

RETURN IRA HOLCOMBE¹

The most eminent surviving historian of Minnesota asked me on the afternoon preceding the funeral of Return Ira Holcombe to present at the next meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society brief notes of his life and work, with a tribute to his ability and painstaking care as a writer of history.

Mr. Holcombe was born in Huntington Township, Gallia County, Ohio, February 24, 1845, and was named Robert Ira, but he changed his first name to Return, which was the name of his grandfather's grandfather, a soldier of Connecticut in the army of the American Revolution. His parents and the family removed to Missouri when he was six years old, and there he received a serviceable education in the district or village school; after the war he attended an academy in Troy, Iowa. In our last conversation, five hours before his death, he told me of having learned "small Latin and less Greek," as one of his favorite old authors, Ben Jonson, wrote of Shakespeare.

During the Civil War Holcombe served on the Union side in the Tenth Missouri Regiment. Ever afterward, throughout his life, he took great interest in all phases of the history of that great war, and much enjoyed fellowship with those who wore the blue in 1861-65, being a member of the Garfield Post of St. Paul, Grand Army of the Republic. But his interest and breadth of sympathy extended also to those who wore the gray; he carefully read their monthly magazine, the *Confederate Veteran*, and collected many articles from newspapers and much information through correspondence concerning the southern side of the war. He was sixteen years of age when that conflict began, and, as the early limit for recruits was

¹ A memorial read at the stated meeting of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society, December 11, 1916.

eighteen years, he entered the service as a drummer boy, later taking a musket as a soldier.

After the war he resumed his school studies for a time; learned the printer's trade, at which he worked about four years; was married and resided several years at Clarinda, Iowa; and engaged as editor of newspapers in Iowa and Missouri. His only child, a daughter named Lillian Maude, was born in 1872, and was married to O. E. McAnulty in 1898. She died September 13, 1916, leaving a little daughter, Lillian Audrey, as her only surviving child.

In Missouri and Kansas Mr. Holcombe became a proficient writer on the staff of various publishers of county and city histories. Two of these large works, in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society, on Greene and Marion counties, Missouri, published respectively in 1883 and 1884, he regarded with much satisfaction as examples of his early extensive labors, for many counties, on local histories and biographies.

In the summer of 1888 his publishers, having undertaken to prepare a history of the city of St. Paul, for which General C. C. Andrews was editor, secured the aid of Mr. Holcombe to write several long chapters of that work, which was issued in 1890, and also to gather the data for and write its large and very valuable part 2 (219 pages), comprising 129 biographies of leading St. Paul citizens. From that date his home was in St. Paul, where he did much work as a newspaper writer, especially for the *Pioneer Press* and the *Dispatch*, from 1890 to 1905, with occasional articles in the later years.

For the *Collections* of the Minnesota Historical Society he wrote "A Sioux Story of the War" (volume 6), the narrative by Chief Big Eagle of the Sioux outbreak in 1862, which Holcombe personally received from the chief at Flandreau, South Dakota, through interpreters; explanatory notes appended to the "Narrative of a Friendly Sioux, by Snana, the Rescuer of Mary Schwandt" (volume 9); and several footnotes to "A Sioux Narrative of the Outbreak in 1862, and of Sibley's Expedition in 1863, by Gabriel Renville" (volume 10). In

another paper of volume 10, "The Work of the Second State Legislature," by General John B. Sanborn, the aid of Mr. Holcombe in its preparation is duly acknowledged.

Through about a year, 1893-94, the Minnesota Historical Society employed Mr. Holcombe as an assistant, to share the general work with Josiah B. Chaney, who had been in charge of the newspaper department since 1887. During this time Holcombe examined and arranged the large collection of letters and other papers received from General Sibley, who had died two years before.

