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Narratives of Democracy and Despotism: Richard Hildreth and the Politics of American History

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This article argues that the muted and often negative responses to the American historian Richard Hildreth's six-volume History of the United States published between 1849 and 1852 resulted from his embrace of a secular, utilitarian philosophy of history emphasizing individual freedom as the main source of human happiness and social progress. Tracing the origins of these ideas to Hildreth's early exposure to liberal religion, democratic party politics, and antislavery thought, the article shows that Hildreth's historiographical approach rejected providentialism in favor of secular causation, rooted in human agency and historical contingency. Hildreth's liberal utilitarianism is offered as at least a partial solution to what has been called the "problem" of defining his place in American intellectual history.

In the 1834 preface to the first volume of what became his ten-volume *History of the United States*, the American historian George Bancroft assured his readers that he had avoided the "carelessness" of previous historians. Without naming his predecessors, Bancroft accused them of substituting "rumors and vague recollections" for the facts and arriving at conclusions that "satisfied prejudice by wanton perversions" of the truth. At the same time, however, he claimed that his rigorous attention to the facts of American history had revealed the fundamentally democratic and providential nature of the United States. Thorough study of the nation's early history, he asserted, had shown that the "germ of our institutions" had taken root in the American colonies and that "the spirit of the colonies demanded freedom from the beginning." The liberal and democratic institutions that Bancroft celebrated in his own day were prefigured in the nation's complex, yet divinely patterned, history. The "maturity of the nation," he argued, "is but a continuation of its youth."¹

Six years later, the Massachusetts lawyer and journalist Richard Hildreth began conceiving his own history of the United States, a project that would culminate in six volumes, completed in 1852. Accepting Bancroft's respect for factual accuracy but rejecting his providentialism, Hildreth argued for a radically different understanding

¹George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, vol. 1, 8th edn (Boston, 1841), vi, vii.

of America's past. Rather than finding only the roots of democracy in the colonial and early national United States, Hildreth found an ongoing, open-ended, and entirely human struggle between *democracy* and *despotism*. Unlike Bancroft, whose belief in America's democratic destiny was tied to a romantic faith in divine providence, Hildreth insisted that religious bigotry, social hierarchy, and racial slavery constituted real and potentially insurmountable obstacles to the triumph of liberal democracy. There was no providential guarantee of a happy ending, Hildreth argued, but democracy and despotism stood "face to face, like Gabriel and the Archenemy," and "make ready for a dreadful struggle."²

Not surprisingly, Bancroft's comforting vision of America's unique, providential destiny and his adoption of a romantic and "vivid" narrative style made his books extremely popular.³ Praised by American readers across party lines, no mean feat in an era of intense party competition, Bancroft's reputation as America's first "master historian" has remained strong into recent times.⁴ Hildreth's work, on the other hand, received a lukewarm reception from his contemporaries. Not only had he offended readers by his direct "severe censures and bitter sneers" against the nation's colonial progenitors, but his straightforward factual style lacked all the "beautiful poetry" of Bancroft's work.⁵ An angry reviewer at the *Boston Evening Traveler* was offended at the historian's blunt indictment of Puritan religious intolerance, while a reviewer at the *Boston Post* in 1849 described Hildreth's writing as "hard, dry and cold."⁶ In his 1940 article, the great American historian Arthur Schlesinger claimed that a key "problem" in assessing Hildreth's place in American intellectual history was reconciling his often vivid and polemically charged pamphlet literature with his historical writing, marked as it was by a "remarkable and persevering dullness."⁷

This article will argue that the muted and often negative responses to Hildreth's historical writing resulted from his distinctive, at least in America, embrace of a secular philosophy of history shaped by secular liberal and utilitarian principles. Identifying individual freedom as the most important source of human progress, Hildreth's approach to historical writing was shaped by a multi-decade campaign against what he saw as irrational forms of political, social, religious, economic, and intellectual tyranny. In ways that mirror the "liberal utilitarianism" embraced by John Stuart Mill around the same time in Great Britain, Hildreth came to see "the development of individuals' ... faculties, sentiments, and character" as essential to human happiness and social improvement. Though there is no surviving correspondence between them, Hildreth and Mill shared parallel experiences and a similar intellectual evolution. Like his English counterpart, Hildreth began as an admirer of Jeremy Bentham but departed

² Richard Hildreth, *Despotism in America: An Inquiry into the Nature, Results, and Legal Basis of the Slaveholding System in the United States* (Boston, 1840), 9, 11.

³ Eileen Ka-May Cheng, *Historiography: An Introductory Guide* (New York, 2012), 77.

⁴ George Athan Billias, "George Bancroft: Master Historian," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 111/2 (2001), 507–28, at 528.

