

5-1-1925

Comment

John Ely Briggs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Briggs, John E. "Comment." *The Palimpsest* 6 (1925), 174-176.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol6/iss5/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Comment by the Editor

IMAGINATION IN HISTORY

At a time near the end of the last century when the general tendency of American literature was to be clever and amusing, the historians wrote a tedious page. They emphasized accuracy and cultivated detachment until their writings lost both vividness and unity in a maze of factual information. Some there were, like Justin Winsor, who laid no claim to good style and who avowedly made of history a thing of "shreds and patches" on the pretense that life itself consists of dates and isolated episodes. College history teachers particularly, influenced by didactics and devoted to seminar technique, lost sight of the purpose of history in their zeal for critical standards and the exploitation of documentary sources. Historical writing was reduced to mechanical routine, and the proof of good work lay in the foot-notes. Imagination and literary expression were taboo. Frederic Harrison epitomized the prevalent attitude in his assertion that "brilliant and ingenious writing has been the bane of history."

Ingenuity, in the sense of shrewd imaginative foresight, is not the bane of anything — certainly not of history. The noblest purpose of history is to vitalize the past — an end that can not be fully

achieved without a keen appreciation of setting, human nature, and the relative significance of facts. Imagination is a prime essential both in the conception and the execution of historical research, for it is only through imagination that the people, places, and events of the past can be visualized. Without imagination the historian can neither discover his materials nor write convincingly.

Much of the story of "An Ioway Village" is imaginary — the visit of the author, the name of the guide, the conversation, the present tense. The village itself is a composite. Yet, as a description of the manner of living, the character, and the appearance of the Ioway Indians a hundred years ago, the account is absolutely accurate and more truthful than a lifeless list of facts. Imagination, born of sympathetic understanding, has paved the way to the recreation of the past.

Francis Parkman was successful because he was able to make historical personages live in his pages. He thought of his great series of books dealing with the French and English struggle for the possession of North America as "the history of the American forest". "My theme fascinated me," he wrote, "and I was haunted with wilderness images day and night." While adhering scrupulously to the truth, he tried to animate facts and "clothe the skeleton with flesh".

Truthful history is more than the recounting of cold facts: the narrator must saturate his story with

the life and spirit of the time. As Woodrow Wilson said, historians should be as those who see "a distant country and a far-away people before their very eyes, as real, as full of life and hope and incident, as the day in which they themselves live." Historians need imagination quite as much as scholarship.

J. E. B.