Always greatly interested and exceptionally well informed in all subjects pertaining to the Sioux and the Ojibway, Holcombe was the best qualified investigator and author whom Hon. Charles D. Gilfillan, formerly of St. Paul and later of Redwood County, could find to determine the historical facts and locations of events in the Sioux massacre and war of 1862, and to mark these localities for future generations. Forty years after these thrilling events, through the generous patriotism and direction of Mr. Gilfillan and of a small collaborative society of his near friends, Holcombe wrote a pamphlet entitled *Sketches Historical and Descriptive of the Monuments and Tablets Erected by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society in Renville and Redwood Counties, Minnesota* (Morton, Minnesota, 1902. 79 p.).

Holcombe's most important work for the history of the state is contained in *Minnesota in Three Centuries* (four volumes), published in 1908, for which he wrote the second volume, narrating the history from the building of Fort Snelling to the admission of Minnesota to statehood in 1858, and also the greater part of volume 3, covering the period from 1858 to 1870, to which General Lucius F. Hubbard contributed five chapters covering the records of Minnesota in the Civil War. A second very important service to the state is the *History of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society* (St. Paul, 1910. 405 p.), which is the joint work of Hon. Darwin S. Hall and

R. I. Holcombe. This work is a great contribution to the history of agriculture and of the state fairs.

Through the years 1911 to 1913 Holcombe was mainly employed in research and in writing the *History of the First Minnesota Regiment*, doing this for a committee of the survivors of the regiment; but his completed manuscript was delayed nearly three years and, finally, after some revision by the committee, was published June, 1916 (508 p.).

During his last years he was especially busy, resuming the field of his early writing on city and county histories. Three books largely supplied from his pen during this closing period are entitled as follows: *Compendium of History and Biography of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, for which he wrote nearly all the historical portion, 179 pages; *Compendium of History and Biography of Carver and Hennepin Counties*, his part therein being 262 pages; and *Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County*, in which Mr. Holcombe wrote 46 pages. He also contributed jointly with Hon. E. E. Corliss, an interesting paper on the earliest settlements in Otter Tail County, published as chapter 3 of the history of that county.

When he died in the evening of November 21, he left practically completed and ready for publication an extensive manuscript *History of McLeod County*, on which he had worked in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society through the summer and autumn. This last work of the veteran author is expected soon to be issued by H. C. Cooper Jr. and Company of Winona, publishers of county histories, with whom Holcombe had been connected during the early years of his literary work in Missouri.

Another veteran Minnesota editor and historian, Captain Henry A. Castle, was accustomed to call into the library occasionally to chat with us, Mr. Holcombe's table and my desk being near together at the west end of the reading room. On the last time of his calling, in midsummer, Captain Castle spoke of his ill health, and took a long look around the room at its

familiar books and portraits, saying he expected never to come again, and a few weeks afterward he died.

Now the Great Leveler has laid low our friend Holcombe. He was always cheerful, and, though having several times during the later years illnesses of a few days or weeks or even months, he had rallied each time to take up anew and gladly his beloved historical studies and writing, without apparent impairment of his mental vigor and ability. On the last day of his life, after being shut in only a few days by the last recurrent illness, he had entertained himself by reading the daily newspapers and some of his favorite books. One that I found him reading that afternoon was the ancient epic narrative by Sir Thomas Malory of the life and death of King Arthur. To us who knew Holcombe's friendly and gallant temperament, what book or line of thought could seem more adapted to his last hours?

Among all whom I have known in historical work, he was the most careful, anxious, and persistent to attain accuracy and truth. He was also the most willing to give freely of his time to any inquirer who might wish to consult him on any historical questions.

In several conversations of former months and years he had told me of his readiness and willingness to go, whenever the final summons should come; that he believed in the future life as taught by the Bible, and that he trusted in the compassionate Saviour for his forgiveness and welcome into Heaven. Let us, too, believe that he is again with those whom he had "loved long since and lost awhile," and so we can cheerfully say, Farewell. As Robert Louis Stevenson wrote for himself,

Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

WARREN UPHAM

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



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