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THE STUDY OF LOCAL HISTORY

BY

W. H. ATHERTON

This is not a "paper" proper; it is a peg on which to hang contributions for a subsequent discussion, for which this is a note of invitation. The subject is styled "The Study of local History and the means to promote the study and recording of such."

The title is long, but I hope of no small value in its suggestiveness.

(1) As to the value of the study of local history, there can be no doubt that "*petite histoire*" is the foundation of our large history and, in its own sphere, it is perfect. If the yolk of an egg could write its history this would be confined to the inside of the shell, but it would be adequate for a yolk. "O God," said Hamlet, "I could be bounded in a nut-shell and count myself a king of infinite space were it not that I have had dreams." The entourage of a village, a house, a town, a city can be sufficient material for such valuable historical research. How many of us have, through that inquisitiveness which is the fertile mother of history, been led by the intensive study of a very limited district, further afield, till as years advance, we have Pisgah sights of regions which we shall never be allowed to explore.

(2) As to the opportunity of the student of local history in Canada to produce original work, this is indeed a vast one. In the older countries, centuries of chroniclers have spent themselves so that comparatively speaking, original first-hand research is difficult; but not so in the virgin literary fields in Canada. Here we have but scratched the surface of some corners. It is to the credit of the province of Quebec that it has been the best scratched so far owing to the patriotic school of researchers of "*Les petites choses d'histoire*", but even here, there are numerous and deep mines for generations yet to investigate. The historical groups of our earlier cities have certainly been an inspiration to others following them in the other provinces, but it seems to me that it is now the peculiar function of the Canadian Historical Society to promote this birth of new groups in our ever growing country, where history is now in the making; new posts, villages and towns arising day by day and spots where hitherto no white man ever settled. Our country has become the home of many and varied people of European origin who are the heirs of the traditions and customs that will enrich our social life.

The chronicling of the foundations, the coming of such peoples, the narration of the racial and credal origins of the first pioneers,

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the searches into the past history of their neighbourhoods, the study of aboriginal remains or traces, all of these are worthy of encouragement. Would that in each spot, however populated, we could persuade a few earnest students to come together—they need not be learned scholars—communicate their historical or antiquarian researches, put them on paper, even if the printing of them has to be delayed for years or even if they only serve in their manuscript form for consultation by some lucky savant.

How valuable are the "*relations des Jesuites*", but what are they but letters written in the silent forests or squalid wigwam, descriptive of the places they visited and the tribes they dwelt with. What a light the copy-books of the "*journal des Jesuites*", a mere casual diary, not regularly kept, shed on the early days of New France. How valuable such slight documents are! So will be the simplest even of the records I would encourage. I suppose that there must be stored away, often forgotten or hidden in the far-away places of Canada, many such diaries of the first explorers and settlers of some of our early and even recent town sites or colonies, which if collected by some local groups would be the basis of the manuscript section of the archives of many an antiquarian society of some future note. If these groups could be linked by communication with the Canadian Historical Society, what a contribution would be made to our historical archives. What a source of inspiration opened to our *littérateurs* and romance-writers.

(3) As to formal histories of our more important cities and regions, now is the opportunity for the painstaking local historian to get on to the book shelves of libraries for years to come—to be the first historian of his burgh—an unremunerative and humble aspiration, but still a valuable one for the future of our History of Canada in general.

It seems to me that our Canadian Historical Society has a great mission in fostering all forms of local history, traditional folklore songs, and the like. We are not to be a literary society to meet once a year, to hear a few eminent historians displaying their learning. We have to be practical. All the year round we have to encourage the spirit of historical research and we are to scatter the seeds of stimulation here, there and everywhere, for in the most unlikely places the harvest may be greatest.

(4) In general, may I remark, that the hour is now propitious for the impulse which our society is looked upon to launch. The Parkman celebration promoted by our first president is perhaps the first outstanding indication of what organized effort can do. Again, the recent but now universal movement in Canada to record by monument, wayside cairns, the landmarks of our country's romantic

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story—a movement which we have inherited from the society to whose heritage we have succeeded—is a further proof of the fertile soil we are still further called upon to till and prepare for richer and more abundant and more varied crops. In fine, we must not rest till we have made every nook of Canada red hot with the burning glow of enthusiasm which is fed by the zeal of the priests and votaries of their historical muse.

With this brief and slight introduction to the discussion which I have proposed, may I hope that practical suggestions may yet be the outcome of it. If we desire our immigrants to become loyal Canadians, they must be rooted to the soil through love of its traditions and its storied past. A knowledge of local history is in this propaganda a most useful and intellectual arm in the plan of Canadianization. If I have any reason to explain my own devotion to Canada, it is due to the good luck which threw me at once on my arrival with a group collecting the local history of the earliest missions of northern Alberta. My abiding citizenship as well as my interest in the broad history of Canada started thus; so much so that I realize the truth of the verses:—

“Qui manet in patria et patriam cognoscere temnit
In mihi non civis, sed peregrinus erit.”

which I may doggerelize thus:—

“Who staying in a country, its story scorns to know,
To me, such is no citizen, but passer-by, I trow.”