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HUGH WYNNE, A HISTORICAL NOVEL.

"I am an historian," said Niebuhr, "because I am able to construct a complete picture from the fragments that have been preserved." It is an interesting statement from one competent to speak as to the importance of the imaginative faculty in historical work. The novelist too must exercise imagination, and the possession of this common trait has led many a writer of fiction to tell the story of historical events. Undoubtedly in most cases the story is the object. With some, however, the main purpose, and in all at least a conscious desire is to draw a picture of genuine historical value. Professor Morse Stephens, in his paper on "History," in **Counsel Upon the Reading of Books**, has made a strong plea for the historical novel based upon the importance in historical study of this faculty of imagination. He claims that "the reading of historical novels is likely to lead to a less incorrect knowledge of the past than the reading of inaccurate histories." And one is not inclined to take exception, provided his requirement with regard to all historical reading is met, that "it is the first duty of every reader of such volumes to fix in his own mind as soon as possible the class to which the writer of the book perused belongs."

Inasmuch as they are confessedly fiction, it is perhaps unfair to subject historical novels to the canons of historical criticism. Certainly from the standpoint of the establishment of truth it would be a profitless task. As an essay in criticism, however, such a study may well prove of value. Where no authorities are cited, a long and careful investigation is required to determine either the facts in the case or the basis of the statement that is made. Questions of interpretation and of processes of construction are then presented, and finally a judgment upon the whole must be pronounced. When the author of **The**

Rose of Old St. Louis, in describing the dress of Gouverneur Morris, speaks of "his fine lace ruffles falling over his long white hands, and his immaculate stockings and pumps with their glittering buckles," and a contemporary states that Gouverneur Morris "has been unfortunate in losing one of his legs, and getting all the flesh taken off his right arm by a scald, when a youth," it is fairly obvious that the novelist's imagination had not been properly restrained by historical facts. Generally, however, the problems that arise are not so simple, and their solution demands something more than a mere knowledge of facts.

In the winter of 1901-02 the writer suggested to a class of advanced students in historical criticism at Stanford that a few weeks be spent upon the critical examination of some historical novel, attempting to make a practical application of the principles that had been studied. The suggestion was welcomed, and, largely because the material available was sufficiently extensive to promise profitable results, Dr. Weir Mitchell's **Hugh Wynne** was chosen as the subject of investigation. It was expected that no more would be accomplished than the reaching of some determination as to the extent, accuracy in statement, and use made of historical facts in the story; but not only were the results interesting in themselves, a genuine value also attaches to the insight that was obtained, through the courteous kindness of the author, into the construction of a successful historical novel.

After reading sufficient of the novel to get the general trend and purport of the story, all the available historical material was gathered, classified, and then divided among the various members of the class with instructions to attempt to verify or disprove, wherever possible in the first chapters, statements of historical facts or descriptions of the life and manners of the time. Very quickly a similarity was noticed between certain incidents and descriptions in **Hugh Wynne** and corresponding parts of Watson's **Annals of Philadelphia**. The number of these increased and the similarity was so striking that it was at first assumed that Watson's **Annals** was the source of information for most of the historical material embodied in the story of **Hugh Wynne**. Longer and more careful examination, however, necessitated a modification of such a hastily formed conclusion, and the following was the joint report of the class submitted upon the study of a little more than half the novel:

Sources of Information for the Writing of "Hugh Wynne."

- (a) 75-100 strikingly close resemblances between passages in **Hugh Wynne** and Watson's **Annals of Philadelphia**.
A still greater number of instances of resemblances not so close, but yet possible that in these latter instances the novel is indebted to Watson.
Some of the former resemblances are so striking that only two conclusions are possible: either (1) Dr. Mitchell drew from Watson, or (2) both borrowed from the same source.
In other cases the differences indicate that Watson's statements were modified by reference to other sources, or that these other sources were used independently of Watson.
- (b) One of the most probable of such sources is Christopher Marshall's **Diary**. (Impossible to verify absolutely, as the Library possesses only the early [partial] edition of 1839.)
- (c) Another probable source of information is the **Pennsylvania Magazine of History**, notably the following articles:
- (1) Diaries and Journals of Hiltzheimer, McMichael, Montresor, Mrs. Henry Drinker, and Sally Wister.
 - (2) Letters of Lee, Benjamin Marshall, Paine, Reeves, Rebecca Franks, and others.
 - (3) Directory of Friends in Philadelphia, 1757-60.
 - (4) Keith's Andrew Allen, Flanders' John Dickinson, and others.
 - (5) Stone's Philadelphia Society 100 Years Ago, Baker's Camp by Schuylkill Falls, Exchange of Lee, and Itinerary of Washington.
- (d) Certain points are most reasonably explained by the use of the manuscripts and maps in the Pennsylvania Historical Society Library, referred to by Watson and Winsor. (One member of the class reported that Dr. Mitchell "undoubtedly" used these.)
- (e) Of later writers, several very striking resemblances to Fiske's **American Revolution** are noted.

