

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL HISTORY¹

There is an old way and there is a new way of studying history. Not many years ago when we studied history in the schools it consisted largely of wars, battles, and conquests, outstanding political events, and the careers of notable monarchs, military leaders, politicians, and statesmen. Alexander and Caesar, Charlemagne and Napoleon stalked across the stage, destroying their enemies and setting up imperial domains. The fortunes of kings and emperors occupied many pages in the books, and oftentimes the real test of a student's knowledge of history was his ability to name the Roman emperors or the kings of France or of England in order and with appropriate dates. When we came to American history the emphasis was only slightly changed. We were given, after a résumé of the political and military events just preceding and during the Revolution, the political careers and fortunes of Jefferson and Hamilton, Calhoun, Jackson, Webster, and Clay, interspersed with accounts of wars, diplomatic achievements, and territorial expansion, and some closing lectures on Lincoln and Douglas, slavery, and the military and constitutional events of the Civil War.

Now, all this was very important, and to some extent the facts about these outstanding men and events must be and are still taught and studied. Furthermore, to the mind of youth in the schools, it was all very grand and impressive. As we grew older, however, real doubts began to arise as to the importance and relevance of much that we had learned. Something seemed to be missing from the picture, and we began

¹This is a revised form of an address delivered at a joint meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society and the League of Minnesota Municipalities at Brainerd on June 13, 1928. *Ed.*

to question the utility of knowing so much about kings, generals, and statesmen, about campaigns, battles, treaties, and statutes, when they served, after all, to give so incomplete a history of the earth's peoples. We began to raise questions as did the little boy in Robert Southey's poem after hearing from his grandfather all about the battle of Blenheim.

"But what good came of it at last?"

Quoth little Peterkin.

"Why, that I cannot tell," said he;

"But 'twas a famous victory."

What profits it to know of wars and battles unless one knows what good, if any, they do? A victory of France over Germany or of Germany over France may be a notable event, but it has no value in and of itself. What good, indeed, to know that empires and republics have risen and fallen or that constitutions, statutes, and treaties have been adopted, enforced for a time, and then broken or repealed, unless we know also what benefit or harm they visited upon the peoples who were affected by them? In fact, what is important in history if it is not the life of the people, the millions and millions of people in all times and in all climes and their long, slow, half-blind struggles upwards — but not always upward — toward self-government, self-mastery, education, improved economic conditions, and in general the better things of life?

Guided by these and other similar considerations, the historian of the modern school, though he knows his kings and his presidents and his military, constitutional, diplomatic, and political history, uses these only as the outline of his picture while he works deeper and deeper into the background to fill in the details about the lives of the people which make the picture more truthful and complete. He wants to know about their migrations, their settlements, and their home life, about their religions, their education, their music, arts, and literature, and about their social and economic customs and institutions. In a word, he wishes to know how men, women, and children

fared while monarchs, military leaders, and politicians played with grand politics and war.

Of the many agencies that are turning our attention to these new phases of history, probably none are doing a more useful work than the state historical societies of this country. In this democratic republic of the twentieth century, with its forty-eight self-governing states and its millions of people steadily turning their faces away from war and toward the ways of peace, it is notable and appropriate that historical work of this type is everywhere encouraged and supported. Let us hope that the work of the many state and local historical societies may go forward free and untrammelled, with an eye single to the truth, neither hemmed in by censors nor denounced by propagandists nor pinched and limited by lack of funds to do their work.