⁵ Quoted in Donald Emerson, *Richard Hildreth* (Baltimore, 1946), 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "The Problem of Richard Hildreth," *New England Quarterly* 13/2 (1940), 223–45, at 229.

from strict utilitarianism in choosing the inner life of individuals as his highest priority. As opposed to Bentham's emphasis on the scientific reform of legal, institutional, or other "external" frameworks, the liberal utilitarianism of Mill and Hildreth was based on a "richer conception of human nature" which they developed "in more liberal directions."⁸ For Hildreth, this libertarian emphasis on individual development translated into a sharp and quite systematic critique of American life that subjected the most hallowed principles of his contemporaries to withering scrutiny.⁹

A focus on these aspects of Hildreth's thought both compounds and complicates recent historiography on the relationship between religious and secular forms of liberalism. Secular liberalism, historian Amy Kittelstrom argues, involved a belief that all forms of human progress depended upon "each individuals' growth in conversation with other individuals, rather than in opposition to them, in a society that rises together if it is to rise at all." She notes that religious liberalism, especially the Protestant form that emerged in New England in the years before the Civil War, provided spiritual grounding for this human individuality that placed "the divine right of private judgment" in opposition to rigid moral prescriptions, ecclesiastical hierarchies or loyalty to creedal statements.¹⁰ Gary Dorrien describes liberal religion as motivated by a profoundly "antidogmatic principle" that aspired to "bring Christian thought into organic unity with the evolutionary world view, the movements for social reconstruction and the expectations of 'a better world.'"¹¹ When Hildreth spoke as he so often did of "the liberal and enlightened," he meant those who were committed to the freedom of the mind, whether from political or religious tyranny, as a sacred duty.¹²

Yet if Hildreth's liberalism was nurtured by his religious environment, this article will also show that conflicts over the boundaries of liberal religion could produce more overt, and at times even militant, secularism. In his response to attacks on religious liberty, both in the past and in the present, Hildreth came to reject all forms of creedalism and moved consistently toward the creation of a public space in which "a non-religious, this worldly perspective [was] a viable option."¹³ His journey from religious liberalism to secularism was driven by encounters with those who bluntly rejected his ideas and sought to suppress them. The themes of Hildreth's history and his rejection of Bancroft's providential nationalism, therefore, provide examples of how early forms of political and economic liberalism could begin in the atmosphere of religious

⁸For a discussion of John Stuart Mill's "liberal utilitarianism" see Piers Norris Turner, "The Rise of Liberal Utilitarianism: Bentham, Mill," in John Shand, ed., *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, 1st edn (New York, 2008), 185–211, at 186.

⁹Matti Häyry, *Liberal Utilitarianism and Applied Ethics* (New York, 1994), 3; Callum Barrell, *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism, 1800–1865* (New York, 2021), 7.

¹⁰Amy Kittelstrom, *Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York, 2015), 8.

¹¹Gary Dorrien, *The Making of Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville, 2001), ix.

¹²Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore: The White Slave or Memoirs of a Fugitive* (New York, 1857), 166.

¹³Christopher Grasso, "The Religious and the Secular in the Early American Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 36/2 (2016), 359–88, at 388. Grasso uses the work of the philosopher Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA, 2007), to interrogate the ways in which historians use the concepts of religion and secularism.

liberalism but move in skeptical and secular directions. Together, these strands of analysis will also provide a reassessment of Hildreth's place in American intellectual history, what historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr once called "the problem of Richard Hildreth."¹⁴

Religion and the origins of Hildreth's secular liberalism

Richard Hildreth's embrace of utilitarianism, and his liberal and secular approach to history, were products of several factors that shaped his life, including an immersion in Jacksonian-era partisan politics and a personal exposure to plantation slavery. But his outlook was initially nurtured in the contested religious climate of antebellum Massachusetts, where Calvinist religious orthodoxy was under fire from Unitarianism, a liberal religious outlook shaped by Lockean epistemology, Scottish moral sense philosophy, and a historicist biblical hermeneutic. By the time of his birth, Harvard-educated Unitarian leaders, such as Boston's William Ellery Channing, were challenging traditional Calvinist doctrines, especially innate depravity and unconditional election, as both irrational and inconsistent with the modern ethic of self-culture and moral improvement. In his famous 1819 sermon "Unitarian Christianity," for example, Channing had denounced Calvinist orthodoxy for its tendency to "to form a gloomy, forbidding, and servile religion" and to "substitute censoriousness, bitterness, and persecution, for a tender and impartial charity."¹⁵

Perhaps most importantly, Massachusetts Unitarianism emphasized both rationality and individual agency in religion, arguing against the orthodox view that the rational and moral faculties of human beings were naturally distorted by sin. "Reason is too godlike a faculty to be insulted and impugned," Channing insisted in a sermon against Calvinism in 1826. When it attempted to defend its irrational doctrines through the claim that human reason was "depraved through the fall," he argued, orthodoxy left itself open to any number of "accumulated absurdities."¹⁶ Channing told his audience that the innumerable "forgeries of imposture and fanaticism" that littered the history of the Christian church should serve as cautionary tales against any separation of religion and reason. It was far better, argued New England's Unitarian divines, to reconcile religion with reason, link piety to moral virtue, and forge a bond between the human will and social progress.¹⁷

These ideas were most prominent in eastern Massachusetts counties during the first third of the nineteenth century, but they reached Connecticut river valley towns like Deerfield, Massachusetts, where Richard Hildreth was born in 1807. His father, Hosea Hildreth, was a minister, historian, and schoolmaster whose Harvard education had exposed him to the new religious liberalism. Though Hosea's preaching

¹⁴Schlesinger, "The Problem of Richard Hildreth," 223.