When it was evident that tangible results were being obtained, the writer ventured to send a letter to Dr. Mitchell explaining what was being attempted and asking him if he were willing to answer the question whether he had not made quite extensive use of Watson's **Annals** in the writing of **Hugh Wynne**. His reply is the best commentary upon their report:

“Philadelphia, Pa.

“Dictated Feb. 15, 1902.

“Dear Sir:

“I am very pleased to answer your letter of the 8th and to reply to your questions.

“I used Watson’s *Annals of Philadelphia*, but with great care, as the book is extremely unreliable. I made much more use of diaries of the times, as Miss Drinker’s, Christopher Marshall, Shoemaker, and others. I also read enormously for years, letters of the time published and unpublished, and books relating to the period, which of course are open to any one. One of the most valuable to me was Barker’s *Itinerary of Washington during the War*. Also I was much helped by the interesting letters (unpublished) of Col. Bradford, Dr. Rush, and Wilson.

“I ought to add that I was over seven years preparing myself to write this book. This may give your young students an idea of the care necessary to reach certain ends. Every important chapter, **save one**, in the book was rewritten three or four times. I leave the students to discover **which chapter**. It is perhaps the most important one & remains with scarcely an alteration.

“Yours truly,

“S. WEIR MITCHELL.”

On receiving a copy of the class report, Dr. Mitchell was sufficiently interested to write with his own hand in response:

“1524 Walnut Street,
“Philadelphia.

“Dear Sir:—Even a too busy life & the late passing of my 73rd mile stone will not, or shall not deny me the pleasure of saying thro you a few words directly to the young men who have honoured my book with their critical attention.

“I desire to confess to the failure to say what by **most important** I meant—I should have said, that, what I regarded as the **best** chapter—had been left unchanged.

“I certainly did use Watson, but did not always trust him—as to mechanics—I found in the M. S. at the Phila. Libr’y M. S. additions to Watson—All the Diarys you mention, I used &—especially Baker’s *Itinerary*. Graydon’s *Memoirs* were of utmost value—&—Col. Bradford’s M. S. letters.

“As to Arnold—There are endless M. S. letters—He was a scoundrel—all thro—& a grand soldier—or fighter.

“I want to say a word as to Washington—I read all the lives—diaries—M.scripts, etc.—& then—somehow the great simple heroic figure took shape & I knew what he would say & do.

“As to historic fiction a word—The historic people should influence the fates of lesser characters—but never be the important persons of the story—They must be won—by some process such as I have described—If once in yr. possession and

charactered, you or they hesitate as to what they are to say or do—you will fail.

“What is called atmosphere: a sense of fitting & influentially valuable environment—is hard to define. To secure it for another time is to be done by immense study of manners customs, dress, diet, hours, amusements, politics, etc. While writing *H. W.* I used to amuse myself by visits to the Willings or Chews—or Cadwaladers & see the dresses—& table & talk with the people—etc. &—be sure I was in a company become familiar & easy—

“Mere archaic allusions will not answer—Indeed too constant effort at such methods of getting atmosphere, result in destroying interest & cause precisely the opposite of what the writer meant to attain—It is a common error—

“A word more—The historical autobiographic novel is rare—*Waverley* & a few more—It needs to acquire the invaluable, all seeing, 3rd person—I got it in *H. W.* by the novel device of the use of his friend Warner’s diary—

“But you want History & this is all about fiction—Give finally my regards to these near & far distant young countrymen. I send you for them what lately I said in verse of Washington*—

“To end—I have written a long letter—Tell them never to write long letters—

“Yrs truly,

“WEIR MITCHELL.”

“5th April 1902.”

In the meantime the members of the class had been at work attempting to solve the new problem that had been set them, of determining which chapter had not been rewritten. Perhaps Dr. Mitchell might not be pleased to learn that some of the class essayed the task by considering the errors that had been noted in various places, believing that the chapter which contained the greatest number of mistakes would probably be the one that had not been revised. He would have been quickly relieved, however, by the paucity of results. Others considered the question as one of style. But the majority attempted to determine which was the “most important” chapter in the book. It resolved itself then into a matter of opinion, and as usual in such cases there was much diversity. There were three chapters, however, which seemed to claim consideration above the others—the siege of Yorktown, Andre’s execution, and the Quaker meeting—but no amount of argument could bring about an agreement upon any one of them. To settle the question, Dr. Mitchell was again appealed to,—this time by a member of the

*“The Birthday of Washington,” printed in *University of Pennsylvania Bulletin*, Feb., 1902.

class,—and apparently other questions were asked and particularly upon certain disputed points in the account of the battle of Germantown.