While this striking change has been taking place in the attitude and the work of the historian, the student of government has been experiencing a similar change in his point of view. Whereas he once dealt mainly with the great state or nation, with its constitution and its sovereign, and with such difficult and abstruse questions as those of sovereignty and the separation and division of powers, he now finds that the progress of events in government has given him other problems to analyze and solve. The state, he now sees more clearly than ever, does not exist merely to maintain its own power, nor does it have power merely for the purposes of maintaining order at home, conquering its enemies abroad, and extending its territory. If the state has any sound reason for existence, once security and stability have been attained, it must be to render services of value to the people; for as Aristotle said many centuries ago the state originates in the bare needs of life but continues in existence for the sake of a good life. The power of the state and the several organs of the state which exercise this power are not ends in themselves but rather the means by which the ends of government may be accomplished. Therefore, ques-

tions of sovereignty, power, and prestige are no longer considered as important as once they were, but questions of public service have an increased importance. The outstanding questions today are: What is the state doing to improve the lives of its people? How is it doing this work and at how much cost?

A consideration of these questions has led political scientists in recent years to delve deep into the problems of public administration. How government raises and expends public funds, how it recruits and controls its staff of employees, and the methods that it uses to perform its several services now are stock problems for the students as well as for the officers of government. Out of the study of these problems has risen the so-called "efficiency movement." Bureaus for research have sprung up all over the land for the primary purpose of assisting public officials to solve their problems of administration and thus indirectly to help the people to obtain more effective, economical, and serviceable government. The results of this movement are only beginning to be felt; we may expect to see more and more of them as time goes on. Perhaps with their help we may even hope to approach some day the ideal of an efficient democracy.

The modern attitude of the historian and the modern viewpoint of the political scientist are giving an enhanced importance to the study of the small community—the city, the village, the town, and the county. Nearly a century ago a learned Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, putting into writing his acute observations of *Democracy in America*, spoke most impressively of the importance of these local units. "The village or township," he said, "is the only association which is so perfectly natural that wherever a number of men are collected it seems to constitute itself. The town or tithing, as the smallest division of a community, must necessarily exist in all nations, whatever their laws and customs may be: if man makes monarchies and establishes republics, the first association of mankind seems constituted by the hand of God."

In our own day, James Bryce, an equally distinguished English student and statesman, writing in *Modern Democracies* of local self-government and its importance to national self-government, speaks with equal eloquence concerning these local units. "The small communities here described," he says, "may be called the tiny fountainheads of democracy, rising among the rocks, sometimes lost altogether in their course, sometimes running underground to reappear at last in fuller volume. They suffice to show that popular government is not a new thing in the world, but was in many countries the earliest expression of man's political instincts." And he adds in another place that "the best school of democracy, and the best guarantee of its success, is the practice of local self-government."

Even if the modern social historian does not agree entirely with Bryce and De Tocqueville he must give careful heed to these local communities because in them he can get close to the daily lives of the people. It is in these small units that men and women can be studied at short range and in groups not too large to understand. Some cities present, in fact, almost all the social and economic problems of the nation as a whole.

Furthermore, small communities like cities and villages are in a sense more natural and also more durable than great empires. Where is today the empire of Alexander the Great or the far-stretched dominions of the Romans or of Charlemagne or Napoleon? What, indeed, has become of the empire of the Hapsburgs, which lasted into our own time? They are gone, and many more like them, and nothing has risen to take their places, but the materials of which they were formed still exist, though changed by time. The territory, the people, the towns, and the villages go on in many places much as they did in the past. Rome and Athens persist to this day, and so do Damascus, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and many more. Even an historian would find it no easy thing to name over the different régimes under which Rome has lived from the days of its founding to the days of Mussolini, but the Eternal City still

stands as it has stood through the ages, surviving all the shocks of time. Even such modern western cities as Paris, London, and New York have existed under several different sovereignties and have endured much violence in times of change, but their municipal histories are almost unbroken from their several beginnings.

Perdurance is, then, a quality of well-built and well-located cities, yet no one would venture to say that cities always escape destruction, for we know the contrary to be true. Troy is gone, and Carthage, and the almost legendary Ur of the Chaldees. Pompeii is no more a city and we know of the ancient Mayan cities of Central America almost wholly from their archeological remains. For many a city we may lament, with Jeremiah, "How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people." Yes, cities perish along with other things mortal, whether worn out by time or destroyed by the furies of nature or of men. Some of them fall never to rise again, others only to rise more potent than before. Archeologists, digging among the ruins of ancient places in search of clues to the history of olden times and men, have found evidences of three, four, and even five or more cities having been built in succession in one place, each one upon the broken stones of its predecessor. And so, even when falling into ruins, cities reveal their importance to history, for it is to these very ruins that modern scientists return to excavate for the broken pillars, the images, the pottery, and the graven tablets that throw a little light upon the life of man as it was lived in now-forgotten periods of time.

