the necessity for stimulating interest in local history.⁴ We note

⁴The Virginia Branch of the Daughters of the Revolution (Mrs William Wirt Henry, Regent) are making efforts to raise an endowment for the Virginia Historical Society—a most noteworthy object

furthermore that two members of this society have recently published works which will take their places in the permanent historical literature of the country. I refer, of course, to Mr. Alexander Brown's "Genesis of the United States," and to Mr. William Wirt Henry's biography of Patrick Henry. Nor do these names at all exhaust the list of the Virginians who are active in historical investigation. The work of Mr. Brock, President Tyler, Dr. Page, Mr. Moncure Conway and many others is familiar to us all. We must also remember that when our wretched debt question becomes settled, the State authorities will be deprived of their perennial excuse for their backwardness in publishing our archives. It will not be long before they will have to erect a fire-proof building for such documents as the teeth of time and of mice have left us; and in the meantime we can all hope that they will appropriate enough money to have the Northampton and other county records copied.

The recent activity of North Carolina with regard to her archives has been commended already, but a word of praise should be given here to the editor of the "Colonial Records," Hon. W. L. Saunders; to Dr. Kemp P. Battle, who has been a life-long laborer in local history, and to some younger students like Drs. Smith and Weeks for their valuable monographs. South Carolina up to last summer appeared to be sleeping soundly, but the activity of her Northern neighbor seems to have awakened her. A committee of the State Historical Society began in June to collect information as to the cost of procuring copies of all documents in the Public Record Office at London, not hitherto copied, relating to the history of the province and the colony. The chairman of this committee was Hon. William A. Courtenay, who, during the time that he was mayor of Charleston, did much to encourage historical studies by the publication of the Charleston "Year Books," and was largely instrumental in having copies made of the so-called "Shaftsbury Papers," which another committee of the society is soon to edit. Mr. Courtenay and his colleagues having got their information into shape, began an effective propaganda among the counties and parishes, in order to force the Legislature by popular pressure to appropriate the small sum necessary for the accomplishment of their purpose. A good deal of interest having been aroused, a

public meeting in behalf of the project was held at Columbia on December 1st. At the time of this writing a bill drawn up by friends of the movement has passed the lower House in a modified form, and it is unlikely that the Senate will withhold its assent.⁵ Thus South Carolina has probably secured copies of her colonial records, but she has also had her people of all classes aroused to the necessity of local historical work. If the members of her society will bestir themselves to keep the public interest from flagging, they will find that their future work will be greatly stimulated.

Passing to Georgia, we see that her historical work is still chiefly connected with one name, that of Colonel Charles C. Jones, Jr., who has recently found time to publish a volume of biographical sketches. Georgia has, also, what is perhaps the most valuable archæological collection in the Southern States, that of Dr. Roland Steiner of Waynesboro. It is further to be noted that a separate chair of history has recently been established in the State University, which is a decided step in advance. But it is the splendid example of constancy and high endeavor set by a citizen of Alabama that gives me most hope with regard to the future of Southern historical work. I refer to the labors of Mr. Hannis Taylor of Mobile, upon English constitutional history. When a lawyer in full practice can become so enamoured of scholarly work as to devote both time and money to pursuing researches similar to those which Mr. Taylor has undertaken, certainly no one need despair of the future of historical scholarship in the South.

In my paper of two years ago, the space devoted to the States of Mississippi, Florida and Arkansas, was almost as short as the famous chapter on snakes in Ireland. There was practically no historical work to record, not even a semi-defunct historical society to attend to. Recently movements for the establishment of State societies have taken place in all three of these States, and, although it is too soon to prophesy any specific results, it is safe to infer that good will be accomplished by the agitation of so important a matter. I have mentioned already the work doing by the new Louisiana Historical Association. From a

⁵ The bill has since passed.

newspaper report of the contributions lately received by this Association I judge that it has succeeded in arousing some popular interest. When people come forward voluntarily and deposit their antiquarian treasures in a public museum instead of keeping them selfishly at home, a great step forward has been made.

