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Francis Parkman

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FRANCIS PARKMAN

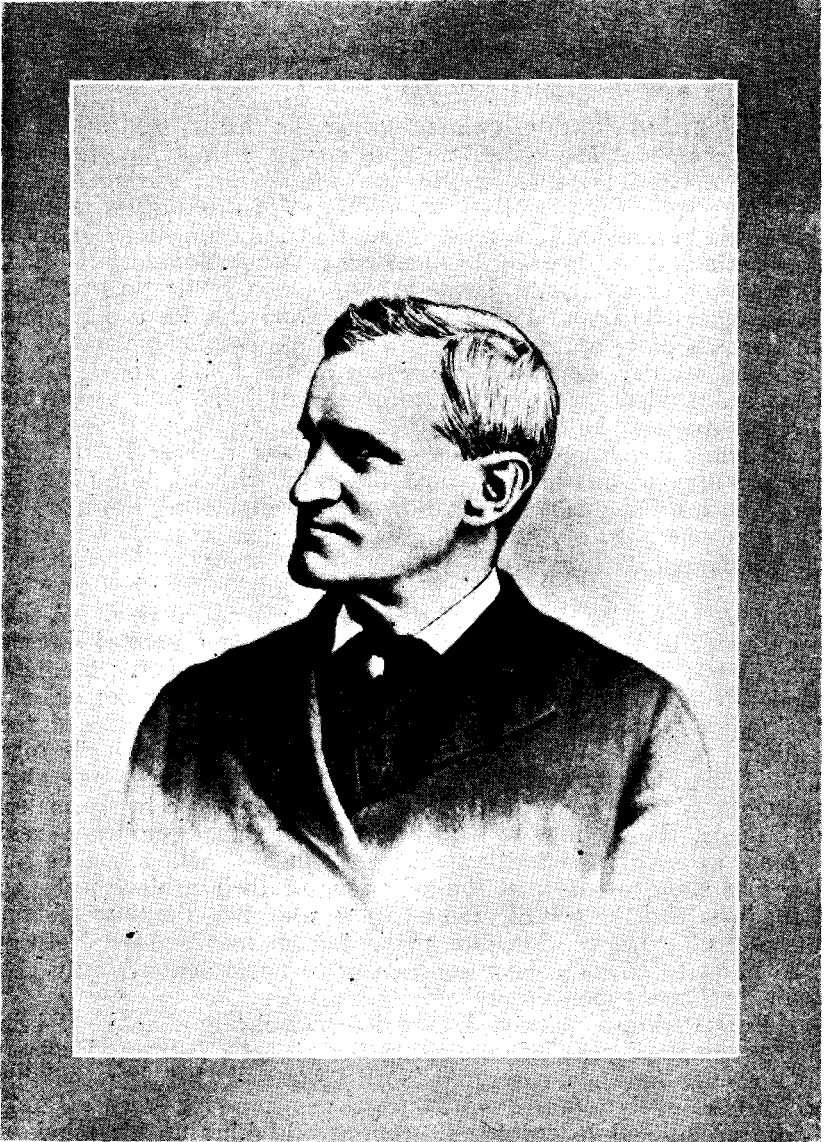
BY

BASIL WILLIAMS¹

The United States can claim, during the century and a half of its existence, four historians who rank among the notable historians of modern times: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley and Parkman; and of these certainly not the least is the subject of this address to-night—Francis Parkman. It is most fitting that the Canadian Historical Association, at the meeting to inaugurate its new title and its more catholic activities, should devote a few minutes of its time to celebrate the centenary of Parkman's birth. And this for two reasons. In the first place a great historian is not the peculiar possession of any one country, he is the possession of the world, and the true historical student will profit from the great historian's researches and his mastery, be he English, French, Italian, German or Canadian; hence any company of learned historians, such as I now have the privilege of addressing, would naturally wish to do honour to one who has enlightened, as Parkman has enlightened, any part of our great heritage of the past. But there is a second, even more special reason why we should honour this centenary. Though not a Canadian himself, Parkman is pre-eminently the historian of Canada. Others no doubt have written histories of merit about this country, or have explored with industry and insight isolated aspects of its past; but no one has made the face of the country familiar, made living the struggles of our forefathers of both races against the forces of nature and of savage humanity, or awakened the national pride and sense of romance in the country and its history as Parkman has done in his great series. The tribute we owe him, therefore, is not merely to the great historian but also to the maker of Canada. For he may be hailed a maker of Canada in just as real a sense as we give that title to the great men of action that he for the first time revealed, in the splendour of their achievements, to Canadians and the world. Indeed those who, like Parkman, follow the precept, "Let us, therefore, praise famous men and our Fathers who begot us," inspire later generations to noble action hardly less than the famous men themselves.

