

## The Historian as Brahmin: Francis Parkman

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When Francis Parkman, that most Brahmin of American historians, died in 1893, he left behind a reputation unsurpassed in his generation. For Parkman history was an epic struggle of character and courage: white man against red, English civilization against French, and, above all, man against wilderness. Born in Boston in 1823, the son of a prominent Unitarian minister, Parkman's American paternal lineage extended back almost two hundred years, and his mother traced her ancestry directly to the Rev. John Cotton himself. Thus, he grew up in a family linked by marriage or blood to various Mathers and Shaws. His grandfather, Samuel Parkman, acquired a considerable fortune as a merchant and eventually endowed a professorship at Harvard College. Inevitably, Francis attended the college as well, where he joined Hasty Pudding and the Chit-Chat Club and earned mediocre grades, the result of poor class attendance. Finding the traditional drill and recitation boring, he spent his time in the library reading in history and ethnology. He also learned French and Italian, and later added Spanish and German to his skills. He graduated in 1844 and then, pushed by his parents, went on to earn a law degree as well. Destined to be neither a lawyer nor a cleric, he had, as he later wrote, graduated with "Injuns on his brain."

Parkman was no retiring scholar, however. As a youth he engaged in an active life. Summers on his grandfather's farm in nearby Medford developed his outdoor tastes. Later, punishing hikes in the White Mountains, bone-chilling canoe trips along Lake George, and admiration for the physical culture philosophy practiced in Germany led to a very physically determined young man who rode a horse skillfully and handled a rifle even better. As an undergraduate he extended his rambles to the Great Lakes and eastern Canada, often exhausting his companions. It was no coincidence that he came to admire men of action. Shortly after graduation, he and his cousin, Quincy Adams Shaw - how's that for a Boston name - embarked on a fatiguing and dangerous journey across the Great Plains, during which he lived for three weeks among the Lakota Sioux. This resulted several years later in his first publication, *The Oregon Trail*. This book is less about the emigrants, however, whom he saw as generally low and ignorant people, than about Indian tribal life, rugged mountain men, and frontier hardships. Just as Parkman saw life as a physical challenge, so did he see all history. Having gone west in part to observe the fast disappearing Indian life, he returned determined to bring to life the great 18th century struggle between Great Britain and France for control of North America, what he liked to call "a history of the forest."

However, Parkman's Great Plains adventure took a physical toll. At Harvard his health had been troublesome, and his eyesight, never strong, showed alarming signs of weakness. The Oregon trip was also an attempt to challenge his infirmities, to master his own body, but dysentery weakened him physically and under the harsh sun and alkaline dust of the prairie his vision worsened. On his return, and for the rest of his life, he suffered from insomnia, arthritis, rheumatism, and periodic headaches. Physicians

remained mystified by his condition, which, of course, did not deter them from prescribing cures. One advocated tonics; another suggested a milk diet. Hydrotherapy was recommended, as was galvanism. At one point red hot irons were drawn along his spine and nitric acid applied to the back of his neck. As you might imagine, relief proved elusive. For a time Parkman feared insanity and blindness. In 1850 he married Catherine Scollay Bigelow, a product of two of Boston's most prominent families, and the next few years provided him with the normal trappings of domestic life. A daughter, Grace, was born, followed in 1855 by a son, Francis, and Catherine's support allowed him to complete *The History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac*. In 1857 tragedy struck. The two year-old-boy died of scarlet fever, and a few months later Catherine, after giving birth to another daughter, followed him to the grave. For the rest of his life Parkman, an advocate of the strenuous life, dealt with long periods of loneliness, depression and discomfort. Wearing smoked glasses, he sought relief in his garden. A greenhouse was constructed and during the summers he experimented with cross-pollination of lilies, floral grafts, and new plant species. He imported rare specimens from Asia, created his own nursery, published a significant book on roses, and served as president of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. In 1871 Harvard appointed him Professor of Horticulture.

Eighteen months earlier Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a prominent Philadelphia neurologist, had become his physician. Mitchell prescribed extensive bed rest and a diet heavy with butter and cream-fashionably laced with arsenic. He also recommended sexual abstinence, believing, as many did, that loss of semen weakened the body. Whether it was the rest, the diet, the arsenic, or abstinence, Mitchell's regimen brought considerable relief to Parkman, and after 1870, as long as he paced himself, he was able to function despite his illnesses.

