

The Historian's Point of View: Is It National Or Local, Or Both?

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THE HISTORIAN'S POINT OF VIEW: IS IT NATIONAL OR LOCAL, OR BOTH?

Our old maxim, "Familiarity breeds contempt," and its correlative, "Distance lends enchantment," doubtless account for the common undervaluation of the worth and interest of local history. Notwithstanding the widespread increase in recent years, of scientific study of local life and local institutions, we may observe a marked tendency towards such undervaluation among academicians. It is exhibited in the general inclination to inculcate the notion that local history if desirable, is worth while merely in so far as it aids in illuminating national history. Local events and local life in and of themselves are regarded either with contempt or with toleration as stale, flat and unprofitable. But if they exert a potent influence upon the currents of national life and government or conversely, local life is constantly modified by national forces whose currents flow into, over and around local institutions, then local history and local life become matters worth while to the scientific student of social origins and evolution. This attitude is apparent in the concluding words of an interesting and instructive paper written by Prof. Allen Johnson, of Iowa College, at Grinnell, on "Early Iowa as a Field for Historical Research":

"Ultimately the study of frontier conditions", says Prof. Johnson, "must find its reward in its contributions to the collective life of the nation. It is the national viewpoint that illuminates much that would be hopelessly commonplace in the annals of western community life".

The whole is, of course, greater than its parts. By reason of its mass or size the aggregate naturally attracts more attention than do any of its units. The vast extent of our national domain, the immense and endlessly varying interests dependent upon our national government, its highly complex mechanism, and the growing importance of federal agencies in the furtherance of local welfare give a grandeur and mag-

nificence to the nation's life and history that easily enthrall the mind, and the minutiae of local life seem petty and uninteresting in contrast. But are local laws intrinsically less interesting and instructive than are national life and institutions? Are not the laws of growth and evolution the same in the units as in the grand aggregate? Of necessity such is the case.

The laws of physics, the law of gravitation, apply to the pebble as well as the planet. Action and reaction are coequal in social life as in physical or chemical phenomena, and this law finds constant illustration in local life no less than in national life. The great science of Biology has not been built up exclusively out of the conclusions of studies of the stately mammalian species, but equally out of data gathered by patient investigators of the phenomena of the amoeba and jelly fish, of the frog, the crayfish, and the grasshopper. Moreover, the intrinsic interest of the less complex forms of life is not a whit less than is that of the larger species or grand aggregate. The fragrance of the solitary rose on the prairie, the bloom of the lilacs in the cottager's door yard, are not less entrancing than the subtle essences exhaled from the masses of bloom in the conservatories of suburban palaces. So it is with local life and history. Here at home we find at every turn in the road countless illustrations of the universal laws of life and evolution. The data and the laws of sociology, of the economic, political and social sciences may be investigated successfully in the hamlets and villages, in the towns and cities of Iowa precisely as our students study the phenomena of physiology and disease in our hospitals and laboratories.

Which is the more important, which is the more interesting, national or local history? This is the question that it is difficult, if not impossible to answer. Indeed, we suspect that no answer is needed. Local life makes up the content of national life. Local forces and factors, local customs and institutions, local interests and prejudices determine national

life and government. *Per contra*, national forces and conditions, and interstate relations and interests, international relations and foreign policies, react forcefully upon local life and condition its development. We can not understand one without a knowledge of the other. Neither state nor nation can act free from a consideration of the interests and welfare of the other. Which is the more important—one or the other of the halves of a pair of scissors?

In saying this we perhaps do Professor Johnson an injustice. With the most of what we have just said he doubtless would agree. In the paper referred to he was making a direct appeal to our educators, students and citizens to take an active interest in local institutions, to undertake investigations and studies of local history here in Iowa. To arouse such interest he had first to overcome our traditional indifference to things near at hand because of the nearly universal assumption that local life is unutterably dull and prosaic. To disturb this persistent prejudice he points out the vital connection of local history with the currents of national life, and seeks through the common interest in national affairs to create an intelligent interest in our communal life here at home; and to secure sympathetic interest he lays the emphasis chiefly on the national phase of the subject.

F. I. H.

INFORMATION WANTED.

A contributor to THE ANNALS desires to obtain the nativity, occupations, ages, and legislative experience of Iowa pioneer law makers. In 1854 the legislature published a "census" or "register" of the members giving such data, but no other such lists seem to have been included in the legislative documents prior to 1860. We have the list for 1838-39. Any reader of THE ANNALS knowing of such lists, or any publication affording such information, will confer a favor by communicating with the Editor.

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