Had Parkman succeeded even less completely than he did in his self-imposed task of recounting the struggle between England and France for the mastery of North America, his life and his methods of work would have been worth remembering as an example to historians and indeed to all scholars. Making up his mind as early as his college days what should be the subject of his life-work, he devoted himself thenceforward solely to preparing himself for

¹ Address delivered on the evening of May the 24th in the Auditorium of the Victoria Museum.



Francis Parkman

that work and to carrying it out with the same single-minded devotion as any cloistered saint or paladin of old undertook his life of service. It is remarkable that two of the band of American historians who illumined their country's literature during that great period of material, mental and spiritual development between the reign of Andrew Jackson and the end of the Civil War, two of these men, Prescott and Parkman, worked under physical disabilities that would have daunted men of less determined stamp. Prescott was nearly blind and with him reading was always difficult and often impossible; yet his works are a proof of the spirit with which he overcame his difficulties. Parkman's case was even worse. Added to sight so bad that he rarely could read for more than five minutes at a time, he had a mysterious nervous complaint which forbade concentration of his mind for periods appreciably longer. Indeed for some ten years of the primè of his life his general state of health was so desperate that he had almost entirely to abandon his literary labours. Between 1851 and 1865 he published nothing relating to his main theme. During this dark period, however, his energetic spirit did not allow him to remain idle, and he devoted himself to gardening, perhaps the only pursuit of which his ailing faculties were then capable. It is characteristic of him, too, that in this by-product of his energy he attained so much success that he became noted for his flowers, and he even held the chair of horticulture for a short time at his dearly loved university of Harvard.

From 1865, when by dint of carefully husbanding his faculties he was able once more to turn to the great work he had set himself to accomplish, till the very eve of his death in 1893, he went on steadily working. At intervals of from two to seven years he published seven parts of his *France and England in North America*, the concluding portion on the Conspiracy of Pontiac having been published first in 1851. By that time he had carried out his task, but still under almost incredible disadvantages. Nearly all the immense mass of material that he had to assimilate for his purpose had to be read out to him by devoted helpers, since he could not trust his eyesight for any prolonged spell of reading. For the actual work of composition he partly dictated his work, partly by an ingenious "gridiron" he had contrived he was able to write for short periods without hurting his eyes by looking at the paper. To any one who has attempted historical work requiring much research, such as Parkman required and undertook for his books, the prodigious effort of memory and still more of concentrated will needed for any sort of work under such circumstances will be perhaps faintly intelligible; but when the result of Parkman's labours with all these disadvantages is seen in the finished and well-rounded volumes of his series, the effort seems little short of marvellous. He himself, in one of his autobiographical letters, says—and we may well believe

him—"Taking the last forty years as a whole, the capacity of literary work, which during that time has fallen to my share, has, I am confident, been considerably less than a fourth part of what it would have been under normal conditions."

So much it is only fitting that one should say with regard to Parkman's special difficulties, difficulties which would make his persistence and ultimate triumph remarkable in any walk of life. This aspect of his career is an inspiration and example to us all, whatever may be our special pursuit; for, though few of us fortunately labour under the extraordinary difficulties he met so courageously, yet we all have our crosses which at times seem to make the goal unattainable, and it is just the memory of such valiant struggles against odds as fell to Parkman's lot that gives us courage to fight against lesser difficulties, maybe, and hope that stern endeavour will overcome them.

With these brief words on Parkman the man, I now turn to him as the historian, and shall attempt to see what lessons we can draw from his methods, and what judgment we should form as to the value of his accomplished work.