With his body again under control, Parkman returned to history. He spent summers at his house on Jamaica Pond, just outside Boston, where sixty-foot elms, towering hemlocks, and his gardens comforted him; winters found him at his Chestnut Street home where he forged his literary reputation. Here he could walk to the Boston Common or to his private clubs. Here is where packages of records and materials arrived almost weekly, where a succession of readers substituted as his eyes, and assistants came to take dictation. When health permitted, he tramped where Indians had gone a century before; he sought out documents in both English and French archives; he visited Quebec City and stood on the Plains of Abraham. Above all he depended on his powerful memory and poetic imagination. In the twenty-seven years following the Civil War he produced seven volumes on the Anglo-French conflict, plus a two-volume revision of the Pontiac work in which he introduced readers to the dismal story of how the British distributed smallpox infested blankets to the Indians. He did all this without note cards or outlines, or even drafts. The original copy, with careful revisions in his schoolboy handwriting, went to the printer. Parkman belonged to a select company of intellectual elites in Boston that included Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Charles Eliot Norton, Robert Winthrop, Louis Agassiz, and Henry Adams. Memberships in the St. Botolph Club, the Union Club, the Saturday Club, and the Massachusetts Historical Society reinforced his orthodox, even antiquarian, views on race, class and gender. Comfortable in a world of

privilege and prestige, Parkman found any societal change disturbing. He held only contempt for Irish Catholic immigrants, *nouveau riche* industrialists, and the emerging financial oligarchy. To read Parkman today is to see a representative of a particular time and place. Politically incorrect would be the polite way of describing his social views. In politics he remained a conservative Whig, appalled by the constant inroads of coonskin democracy. Every bit as condescending as those English visitors who sneered at Americans, Parkman found his countrymen west of the Charles River to be in general a boorish lot. On his 1846 journey he wrote to his mother from Cincinnati that he had never seen "such a set of beasts as these western men." And lest one conclude that this was merely the voice of youth, even his later writings reflect a strong class prejudice. His real heroes were always gentlemen: the Sieur de LaSalle, Count Frontenac, Generals Wolfe and Montcalm. These were the men who controlled the destinies of empires. Although he could lionize the courage of individual 17th century Jesuit missionaries, he criticized the Roman Catholic Church because he believed that its priesthood subverted democracy through its mental hold on the common people, especially women.

Parkman always benefited from the love and support of women. Closer to his mother than his father, he also enjoyed the adoration of his younger sister, Lizzie, and later his two daughters. Yet, if he depended on women for emotional and physical support, he had very clear views about their place in society. He expected them to stay in the home. He questioned their intellectual abilities and publicly opposed women's suffrage. We certainly would have considered him for membership. Although he supported the Union in the Civil War, he despised abolitionists, assumed the inferiority of all people of color, and opposed suffrage for freedmen. Of course, he also opposed suffrage for the lowest classes of whites. Control of the nation should remain with an educated Anglo-Saxon male elite.

Despite these views, Francis Parkman's place as an historian is firmly fixed. His extensive use of primary documents anticipated the German scientific emphasis on sources. His first hand knowledge of Native American cultures and the eastern forests would fit easily into today's blending of history, geography and ethnology. His ability to breathe life into the past could serve as a model for contemporary historians. When most American historians were preoccupied with the European tradition, Parkman focused on a neglected colonial past and tied it to both rising American nationalism and to the great drama of Europe. Parkman's emphasis on the significance of the West pre-dated Frederick Jackson Turner's memorable 1893 essay, although he did not extend this to the frontier's possible democratic influence. For that, he looked to the masculine strength of Anglo-Saxons. During his lifetime and beyond he influenced historians such as Herbert Osgood, Henry Adams, Theodore Roosevelt--who at one time dreamed of becoming a second Parkman--and, most significantly of course, Frederick Turner. Today, no one reads Parkman's contemporaries: Motley, Bancroft, or Prescott, and his most enduring monument remains his powerful narrative. Six of his books remain in print.

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