“20th April 1902.

“1524 Walnut Street,
“Philadelphia.

“Dear Sir:

“My last and long letter to Prof. F. answers some of your queries. The chapter in question I was wrong to call ‘**most important.**’ It was to me the one I believed would be the most difficult. It is that in which H. W. visits Washington the night before Andre’s death. I wrote it easily & never materially altered it.

“As to the sources whence I drew the battle of Germantown—they were many—diaries, traditions—all the histories—lives, etc. I burned my notes, being cursed by accumulating M. S. & even had I them still, I could not answer you. I regard the Quaker meeting as the chapter to which I should have given the place as most **important.** As to this you are right. A good deal of the talk is taken in bits out of unpublished letters of Wetherill, Waln, etc.—of course I used Watson, but always cautiously. Pray let Prof. F. see this letter. I am much pleased by the intelligent interest my book has excited in the minds of my young fellow citizens.

“I read even more largely for Francois, and am told that it is the truest picture of the Paris of that day; a picture usually overcoloured as by Dickens.—

“Yrs truly,

“WEIR MITCHELL.

“James Cone, Esq.,

“My statement ought to have been—What chapter of importance was unaltered?”

The letters have been allowed to tell their own story for they reveal, better than any second-hand account could, many interesting things, some of which were quite unexpected. Though quite apart from the main purpose, the insight that was obtained into certain traits of the author—his interest, his kindness, his courtesy and patience—could not fail of recognition and appreciation by those for whom he took so much trouble. The time and care taken in preparation for the writing of **Hugh Wynne** will surprise all but the few who know, and should stand as an example to everyone attempting this form of writing. But the handling of the material after it has been gathered will ever remain the most difficult task, and Dr. Mitchell’s letter

in explanation of the methods he followed is as valuable as it is interesting. No stronger testimony to his success in this direction could be found than the oft-repeated complaint of every member of the class studying **Hugh Wynne** that the story was so interesting that all criticism was forgotten, and a second, even a third reading of many chapters failed to remove the difficulty.

When one knows of the long and careful study that preceded the writing of **Hugh Wynne**, one would not expect to find many historical inaccuracies in the novel, nor is this expectation disappointed. Here and there are slight discrepancies within the story itself, apparently due to a slip of memory or to some uncertainty as to the actual course of events. In the brief sketches of some of the characters attending the first session of the Continental Congress in 1774, names of men are included who were not present until a later day. But such quite excusable and perhaps intentional anachronisms are the most serious deviations from strictest exactitude. Yet all these give but fragments, and the picture remains to be completed. This Dr. Mitchell leaves entirely to the imagination of the reader. From the standpoint of the novelist it lends strength, from the standpoint of the historical student it is the story's greatest weakness. The imagination must construct the picture from the analogy of scenes with which it is already familiar, and in the case of the average reader this will differ widely from the reality. The story is not thereby affected, but the historical picture, through the fault of the reader rather than of the author, will prove decidedly untrue.

In the portrayal of historical characters, Dr. Mitchell has shown perhaps his strongest side. "Put yourself in his place" is the precept of the historian in such delineation as it is of the novelist. Human nature is the same in one generation as in another, and provided only he strictly guards the use of his imagination by all the facts ascertainable in the case, the novelist in his presentation of historical figures may well succeed where many an equally painstaking but less imaginative historian has failed. His letter of April 5th shows how carefully and with what sympathetic appreciation Dr. Mitchell prepared himself for this phase of his work, and one recognizes quickly the inception of that really daring attempt, "The Youth of Washington," which appeared in the *Century* a few years ago.

This phase of the story appealed especially to the writer, and in a final note he expressed his appreciation of this, and his

particular interest in the character of Wilson. Dr. Mitchell's reply may well serve as a close to this imperfect sketch of a study, which proved as profitable as it was interesting:

"No. 1524 Walnut Street,
"Philadelphia, Pa.
"April 28—1902.

"Dear Prof. Farrand.

"Your interests, and mine, have led us into what is an unusually lengthy correspondence.

"Many thanks for your note of April 21st, which gives me the opportunity to say a single word in relation to James Wilson. I was able to find very little about his younger life except that he was tutor in the Grammar School or what was then called the Academy of the University, but a good deal of light has been thrown upon his great services in connection with the Constitution in '87. There are many unused documents in the Historical Society which contribute large knowledge as to his legal character.

"As to the rest I did more guessing than I should have done if I had had the time for larger search.

"Yours truly

"WEIR MITCHELL."

MAX FARRAND.