As to his methods: First and foremost he formed at the outset a very clear idea of what he wanted to say. At an early age, he tells us in his autobiographical sketch, he "became enamoured of the woods," the woods of his continent and all that they meant in the early history of European adventure and discovery. At the age of eighteen his fixed intention was to write the "forest drama," as he calls it, which came to its culmination in the great war resulting in the conquest of Canada. To do this effectively he realized he would have to trace back the earliest attempts of colonization by the French and their relations with the denizens of the American forest—all the wild tribes of the woods with whom they came in contact. "My theme fascinated me," he writes, "and I was haunted with wilderness images day and night." But though the romance of the woods had gripped him, he at once saw that vague images coming to him in day-dreams and at night would not enable him to write history. He must have as his basis, not only the solid facts acquired by research in records, but still more those acquired by personal experience, of the kind that would "identify him with his theme." This experience he sought perhaps in more whole-hearted fashion than any other historian has sought it since Herodotus's day. In his college vacations he used to go wandering about the hills and forests of New England, still in parts much as they might have been when the Abenakis roamed and hunted among them. He explored thoroughly all the country which he described in his *Conspiracy of Pontiac*. Once he carefully traced the course of Abercromby's force as it went up from Albany on its ill-fated mission to Fort Ticonderoga, and thence down lake Champlain

by the route along which Montcalm had brought his men to victory, a journey of which we see the fruits in that wonderful description of the British flotilla sailing down lake George and in the loving record of the noble Howe's last talks on the bearskin with the great colonial ranger Stark. Later, when he has left college, he undertook the arduous journey which he has recounted in the *Oregon Trail*. Realising that the wild life of the pioneer on the prairie would soon be a thing of the past, that the tracks through the forest-lands of the continent would be obliterated with the forests through which they led, that the great buffalo herds would within a comparatively short time be almost extinct, and that the few remaining tribes of Indians would not much longer retain their wild flavour—in short that all that was most characteristic of North America in the days of which he proposed to write was bound even in his lifetime to disappear;—realizing all this, he determined to see it all and live the life of the pioneer for himself while there was yet time. He was ailing when he started and no doubt made his nervous malady permanent by the hardships he underwent in his determination to carry the experiment through; but he did what he had set out to do. He was able to experience, as far as anybody could in his age, what the pioneers of New France and New England had gone through. He “hunted the buffalo on horseback, over a broken country, when without the tonic of the chase he could scarcely sit upright in the saddle.” For five days he followed the trail of a tribe of Ogillallah Indians, and having caught them up after tremendous exertions, accompanied them in their wanderings for several weeks, so as to catch some faint idea of what his early Jesuit missionaries must have experienced in their endeavours to reclaim similar tribes to their Master's fold. Then, as if this was not enough, he must try, while in Rome, to catch something of the spiritual exaltation of those devoted missionaries by getting leave to spend some days in a cell of the Passionist Fathers' convent.

All these exertions and all these experiences he went through not merely in order to study what he would have to describe, but also from the belief that the historian should not be just the “pale student, glued to his desk, . . . whose natural fruit is that pallid and emasculate scholarship of which New England,” as he puts it, “has had too many examples,” but one who, having to write of vigorous life, should have tasted all the joys and hardships of vigorous life in his own person. “For the student,” to quote his own words again, “there is, in its season, no better place than the saddle, and no better companion than the rifle or the oar.” Indeed, when you come to look at the careers of most of the great historians of the world, Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus, and in later times Gibbon, Macaulay, you will find that much of their power comes from the fact that they were men of action in politics or in the field as well as students: for as a

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French statesman, and no mean historian, has said, "Ecrire l'histoire, c'est agir, et c'est pourquoi il convient que l'historien soit homme d'action."

But because he saw something more than literary research in the historian's equipment, Parkman was no mere amateur who thought that vaguely picturesque writing could take the place of solid learning. What physical obstacles there were to his studying in archives and reading the crabbed handwriting of 16th and 17th century documents I have already indicated. Fortunately he had ample means wherewith to hire copyists; he had devoted relatives who served him with their eyes and hands. Above all he had that zeal for exact knowledge and that determination to acquire it that overcame all material obstacles. He had an extraordinary flair for discovering recondite manuscripts in their most obscure recesses and with it a quiet and tactful persistence which invariably enabled him to persuade their owners to let him extract from them what he needed. In the tales that can be told about the unearthing of missing authorities few could be more romantic than those of Parkman's success in getting sight of material for his *La Salle* and *Montcalm and Wolfe*. The *La Salle MSS.* had been discovered by a French friend of Parkman's who refused to let any eye but his own see them, unless his heavy expenses of publishing them were assured to him. In order to secure that they should be made available to himself and the world, Parkman actually induced Congress to pay for their publication, and so secured for his account of the Mississippi adventure that richness of detail it possesses. Another precious collection of letters from Montcalm to Bourlamaque had been known to exist in France, but had been sold and, since their sale, had been entirely lost to view. To make matters worse, the names neither of seller nor of purchaser could be traced. Parkman, however, with hardly any clue to guide him, pursued his investigations like a slueth-hound, until he finally tracked them over from France to the Phillips collection in England, and was rewarded by permission to have copies taken of them.

