

PROFESSOR CHANNING AND THE WEST

"No historian can hope to live as can a poet or an essayist, because new facts will constantly arise to invalidate his most careful conclusions * * * " says Professor Edward Channing in closing the chapter on American Literature in Volume Five.

New facts have constantly arisen, by the thousands, since this period was covered by the last general history of the United States. Hundreds of research students in scores of universities from Cambridge to Berkeley have been turning over the sources for the history of the country, particularly the history of the West. In a survey of the years 1815-1848, the American historian has to digest these myriad articles and papers located in the voluminous pages of numerous historical reviews. He must gorge himself on these as well as chew up the countless printed and unprinted sources which bestrew the path of the careful investigator. It must often be a question which is the more indigestible. But Professor Channing has eaten through the mass and emerged with undamaged appetite to attack, in the next volume, the slavery controversy and the outbreak of the Civil War. The result of this gargantuan task of digestion is Volume Five. It will be some years before new facts constantly arising will invalidate the general narrative in which Channing has set down his most careful conclusions.

The introduction to Volume Five is really the last sentence of Volume IV: "The American Nation, with its back to Europe and its face to the West, addressed itself to the solution of the problems of the nineteenth century." Professor Channing has now addressed himself to an analysis of our period of national growing-pains. The question in every scholar's mind as he opens the book is what does the author think of the West? How has the recent generation of the disciples of Turner affected the thinking of the man whom Mr. Albert J. Beveridge calls "the dean of American historical scholarship"? How shares the West in what will be at least for the next dozen years the definitive account of the period?

The titles of the chapters do not give true measure of western content in the volume. Seven of the eighteen chapters deal principally with western subjects, from "The Wonderful Century," and "The Westward March," to "The Year 1846," but the savor

of newly-turned western sod clings to a much larger portion of the narrative. We may conclude that Professor Channing himself throughout the volume keeps his face turned toward the West, and overlooks no study of even minor importance contributed by the recent school of investigators. Nevertheless his feet are fixed on the Atlantic Coast.

An interesting phase of the study is the intellectual and religious stirring which characterized the second third of the century. The peculiar social and emotional manifestations of American life, an extraordinary gamut running from transcendentalism to Mormonism, are, in general, expressions of a "revolt" of a new generation of men and women "from the ideas of their fathers and grandfathers." This "transition" was an accompaniment of the changing economic conditions ushered in by the "Wonderful Century" which witnessed "The Westward March." Perhaps this is why the author has turned aside a little from the order of narration of previous volumes and has devoted the first half of his 600 pages to economic and social subjects. The beginnings of "Urban Migration" and "The First Labor Movement" may well prove to historical investigators in the latter half of the twentieth century as important as the westward movement is to the research students of our own times. Now that the frontier is gone everybody agrees that American history will of necessity revolve about social and economic hubs. If this is so must not the student of the future turn more and more to the origin of these subjects somewhat overlooked during the grand procession west?

The last half of the volume rapidly runs over the general events of the times. There is no one living who can better smell out an Ethiopian from the political woodpile than Channing. The reader turns with expectancy to the pages on the politics of Jacksonian Democracy. He is not disappointed. The old idea of Jacksonian Democrat as a product pure and simple of the West must melt away somewhat before a keen analysis of just what that "democracy" was. Jackson himself was no radical—as Professor Bassett's study of the platitudes of his Inaugural Address shows. There was nothing new or reforming about his expressed ideas of political principles. He was elected on no wave of reform. He won the presidency because he was a popular hero of the West, was aided by shrewd politicians of the North, and above all, as Professor Channing points out, he was the representative of the solid South, albeit in a strongly national way.

To know Jacksonian Democracy one must study more than the economic background of the war on the bank. One must consider Van Buren and Lewis and Blair and other wire-pullers, as Bassett and Channing have done. The reader of Volume Five may be somewhat disappointed, however, at the length of the five-page narrative in which the administrations of Van Buren and Tyler are dismissed. Some readers may also feel annoyed at the brevity of Pacific Coast history before 1846, but they must remember that before Polk the Pacific West did not loom very large in the national consciousness. We might note here that Professor Channing follows Justin Smith's conclusions as to the aggression of Polk.

Who will say that there is a historian more objective than Channing? Yet the most objective historian has his subjective moods, and it was quite delightful to this reviewer to come on them. For example, Edgar Allen Poe was a "genius who knows no geographic bounds," but whose prose is not read now "except by professors of English and their pupils. It is hard to believe that library attendants would accept this opinion. Nor will western ranchers appreciate the statement that the farmer of the prairie "watches the forces of nature bringing the crop to fruition with a little hoeing or cultivating now and then." On the other hand there are many readers who will agree that nationalism is by no means complete in America now, and others, including Mr. Ellsworth Huntington, who will not be startled by the suggestion (p. 457) that sunspots have a great deal to do with history. These personal touches help make the *History of the United States* what it is. Only a great historian could "get away" with them. They are among the many other greater features which give to the *History* its unique character. There is charm in Channing.

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