

5-1-1931

Comment

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Recommended Citation

Briggs, John E. "Comment." *The Palimpsest* 12 (1931), 198-200.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol12/iss5/5>

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Comment by the Editor

THE PARADOX OF NAMES AND DATES

Reduce the most significant event to final terms, omit the misery and the glory, ignore the causes and effects, and all that then remains are the simple facts of someone, somewhere, sometime. King John at Runnymede in 1215 put his seal upon the Magna Charta. As matter consists of molecules, as music is sound, and sculpture form, so human deeds may be described in elemental terms. Delve into the mines of past achievement, smelt up the ore of circumstance, skim off the superficial dross, and only the gold of personality is left. People, time, and place are the fundamental elements of history.

In certain realms the truth is more or less apparent. Let one fact be known, like the force of gravity, and an explanation of the universe can be deduced with logical precision. The mathematician may verify his answer by simply reversing the process. According to the universal rules of sentence structure, it is inherently right that the number of the predicate should depend upon the subject. No further test is necessary. The simple axiom contains the proof of its own validity.

But when the historian goes in search of truth, he

must be aware of other evidence than the simple facts of person, time, and place. Guided by nothing but the fundamental elements of history, he can not be sure the facts are right. Places like Red Bud or Rome have no natural significance. Other facts must be adduced to give them meaning.

A date alone might indicate the time when innumerable events transpired. To the question, "What happened on the Fourth of July in 1826?" a multitude of answers might be right. The day of the week was Tuesday; John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and many other people died that day; no doubt some more were born; and Liberty Bell was tolled in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the nation's independence. The number of the day and year itself is meaningless.

The same thing may be said concerning people. In the records of the past, Napoleon is nothing but a name. Sam Hill, John Brown, Dan Webster, and Erasmus Whifflestilt might all be famous men or unknown dolts for all their names imply. Only in relation to time and place could they have any personality, and even then their actuality might not be entirely certain. Chicago and 1859 do not identify John Brown beyond a doubt, though he was there that year.

When Irving B. Richman was describing anti-slavery sentiment in *Ioway to Iowa*, he discovered that a novel, *Emma Bartlett*, was written in 1856 by an Iowa woman. Contemporary advertisements indicated that "Kate

Harrington" was the author's name and that she lived in Keokuk. There were all of the elements — name and place and date.

But how could he be sure that they were accurate? Perhaps the book itself would supply an explanation. Though the title page was noncommittal, the notice of copyright verified the date but gave protection to R. H. Smith instead of the reputed author.

Moreover, the confusion was further complicated by an assertion that Josephine Pollard wrote the book. There was an author of that name. Apparently "Kate Harrington" was a pseudonym and R. H. Smith might have been a friend or relative. Persistent inquiry revealed nothing to contradict the authorship of Josephine Pollard, and so to her the book was credited by Mr. Richman. From all the facts available it was entirely reasonable; yet in two essentials the statement was erroneous. *Emma Bartlett* was actually written by Rebecca Harrington Smith, later the wife of James Pollard, and in 1856 she lived in Farmington instead of Keokuk.

What paradox is this? The very essence of history consists of names and dates, but isolate them from their associations and their whole significance is lost.

J. E. B.