Like the historian the political scientist is learning the importance of the local units of government. Anxious to know how the government is influencing the lives of men and women for better or for worse, he must needs study local government primarily, since it is the local units which supply the chief services that redound measurably to the benefit of the people. We look to the national government to provide for a few great

national concerns, such as foreign affairs, war and peace, defense against enemies, and the regulation of currency, banking, and foreign and interstate commerce. It has been estimated by high authority that from seventy-five to eighty per cent of all the expenditures of the national government have gone or go to pay for past, present, and future wars. What we have to show for some of these expenditures it would be hard to say; and if the national government provides a postal service and some aid to good roads, waterways, public health, and education, we must perforce be thankful that its peaceful public services are not less than they are.

As we come down from the national to the state or commonwealth governments we find the ideal of service to the public more emphasized, and in fairness it must be said that in recent years the states have done notable work in expanding the activities that tend toward making better the lives of men and women. It is, however, in the local units — the cities, villages, towns, school districts, and counties — that we find the government most active in promoting the public weal. It is here, in the thousands upon thousands of local communities, that men and women bear directly the financial burden and give the time needed to support and carry on education, public works, street and road improvements, health work, parks and recreation, drainage, water supply and other public utilities, police and fire protection, and the numerous other local services that inure to the welfare of the people. The growth and spread of these services and the standard at which they are maintained constitute in fact an excellent measure of the state of civilization we have reached.

We have, then, in the modern ideal of government existing for public service and in the consequent increased importance of local government in our scheme of life two of the outstanding social facts of our present age. The historian, the political scientist, and the official of local government will find much of mutual importance in these two facts. It is fitting, there-

fore, at a joint session of the Minnesota Historical Society and the League of Minnesota Municipalities, that we pay some heed to the dignity and the importance of the work in which we are mutually engaged, that we reconsider the spirit and the purpose of the things we are trying to do and the nature of our responsibility, and that we consider, also, whether there are not opportunities for us to engage in coöperative labors beneficial to the state, the local communities, and the people whom we jointly serve.

In speaking on these questions I shall assume to do so not as a professed political scientist addressing two alien and diverse groups, but rather as if I were a member of both organizations. This is not strictly the case, of course, since the League of Minnesota Municipalities has no members except cities, villages, and towns and their chosen officials. Nevertheless, some contact with the league and its work over a period of years has made me feel that I have a sort of membership in it; and I have a real membership in the Minnesota Historical Society.

To the members and staff of the Minnesota Historical Society permit me to offer the thought that an increasing attention to the history of local government and local administration would open a rich field for research and might easily lead to valuable results in the interpretation of our social and economic heritage. This is not to ask anyone to forsake the modern ways of social and economic history, but quite the contrary. In the history of local governments there is practically nothing of dynastic or military history and very little of constitutional or political history in the usual sense. Indeed to study the history of the government and administration of cities, villages, towns, and counties is but to study a most natural phase of some highly important forms of local social and economic organization.

The work suggested may be done in several different ways, but all roads will lead eventually to a common goal. Particular cities, towns, villages, or counties might well be selected for

local and intensive study. It would be highly useful to have adequate, scholarly histories of each of the larger cities and counties of the state and of as many of the smaller ones as possible. These studies would be best rounded out if they dealt with government and administration as a part of the general social and economic development of the place, but they would be useful even if they dealt only with the governmental and administrative history. This is a type of historical work that should enlist the interest and the efforts not only of local historical societies in counties and cities but also of local teachers, scholars, and writers, and of teachers and graduate students in our university and colleges.