These two incidents are characteristic of his methods of preparation for his work. In some respects indeed he reminds one of the actors who would not play the part of Othello without blacking his body all over, so exhaustive was he in his verification of the minutest points. When he has to speak of the influence of France on the history of her colony, he is not content to accept the ordinary views of French history, but he must needs make the French history of the period his own by independent researches. So it is with regard to everything related in his books. The specialist of today may perchance discover new material which may throw a different light on some of Parkman's versions of the facts, and of course everybody does not accept his judgments; but probably there are hardly any

statements of fact related by Parkman which could have been proved false from material available in his day.

Now to come to the finished product. What judgment are we to pronounce upon it? The first impression, I think, which the reader has is that his work is the work of a story-teller, not of an erudite and scholarly historian, as we have seen Parkman was. The narrative flows with so much ease, each volume forms so finished a tale in itself that one is apt to feel that it is more like some romance spun from the brain of an imaginative writer than a work of erudition representing the labour of years. If that is so, it is the highest tribute that Parkman could have wished to be paid him, for it is exactly the effect he strove to attain. He believed that history should not be a series of lucubrations intended solely for the student's shelf, but a joyous, living story, to appeal to the common man and cause him almost insensibly to realize the lessons of the past. Once, when he was reproached for criticizing a historian for taking too dignified a view of history, he replied, "Damn the dignity of history; straws are often the best material." The fact was that Parkman thought no toil, however great and prolonged, could be excessive for the writer of history in his search after the most scrupulous accuracy, but that in the finished product the least sign of this *limae labor* was an impertinent intrusion on the reader, as distracting from his attention on the main object, a representation of the past.

The most formidable criticism made against Parkman's work, both in his own lifetime and since, is that he is not fair in his presentation of the French régime in Canada and notably in his view of the Jesuits and the activity of the Roman Catholic Church generally. This criticism was strongly put forward by Parkman's contemporary and friend, the Abbé Casgrain, himself a noted writer on early Canadian history, and it was the reason why the University of Laval refused to honour him with the degree, which it was reserved for my University to grant him. Now I think it cannot be denied that Parkman had a strong prejudice against the policy of the Jesuits and also against the general system of administration in French Canada, and that he took no pains to conceal this prejudice. The savour indeed of his volume comes out very strongly in his *obiter dicta* on these matters. But in forming a judgment on this criticism we must distinguish between the facts as set forth by the chronicler and the opinions he expresses on these facts. To me it seems that in the presentation of the facts Parkman is so just and fair that he gives every opportunity to those who disagree with his point of view to form conclusions different from his own. Some writers with violent prejudices are so overcome with zeal in their cause that, whether wittingly or unconsciously, they are apt to overlook facts that militate against their preconceived opinions. But this can never

be said of Parkman. He always quite fairly gives the facts upon which anyone, with different preconceptions to his own, is at liberty to arrive at an exactly opposite conclusion. Thus in his great book on *The Jesuits in North America*, though with all his admiration for the early Jesuit missionaries he cannot restrain the expression of his contempt for many of the chief objects of their devotion, yet throughout he provides the most ardent Catholic with material for sustaining a judgment more in harmony with Catholic teaching. Personally, though I agree with Parkman's conclusions in the main, I feel often that he weakens his own case by a certain hardness of vision and want of sympathy with the exaltation of the religious enthusiast. I can understand, for example, a devout Catholic objecting to the conclusion of one of his most moving chapters: "When we see them entering, one after another, these wretched abodes of misery and darkness, and all for one sole end, the baptism of the sick and dying, *we may smile at the futility of the object*, but we must needs admire the self-sacrificing zeal with which it was pursued." If I felt secure enough in my own faith, I should not reject the history for that reason, because I should feel that the object was not futile, and that all the facts which Parkman so movingly relates only add to the glory of these heroic missionaries and of the faith that inspired them. It is my strong belief that you cannot get an historian worth reading who has not got prejudices of some sort; sometimes, as in the case of Carlyle, very violent prejudices; but if, as with Parkman, you get that fairness and scholarly accuracy in setting forth the facts, you also have in his books the antidote, if you wish it, to these very prejudices. And after all you will generally find that from the strength of the great writer's opinions, or even prejudices, comes the inspiration that makes his work live.

