

Comment by the Editor

THE ARCHITECTURE OF HISTORY

The operative mason, who is a master of his craft, can transform a pile of irregular stones into an edifice of symmetry and use. Following the design upon his trestle-board, he builds the solid walls out of materials of the geologic ages to express the thought and purpose of his own epoch in terms that will endure the adversity of future events. The substance of his creation is what the earth is made of, and his working tools are simple.

The historian, too, is a builder. Like the mason, he works with universal stuff, and his instruments are the compass of truth and the square of experience. From the heterogeneous mass of circumstance he shapes the story of the past so that it has significance in the light of present needs and may guide the conduct of generations yet to come. The mansion of fact that he erects can possess charm and character as well as utility.

In the process of his work, the craftsman of history encounters many problems. Maybe the identity of certain characters is obscured by vague illusions. Who was the Sioux chieftain that Keokuk met in Washington and again on his hunting

trip in 1833? No record may have been left of incidents that must have happened. Fires on the prairie were common, but where are the eyewitness descriptions? Perhaps a source of authority can not be ascertained. The *Chicago Democrat* copied the story of Keokuk's hunt from the *Saint Louis Times*. But who heard the chief tell it at the Rock Island council in August, 1833?

If the historian builds according to chronology his house of episodes is apt to be a rambling structure with many eaves and gables. But if he undertakes to fit events into a preconceived design, he may be gravely handicapped by missing information. Nevertheless, the scholar will endeavor to supply essential details to complete the pattern of his version. If too much is omitted, a later artisan may devise a different interpretation.

From the abundant material of human affairs, historical architecture can be fashioned in infinite variety. But valid history, like solid masonry, is a product of purpose and inspiration. As the mason fills the chinks between the stones with mortar, so the historian cements the facts with reason. There is room for honest speculation in the reconstruction of the past. A chronicle without plan or meaning is only a pile of unassorted doings.

J. E. B.

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