

PROFESSIONAL NOTES

HERBERT EUGENE BOLTON, 1870-1953

The death of Herbert Eugene Bolton at his home in Berkeley on January 30 ended a career with few parallels in American historical scholarship. Though granted a dozen years beyond the Biblical three score and ten, this kindly *conquistador* crammed into his busy life achievement that will always remain a marvel to the less gifted.

After working under Frederick Jackson Turner at the state university of his native Wisconsin and John Bach McMaster at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received the doctorate in 1899, Bolton embarked upon a half-century of monumental labors which continued after his retirement in 1940 until he was immobilized by his final illness a little over six months ago. At Texas (1901-09), at Stanford (1909-11), and finally at California, where he long presided as chairman of the Department of History, Sather Professor, and director of the Bancroft Library, this vigorous knight of the pen, the classroom, the trail, and the archive established a truly imposing record. A shelf of his books measuring something more than the proverbial five feet, the direction of over one hundred Ph.D. and nearly three hundred M.A. theses, the stimulation and sympathetic counseling of an army of students, service on dozens of historical boards and commissions, nine honorary degrees, two *Festschriften*, several decorations from foreign governments, editorial labors for this and other journals, and the presidency of the American Historical Association—these are crude quantitative indices of Bolton's accomplishments. How may those who contemplate this record account for the amount and for the quality of his work?

Unquestionably, one explanation is to be found in Bolton's qualities as a person. He possessed an endless vitality and capacity for work, as generations of despairing students who saw the light burn till midnight in his Bancroft Library office can attest. A rugged constitution not only aided his sedentary labors, but fitted him to follow Anza and Coronado, Kino and Escalante on the open trail by any and all means of travel; while a seeming immunity to the afflictions of ordinary *gringos* enabled him to work without interruption in other climates.

More important than these useful physical attributes were certain gifts of the spirit with which Professor Bolton was liberally endowed. He possessed a buoyancy, a zest, an enthusiasm which supported his own and his associates' enterprises. He was ever confident that a bold *entrada* into the unmapped *selva* of this or that archive would uncover some "otro México" to the wondering eyes of the scholarly adventurer. He enjoyed, understood, and consistently brought out the best in people, whether living associates, or those other companions whom he discovered in the documents. Confident of his own powers, he was generous in recognizing and praising the accomplishments of others. Although free with his time and energy, he possessed a single-mindedness that enabled him upon occasion to brush aside distractions and to finish a book or to push through to any other current goal.

Many of these personal qualities carried over into Bolton's work as a teacher. But perhaps his greatest gift in this field was his rare ability to infuse his own enthusiasm into his students. This faculty was notably evident whether he was lecturing to upwards of a thousand undergraduates in his History of the Americas course, or whether he was tactfully drawing out an apprentice in his seminar at the battered "round table" he inherited from Henry Morse Stephens. A practical psychologist, Bolton chose to arouse interest and to stimulate work by example and by kindly guidance rather than to dampen budding enthusiasm by negative criticism.

Although his personality will long live vividly in the memories of a host of former students and admirers, Bolton's final claim to fame must rest upon his scholarship. He often cautioned his students that there is no such thing as a "definitive" book and that volumes with such pretensions mischievously deter the timorous from undertaking needed work. In the same way, he probably would have agreed, there is no such thing as a "definitive" school of historiography. The most that either book or school can do is to re-study old facts, add new ones through fresh research, and re-interpret the past in such a way as to give it greater meaning for the generation of which the scholar is a part. Bolton was notably successful in accomplishing these purposes in his presentation of "the Epic of Greater America."

Like other creative thinkers, Bolton had his predecessors in developing the hemispheric concept. The Chilean, Diego Barros Arana, whose *Compendio de historia de América* appeared in 1865, to men-

tion one; and others could be cited. The Anglo-American scholar did not discover the unities and interrelations of the history of the Americas in others' writings, however, but through his own study of a key region of cultural exchange and international flux, now generally known by the name he gave it: the Spanish Borderlands. Personal experience and original research there lent conviction, power, and a wealth of illustrative material to his development of the broader concept.

The process began when the fledgling Ph.D. (whose doctoral thesis concerned the free Negro in the South before the Civil War) arrived at the University of Texas in 1901—to teach medieval history! He saw beyond provincial and national horizons, and soon he found in the local environment stimulus to study—with a sympathy and insight then rare among Anglo-Americans—the Spanish and Mexican background of the area. Summer after summer found him in the Mexican archives, whose importance first became known, at least outside Mexico, through his pioneer work. Gradually the international pageant of the Borderlands came into focus. From his tireless pen flowed a long series of frontier biographies and monographs, studies in Borderlands ethnography, cartography, and geography, and carefully edited documents of key significance. His writings were as notable in style as they were in scholarship, for Bolton never lost sight of the fact that to be effective history must be readable.

It was a logical step to generalize the lessons of the Borderlands in his teaching and in his broader essays and addresses and to apply them to the Americas as a whole. His intention was not to supersede the national histories of the Hemisphere, but through perspective and fresh knowledge to render them more complete. Imperfections there may be, and perhaps a certain unevenness of emphasis, but few will deny that the departed master is one of that select company of giants, whose permanent influence on the historiography of the Americas will become increasingly obvious with the passing of time.

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