A more just criticism which, to my thinking, one might make on Parkman's work is that it suffers somewhat as a whole by its disjointed form of composition. He composed the last volume of the series long before he had begun the others; and *Montcalm and Wolfe* was produced before its predecessor in chronological order. The consequence is that there is a certain overlapping of interest in the volumes and the whole chain of events is not so clearly exposed as it might have been by a more systematic method. Indeed, with all Parkman's great merits, you do miss in him something of that majestic sweep over the whole period, which you find in the very greatest historians.

This defect, such as it is, is no doubt partly due to the enormous physical difficulties from which Parkman suffered, but still more to Parkman's dramatic instinct in seizing some central figure or movement round which to group all he had to say in each volume. He groaned, for example, a good deal over his last-written volume,

A Half-Century of Conflict, as he could find no striking incident or personality on which to focus interest, and put off writing it till he had finished what he cared for much more. But if we look at his work as a whole, this is a comparatively small matter, since no one can deny that essentially Parkman has succeeded in giving a gallery of the most vigorous and living pictures yet produced of Canada, from its discovery till its conquest by the English.

And what pictures they are! You know the rivers, the lakes, the forests, the clearings, the tracks and the portages and the rapids, the mission-stations and the settlements of the early days as if you had actually seen them yourself. I once had to get up the topography of Quebec for my own purposes, and in doing so relied largely on Parkman. I remember that subsequently, when I first sailed up the St. Lawrence and came in view of the Montmorency falls, the St. Charles river and the great bluff of Quebec itself, it all seemed perfectly familiar ground to me, so vivid had been the impression given to me in Parkman's loving descriptions. And the men and women who live through his pages! Sometimes a mere sketch of a few lines—such the sketches of some of those early Jesuit Fathers, or of Jeanne Mance, or of Marie de l'Incarnation—leaves an indelible impression on your mind. Sometimes the more finished pictures, La Salle, Frontenac, Wolfe, Montcalm, stand out before you as if they were dear living men you have known in the flesh. And the unforgettable scenes he paints of the life and adventures in those early days! His Frontenac, the *grand seigneur*, suddenly seizing the hatchet at a pow-wow of his fierce Indian allies, brandishing it, and, with wild whoops, dancing the war dance with never a loss of his dignity and mastery! Or take perhaps the most beautiful of all his pictures, that of the birth-night of Montreal:—

“Maissonneuve sprang ashore and fell on his knees. His followers imitated his example; and all joined their voices in enthusiastic songs of thanksgiving. Tents, baggage, arms and stores were landed. An altar was raised on a pleasant spot near at hand; and Mdlle. Mance, with Mme. de la Peltrie, aided by her servant, Charlotte Barré, decorated it with a taste which was the admiration of the beholders. Now all the company gathered before the shrine. Here stood Vimont, in the rich vestments of his office. Here were the two ladies, with their servants; Montmagny, no very willing spectator; and Maissonneuve, a warlike figure, erect and tall, his men clustering around him—soldiers, sailors, artisans, and labourers—all alike soldiers at need. They kneeled in reverent silence as the Host was raised aloft; and when the rite was over, the priest turned and addressed them:—

‘You are a grain of mustard seed, that shall rise and grow till its branches overshadow the earth. You are few, but your

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work is the work of God. His smile is on you and your children shall fill the land.'

"The afternoon waned; the sun sank behind the western forest, and twilight came on. Fireflies were twinkling over the darkened meadow. They caught them, tied them with threads into shining festoons and hung them before the altar, where the Host remained exposed. Then they pitched their tents, lighted their bivouac fires, stationed their guards, and lay down to rest. Such was the birth-night of Montreal."

Is this true history, or a romance of Christian chivalry? It is both.

Such are the pictures that will live as long as Canada is a country, or as long as noble deeds are counted worthy of remembrance. Noble deeds of endurance and self-sacrifice for a cause that seems worthy to the doer, these are the aspects of our history which attracted Parkman to his tale, and these are what chiefly make his series memorable. For, simple and limpid as his narrative always seems, there is a brave philosophy of life underlying it; and you will find that the quality which wins his highest praise and on which he dwells most willingly, is *Manliness*—the manliness which has made whatever is best in Canada, and which, as long as her sons possess it, will make her a greater country yet.