Lack of space prevents me from doing justice to the work of the Filson Club of Louisville, nor can I pay more than a passing tribute to the activity of the West Virginia Historical and Antiquarian Society, which, if it has not yet done great things, is evidently working along modern lines.⁶ I must mention, however, a society which, although just organized, will, I hope, do good work and set a good example. I refer to the Sewanee Historical Society, recently founded by officers, students and friends of the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee. As I happen to be president of this Society, and somewhat responsible for its existence, I should prefer to keep silent about it, but for the fact that it seems to me to stand for one or two ideas which may be fruitful of good to the cause which I have most at heart—the cause of Southern history. Whether the Sewanee Society will succeed in accomplishing the objects it proposes to itself cannot now be determined, but the ideas it stands for can be weighed in the balance now, and if approved can be acted upon at once by others.

The first idea is to enlist in the service of historical research all the forces that go to make up a university. Every student, alumnus and friend of Sewanee is to be appealed to for contributions ranging from an Indian arrow head to a life member's fee. Corresponding members have been selected from among the alumni, especially the clergy, to spread the historical propaganda in every city and parish in the South. Some have already responded in a loyal way, for it is a great thing to touch into activity two such strong feelings, as love for one's *alma mater*, and love for one's country. The law is said not to care for trifles, but the Sewanee Society does, for it believes that the best way to found an historical library and museum is to appeal for small gifts; for what

⁶ It has recently established a "Magazine of Southern History," under the editorship of Professor Virgil A. Lewis.

most people would regard as trifles; old letters, old newspapers, odd numbers of magazines, any book printed in the South, be it only a school arithmetic. Not a student is allowed to leave the University without having it impressed upon him that he will confer a personal favor upon the officers of the society if he will keep a sharp lookout for such things. Now this idea of utilizing students and alumni is not new, but I am not aware that it has yet been applied by many of our Southern colleges in behalf of local history. I pass over the obvious advantages which the calm seclusion of a university offers for the study of history, in order to say a few words about another idea which this Society represents.

The Society is managed by an executive council which is organized like a German seminary. It meets frequently, hears papers read, and is responsible for the proper use of the materials gathered by the Society. Each member is assigned special work—generally by the president—and it has been resolved that for several years to come this work must be local in character. In other words, the council is pledged to prepare a careful history of the University of the South, and if it does no more than this, it will at least do more than some older and more important American universities have yet done for themselves. The Society, therefore, stands for the idea that minute work on local history must be prosecuted before any lasting work can be done in the more ambitious field of general Southern history.

Now, why cannot every college and university in the South have a local historical society working in a true seminary style? I believe that Richmond College already has one. And why should not every town, village and city have one as well? Such societies need not interfere in the slightest degree with the State societies—they should rather be auxiliary to them. They can be organized by a dozen earnest persons, and certainly every college that has a professor of history ought to be able to furnish a competent director for the work. It would seem, by the way, that this historical work could be easily fitted in with the schemes for university extension, which are being so vigorously discussed. I know of no more fruitful way of preparing a community to receive the benefits of university extension—and if I mistake not our Southern universities are too much cut off from the great

public that lives and moves around them—than by instituting preliminary courses in local history, to be conducted by the professor of history in the nearest college or other institution of learning.

But my time is exhausted and I must bring these "notes" to a conclusion. I trust that this paper has shown that the Southern people are beginning to see the necessity for encouraging their historical students, and that the work these students are doing is being done on right lines. I believe that year by year more materials for Southern history will be gathered and more scholarly work done on them. I believe that the time will soon come when the self-sacrifice and patient endurance of the Southern historians of the past and present will be generally recognized and praised. At any rate I am certain that we are even now far removed from the time when the following incident could occur in a Southern State and among educated men.

A certain Georgia citizen, whose name is not given, wrote an account of some stirring scene in his State's early history. He died before he could have his monograph published. Two gentlemen of high standing, probably lawyers, were appointed his executors. They undertook the delicate task of apportioning the estate among the several heirs, and things went on swimmingly for a time until the testator's manuscript was reached. Here a difficulty arose. It could not be divided. To publish it would be an unheard-of extravagance. It could not be left to become a bone of contention to the heirs. What, then, did these exemplary gentlemen—men who could doubtless have defended with great zeal and eloquence the genial practices of lynching and dueling—do with the manuscript? They burned it!⁷

W. P. TRENT.

⁷From a pamphlet by Governor George R. Gilmer, of Georgia, quoted in *The Southern Quarterly Review* for April, 1852 (Vol. XXI, p. 514).

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