Another approach lies along lines broader as to area but more specialized as to subject. Thus it would be exceedingly valuable to have studies covering the whole state of Minnesota and dealing with the history of such matters as taxation, elections, police, education, public health work, poor relief and welfare enterprises, drainage operations, and dozens of other activities of state and local governments.

The importance of such studies, when adequately done, cannot easily be overstated. Partly through the labors of local authorities in many of these activities our whole civilization is being swiftly made over "into something rich and strange." Let us take, as a single example, the development of the roads and highways of our state. The story could be made almost romantic, particularly if it began with a study of Indian and pioneer trails, but even without this feature a history of road and highway developments under town, county, and state control since 1858, and particularly in recent years, would constitute a social document of the greatest interest and importance. Some years ago Mr. Sidney Webb wrote a book for England under the title of *The Story of the King's Highway*, and it seemed that much of the social and economic history of England for several centuries was condensed into that single slender volume. Mr. Webb lightened the pages of his account

by describing the work of two famous road engineers popularly known as "Pontifex Maximus Telford" and "Macadam the Magician." Perhaps Minnesota does not have a Telford or a Macadam to serve as hero of the plot, but there is none so blind that he cannot see how the automobile and the new highways are quickening the life of these United States in a way before undreamed. Old towns are being stirred to a new life and new ones are coming into existence, all at the urge of the new means of easy transportation. "All the world's awheel," we say, and we come several hundred miles to a convention like this with much less trouble than it used to be to drive to the county seat.

Let me pause here for a brief digression, because in giving this single example of a public service the history of which deserves to be written, I have mentioned a name that might inspire any historian of local government to his best work. Mr. Webb and his capable wife, Beatrice Potter Webb, have set a standard in work of this kind that no American has dared attempt to reach. Their joint works on the history of English local government, running now into many volumes, not only have high value as history, but in addition have had an effect on English policy in matters of local government which shows how potent and useful the work of the historian in this field can really be. History, although sometimes called the science of the past, can have a notable influence on the present.

Minnesota stands today in need of historians who will describe with accuracy, sympathy, and insight the history of her many local governments. Let the historian do his work now while the records and many of those who made the records are still available for consultation. As a guide to municipal policy in present-day Minnesota a full and accurate history of Brainerd or of any other city in the state is worth far more to the citizens, legislators, and administrators of Minnesota than all the broken pottery, statues, and tablets that many archeologists can dig up at much expense and labor from the ruins of ancient Carthage, Ur, or Troy.

Having delivered this little sermon to the historians urging them to pay greater attention to local government, I now make bold to turn the tables and to suggest to those engaged in the work of local government that they will find in history much that is of value in their work. By history at this point I mean nothing more nor less than recorded experience. The municipal official should know a good deal of the history not only of his state and of his own city but also of other cities in this and other states. He needs this knowledge, if for no other purpose, to guide his votes and his actions in relation to the duties of his office and other public affairs. Much history of this useful kind is published in one place or another. Some of it is printed in the reports of the Minnesota supreme court, which has had to tell particular cities from time to time what they may and may not do and why. Some of it is written in the reports of certain state departments and some in the reports that cities themselves have published in the past. Much more of it will be found, perhaps, in technical periodicals, such as engineering and medical journals.

Unfortunately, however, a great deal of the sort of practical experience that cities have from time to time is not recorded at all or is very poorly recorded. Hence there is little basis for judgment on many current proposals of municipal action, and city officials may easily be misled by the arguments and the persuasions of supply salesmen, propagandists, and enthusiasts of other descriptions. At such times city officials would do well to consult the municipal reference bureau at the University of Minnesota, the files of *Minnesota Municipalities*, the officials of other cities, and all other sources of information that may be available. Usually some experience will be found recorded somewhere that will serve as a guide to present action.

It should be noted, however, that no information service will ever be as useful as it should be until municipal officials report fully and frankly the experience of their own cities in all important matters. A false sense of local pride often keeps cities from reporting their mistakes, but it is exactly these mistakes which,

if fully reported in *Minnesota Municipalities* or elsewhere, would serve as the best warning to other places not to repeat the errors at a later date.

The value of a knowledge of the past will scarcely be denied by any one. The more complete and accurate the knowledge of the local official of what has happened, the more likely is he to act wisely on matters before him. It is necessary to remind ourselves, also, that the present will quickly be the past. What is done today will be history tomorrow. We live, as it were, upon the thin edge of time, masters only for the moment of the things we do. What lies behind is unchangeable; what lies before is yet out of reach.

Local officials and all others engaged in the work of local government are in a sense the makers of local history. We need to ask ourselves constantly whether the record we make today will be one that we will be proud to report tomorrow. Will it be a record of real achievement? Will men hold meetings to commemorate our deeds or will they execrate us or simply ignore and forget us? Upon our work in the present depend the answers to these questions.

But lest we moralize too long in this vein, let us recognize that there is another important question, namely this: Will men in the future be able to read and understand our records? Are the records of our local governments being written down fully, clearly, and correctly? Are they being written in good ink on paper that will still hold together a generation hence? Are the books being stored in fireproof, dry, airy places, where they will last until the historian or the local citizen of the future comes along to use them? In short, how much care are we taking to preserve a complete and honest record of our local units and their work for the future citizen or official to read as a guide to his action? This is a subject to which too little attention has been given and the historian can report many truly tragic losses of valuable records through fire, water, careless administration, ink that fades with time, and other preventable causes. The state of Massachusetts, more progressive than others in this

matter, has a commissioner of public records with a general power of supervision over the archives of counties and towns. Minnesota would do well to study this problem and to adopt legislation suited to its own conditions to preserve local records ere it is too late.

But it is not only the past and the present that the local official must consider. History shows that the lives of our cities are continuous and long. Their tomorrows will soon be upon us as todays, which themselves quickly pass into yesterdays. Our cities are being made over, almost literally, nearly every generation. Let any city in Minnesota look at a picture of itself of thirty years ago and ask itself, "What will I be like thirty years hence?" and it will see the point of this remark. In a few generations Minnesota will probably double its population — and many of its cities grow even more rapidly than the state as a whole.

Here are problems of city planning and of building for the future. The official is responsible to a municipal corporation which in theory never dies. Let him look, then, to history, to the past, and he will find many examples of the bad results that come from poor planning and from failure to plan. Let him then take warning from the past to plan better for the future. If he does this he will find that he has planted a tree which thirty or more years hence will still be bearing fruit for his own and his city's satisfaction.

In making this plea for planning let me say that I do not propose that all cities try to make themselves over according to one pattern. On the contrary true planning means that each city should find and attempt to realize its own individuality, its own distinctive innate possibilities.

Lord Dunsany has put in poetic language the differences between cities, and it is these which we should preserve and develop.

For there is an air about a city, and it has a way with it, whereby a man may recognize one from another at once. There are cities full of happiness and cities full of pleasure, and cities full of gloom.

There are cities with their faces to heaven, and some with their faces to earth; some have a way of looking at the past and others look at the future; some notice you if you come among them, others glance at you, others let you go by. Some love the cities that are their neighbors, others are dear to the plains and to the heath; some cities are bare to the wind, others have purple cloaks and others brown cloaks and some are clad in white. Some tell the old tale of their infancy, with others it is secret; some cities sing and some mutter, some are angry. And some have broken hearts, and each city has her way of greeting Time.

Permit me then, in closing, to bespeak the coöperation of these two important forces in Minnesota history — the Minnesota Historical Society and the League of Minnesota Municipalities. Let the makers of local history and the students and writers of local history work together toward the common end of making Minnesota an outstanding leader among the states — a state in which historical knowledge and wisdom guide the practical work of the administrator in the building of a better state and the making of a happier, a more contented, and a more intelligent people.

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