

THE PALIMPSEST

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Benj. F. Shambaugh

The scientist, intent upon discovery, scrutinizes each detail, observes every phenomenon, tests all possibilities. With the aid of a microscope he observes the smallest particle of matter with patient care. No particular is too minute, no effort too great, no data too complete. The most trivial circumstance may be infinitely significant. To a comprehending mind a falling apple revealed a fundamental law of the universe. Specific facts provide the basis for the superstructure of general truth.

Benj. F. Shambaugh was scientific. Always exploring unfamiliar fields of history and education, he gave careful attention to immediate problems, studied the intricate pattern of human relations, and exhausted the resources of experimentation. In contrast to emphasizing spectacular events in remote places, he focused upon the ordinary incidents of local history and therein found the key to a better understanding of American social and political institutions. His method of instruction

was formal and precise, yet he stressed general conclusions, advocated a liberal attitude, and continually endeavored to synthesize knowledge, to the end that thoughtful college students might better comprehend the meaning of life. Accepting the principle of evolution, he applied the Darwinian technique in his own research to demonstrate the importance of meticulous observation, the significance of particulars, and the continuity of development in the body politic. It is as if the unity of his own career symbolized his philosophy of the transcendental integration of human experience.

Born on a farm in a pioneer community of eastern Iowa, the son of John and Eva Ann Shambaugh took firm root and flourished in the soil and culture of his nativity. Though he traveled widely, Iowa was his lifelong home from January 29, 1871, to April 7, 1940. Christened Benjamin Franklin, he emulated his illustrious namesake in the charm of his personality, the nimbleness of his wit, the abundance of his energy, the extent of his vision, and the tolerance of his opinion.

At the age of sixteen he entered an academy at Iowa City and in due time graduated from the State University in 1892. Meanwhile he had tasted the wine of academic leadership. He decided to be a scholar. A casual remark by his history teacher challenged his loyalty and kindled

his zeal for investigation. "Why doesn't some one write the biography of an Iowa town?" inquired Professor W. R. Perkins. "It might prove to be as interesting and significant as the romantic tales of New England villages." At once Benjamin Shambaugh began to ransack the miscellaneous collections of the State Historical Society. In 1893 he presented an account of the founding of Iowa City as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts. Somewhat expanded, it was published later that year as *Iowa City: A Contribution to the Early History of Iowa*.

In this initial enterprise Benj. F. Shambaugh discovered the idea that shaped the course of his career. He was convinced that each social organism contained the clues to explain the general nature of society. Indeed, it seemed to be a universal principle. The microscopic analysis of a cubic foot of earth in terms of generic import by Bertha M. Horack won his enthusiastic approval. (They were married in 1897.) Eventually she became the recognized authority on the unique Amana community.

Justice and progress, he believed, are to be obtained by institutionalizing the habits and ethics of common folks. As early settlers protected their property by means of claim associations, so people in other circumstances inevitably resort to collec-

tive action in their own interest. Statute law and constitutions are but legal expressions of the general will. And so the study of a particular community provided an opportunity to exploit undeveloped historical resources, to perform a patriotic service, and to discover the vital factors of government. Further investigation of pioneer institutions and community evolution led to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Pennsylvania University in 1895 and to the publication of a *History of the Constitutions of Iowa* in 1902. Symbolic of the unity of his research, his last book, *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers*, published in 1939, is an expanded version of his first.

As society achieves its noblest purposes through formalization of the ideals of the people, so an individual may contribute more enduring service if his efforts are merged with the functions of a public institution. In that way the work of a person gains wider influence and the activities of the school or state or church acquire personality.

Dr. Shambaugh identified himself with two major institutions. The State Historical Society was the instrumentality through which he accomplished his elaborate program of research and dissemination of Iowa history, especially after he was elected to the Board of Curators in 1897. At the same time he developed his ideas of liberal and

cultural education as founder and head of the Department of Political Science in the State University. Though he never condoned ignorance or error and began his first class with an admonition to memorize the United States constitution, for over forty years he taught "less of methods and more of morals; less of efficiency and more of living; less of the letter and more of the spirit"; less of organization, less of supervision, less of timing, less of testing, less of standardization, and more of individuality, more of culture, more of creation, and more of the "More Than" which distinguishes a true college education.

To the student on the campus Professor Shambaugh was a vivid, dynamic figure — the personification of the culture and idealism he advocated — so clearly expressed in the portrait by Sidney E. Dickinson. The artist chose to paint him just as he stepped into the studio from the street: "a study in browns" — a dark brown suit, a camel-hair overcoat in a lighter shade over his arm, a soft brown beaver hat in one hand, and the ever-present Malacca cane in the other — with a touch of color in the maroon necktie and matching handkerchief. At his elbow are three favorite books from the publications of the State Historical Society — *Amana* written by his wife, Bertha M. H. Shambaugh; *Cabins and Sod Houses* by Thomas

H. Macbride; and *Ioway to Iowa* by Irving B. Richman. On the canvas he appears as he was in life, "invincibly young at sixty, a charming and picturesque personality".

In pursuance of his theory that important aspects of history may be gleaned from the routine records of clubs and courts and congress, he collected three volumes of *Documentary Material Relating to the History of Iowa*. For the same purpose of providing a mine of political information from which the currency of general history might be coined, he compiled the *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa*. The exacting research was valuable experience, and it also provided the foundation for the new publications that were to follow.

For many years the State Historical Society had printed pioneer reminiscences and biographical sketches in periodical form. Dr. Shambaugh edited the last volumes of the *Iowa Historical Record*. But he conceived of a more pretentious quarterly filled with contributions of scholarly research. In 1903 *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics* was launched under his management. Skeptics praised the style and contents of the first issue, but shook their heads. It might be possible to fill a hundred and thirty-five pages with such profound articles, but where could similar ma-

terial be found for future numbers? Iowa history, bah! The *Journal*, pioneer in size and purpose among the magazines of State historical societies, is now in the thirty-eighth volume.

The extensive program of research and publication was so successful that in 1907 Dr. Shambaugh was appointed Superintendent and Editor, a position which he filled with preëminent distinction for thirty-three years. Under his direction a series of Iowa biographies was inaugurated at once. Increased appropriations by the legislature enabled the Society to expand its activities. Series of volumes on economic history, social history, applied history, chronicles of the World War, and many miscellaneous monographs have been added to the list of publications. In 1920 THE PALIMPSEST was started. Designed to reconstruct dim records of the past and relate half-forgotten anecdotes, as if the history of Iowa were an ancient palimpsest, this monthly magazine aims to present the annals of the State in a popular style and attractive form.

At the end of his long service to the Commonwealth, Dr. Shambaugh was engaged in the most ambitious project of all — a centennial history of Iowa that will fill many volumes, in order that the true story of the first century of statehood may be more widely known and cherished.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS