

**THE EARLY
AMERICAN
CHRONICLERS**

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The Early American Chroniclers by Hubert Howe Bancroft

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THE EARLY AMERICAN CHRONICLERS.

Facts can be accurately known to us only by the most rigid observation
and sustained and scrutinizing scepticism.

Froude.

In the *North American Review* for April 1876 appeared an article by Lewis H. Morgan entitled "Montezuma's Dinner," to which some prominence has been given, notably and of late by Thomas Wentworth Higginson in *Harper's Magazine* for August 1882, in an article entitled "The First Americans." As Mr Morgan takes for his text the second volume of my *Native Races of the Pacific States*, which treats of the aboriginal civilization of the Mexican and Central American table-lands, and as his remarkable hypotheses, which seem to find intelligent support, affect not alone the quality of American aboriginal culture, but the foundations of early American history, and indeed of all historic evidence, I deem it my duty to state briefly and plainly my views upon the subject.

I confess to have been a little startled by the statement of Colonel Higginson, that the speculations of Mr Morgan were so generally accepted by scholars.

Nevertheless I was pleased to learn that within a few years there seemed to have come an answer to the question, who and whence were the aboriginal Americans; that the literary and monumental remains of the Aztecs, Mayas, and Mound-builders might now be translated by skilful students; that a clew to the labyrinths of race and origin had been found—found thirty years ago, though successfully applied for only eight or ten years; and when further assured that conjecture in this direction has begun for science a new era, and that although there may be some mysteries relating to humanity not yet solved, there remains little affecting American archæology which the new theory will not make plain—I was pleased, because these are things I have long wished to know.

But when informed that early American annals are by the light of this new theory transformed, and to a great extent annulled, the eyes of the first comers having deceived them; that the aboriginal culture, its arts, literature, sciences, politics, and religions being not these but other things, as is clearly shown by the 'new interpretation,' and that the tales of the conquerors must accordingly be written anew, written and read by this new transforming light; that there never was an Aztec or a Maya empire, but only wild tribes leagued like the northern savages; that Yucatan never had great cities, nor Montezuma a palace, but that as an ordinary Indian chief this personage had lived in the communal dwelling of his tribe; that we can see America as Cortés saw it, not in the words of Cortés and his companions, or in the monumental remains of the south, but in the reflection of New Mexican villages, and through the mental vagaries of one man after the annihilation of facts presented by a hundred men, I was surprised that such conceits should ever assume tangible form and be received as truth by any considerable number of scholars. I was not surprised, however, to see my much admired friend frankly admit, before concluding his essay, that there

were lions in the path in the form of facts, that it was easier to believe the Spanish conquerors than to accept some of Mr Morgan's positions, and that, after all, the matter of origin must still end in an interrogation mark.

If I rightly comprehend the Morgan hypothesis, it is that, by systems of kinship conspicuous in particular among the Iroquois and Ojibways, and present in fainter proportions everywhere, the races of the earth may be divided into savage and civilized, in some such way as hitherto they have been classified by physical, linguistic, and social characteristics. In one category would thus be placed the Aryan and Semitic races; in the other the Turanian, Malayan, and American. Convinced that the American nations all belong to one family, Mr Morgan assumes that their various institutions must be practically identical, and that the social customs of extinct tribes may best be learned, not from the statements of men who wrote from actual observation, but from the study of existing tribes. Himself familiar with the Iroquois, and to some extent with other northern tribes, he applies the Iroquois tribal organization of gentes, phratries, tribes, and confederations to the nations of Mexico and Central and South America, thus making all savages, and all statements to the contrary falsehoods. Among other tests of civilization are those of the marriage of single pairs and inheritance, a plurality of wives or husbands, and community of property belonging of course to savagism. By this system unity of race is established, and the Americans are referred for their origin to Asia.

With Mr Morgan's theory, as such, I have nothing to do. Not dealing in theories of race and origin myself, further than sometimes to catalogue them and wonder which of them all is most absurd; not being specially concerned whether the inhabitants of the Mexican and Central American table-lands are called savage or civilized, especially by those whose concep-

tion of the meaning of these words is quite different from my own, I paid little attention to Mr Morgan's article, not even once carefully reading it until my attention was called to it by Colonel Higginson. But concerning the effect of such teachings on popular estimates of historical evidence, particularly as touching the early American chroniclers, I am deeply interested.

If I am correctly informed, Mr Morgan obtained but little information from Mexico and Central America supporting his theory; but as it must be common and universal in order to stand at all, it was necessary his *ipse dixit* should be employed to extend his doctrines over the southern plateaux; so with all his strength he said it must be so, and was so, all eyes and brains to the contrary notwithstanding. All that was seen and said at the time of the conquest, and all that has since been seen or said conflicting with this fancy, is illusion. Now I venture to affirm, with all respect, that no adequate proof exists in support of his suppositions concerning Mexico; that is, no reasonable, tangible evidence, such as would be accepted by unbiassed common-sense. There are analogies, some of them remarkable. Nature is everywhere one; the nations of the earth, of whatever origin, are formed on one model. But for every analogy these theorists have found, their predecessors have found a score of analogies in support of some other theory. Arguing from analogy to prove origin or race is not sound reasoning.

In looking over Mr Morgan's writings, it is to be noticed that traces of his tests become more and more vague as the southern and more advanced nations are approached. His attempt to locate the ancient Cibola shows no small lack of skill in the use of evidence. Likewise, though more dogmatical in some respects, in his later works he apparently relinquishes in some degree the positions which at first were maintained with such arbitrary obstinacy, and spends some

time in qualifying former errors; but it seems that disciples, more wild than their master, have arisen, who by the blind pursuit of their *ignis fatuus* are rushing headlong into a gulf of absurdity. It seems a long leap indeed, but one made by them with apparent ease, from a theory resting on a trace of certain organizations in the north, and which may by much research be made to assume some weight, to an arbitrary conclusion that the Mayas were identical in their institutions with the Pueblo Indians. Grant the fundamental doctrine, and there is yet a wide distance between Zuni and Uxmal. It requires a vivid imagination to see only joint-tenement structures in the remains at Palenque. But admitting it, the radical difference in plan, architecture, and sculptured and stucco decorations, to employ his own line of argument, suggests a corresponding development and improvement in other institutions and arts which would introduce some troublesome variations in the assumed identity with the Pueblos and Iroquois, even if all started together. The Maya hieroglyphs, and even certain of the Aztec, form also an obstacle by no means so easily removed. True, not being deciphered, their actual grade cannot be positively proved; yet the common picture-writing contains enough of the phonetic element to place the better class high above the line fixed by the new transforming light as the mark of civilization. Even by this bright illumination it seems scarcely possible to reconcile the testimony of existing relics, and of Spanish witnesses who came into contact with the Maya and Nahua nations, with the narrow conclusions of supporters of the all-directing consanguinity. In the earlier life of the hypothesis the change to what is called descriptive consanguinity and the inheritance of property were made tests of civilization; but these tests were abandoned when it was ascertained, among other things, that the Aztecs did inherit personal property, and to a certain extent landed estate.