¹⁵William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity, Discourse at the Ordination of the Rev. Jared Sparks, Baltimore, 1819," in *The Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D.*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1849), 3: 59–103, at 87.

¹⁶William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity: Most Favorable to Piety," in *Works of William Ellery Channing*, 3: 163–206, at 201.

¹⁷On the liberal theology of New England Unitarianism see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861* (Cambridge, 1970); Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 1–35; and E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, 2003), 197–217.

generally avoided controversial topics, his published sermons indicate much greater concern for political morality and public support for education than for the abstract doctrinal points that preoccupied the defenders of New England's Calvinist tradition. In 1824, after moving his young family to New Hampshire to take a job as headmaster of the Phillips Exeter Academy, for example, he defended religious establishment less as a means for saving souls than for what might be described as utilitarian ends. Public support for churches, he argued, would not only promote "the good order of towns," but would increase the "relative value of real estate" since it was a known historical fact that towns with churches "have a decided advantage in the value of their farms."¹⁸

Elements of Richard Hildreth's later approach to the writing of history can also be found in his father's *Abridged History of the United States*, published in 1831 for use in schools. Though far more muted than in his son's scholarship, Hosea's history included gruesome details about the persecution of Quakers in early New England, and he praised the "liberality of conscience" shown by the authorities in Rhode Island in welcoming religious outcasts from other colonies.¹⁹ While this liberality of spirit and emphasis on ethical conduct over doctrinal correctness was deemed largely inoffensive in historical writing, it generated problems when Hosea resumed his ministerial career in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1825. Within a few years, congregants began leaving the church over the pastor's insufficient attention to doctrinal matters and what they deemed to be his overemphasis on the "moral and intellectual improvement of the whole town." Like other eastern Massachusetts religious liberals, Hosea Hildreth was more interested in enforcing "good works more than good belief."²⁰ Richard Hildreth never commented directly on the congregation's rejection of his father over religious doctrine, but his own mature disdain for theological rigidity likely reflects this early experience.

By the time Richard Hildreth entered Harvard in 1822, liberal religious ideas and empirical approaches to knowledge were in the ascendency. In his weekly lectures on "The Evidence of Christianity," for example, Henry Ware, the Hollis Professor of Divinity, taught an inductive method by which the truths of the Christian religion could be proved conclusively at the bar of reason. In Isaac Newton's elegant, ordered physical universe and in William Paley's ecology of perfect biological adaptation, Ware taught students to see irrefutable proof of God's existence, rationality, and benevolence.²¹ When orthodox Calvinists insisted that this view abandoned historic Christianity in favor of the deism of Franklin and Paine, Harvard theologians had a ready answer. Human understanding was powerful enough to discern the nature and character of God in the evidence of nature, but biblical revelation was still necessary to prove the more distinctive ethical doctrines taught by Christ in the Gospels. "When Jesus Christ came into the world," wrote William Ellery Channing in 1821, "nature had

¹⁸Hosea Hildreth, *Two Discourses to Townsmen* (Exeter, 1824), 11.

¹⁹Hosea Hildreth, *An Abridged History of the United States* (Boston, 1831), 35; more information on the Hosea Hildreth can be found in Emerson, *Richard Hildreth*, 14–15.

²⁰John James Babson, *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann, Including the Town of Rockport* (Gloucester, 1860), 495.

²¹Henry Ware's teaching is described in Conrad Wright, "The Early Period," in George H. Williams, ed., *Harvard Divinity School: Its Place in Harvard University and in American Culture* (Boston, 1954), 38–41.

failed to communicate instructions to men in which they had the deepest concern.” Therefore “additional supernatural lights” were necessary for man to grasp the deepest truths of religion and morality.²² This argument, often called “supernatural rationalism,” held that though the laws of nature testify to the existence of a rational God, Christ’s miraculous interruption of those laws was required to prove the authority of his specific redemptive message to man.²³ Reason, he argued, could only go so far and prove so much before a messenger wielding miraculous powers was needed to complete God’s message to the world.

Yet if this position temporarily shielded Harvard Unitarianism from orthodox attacks, it was a perilous theological balancing act between biblical literalism on the one hand and deistic natural religion on the other. It also placed a huge theological burden on the *historicity* of the biblical miracles, a burden that a younger generation of Harvard-trained intellectuals, including Hildreth, felt it could not bear. Typically, this conflict is described as the Transcendentalist controversy, with young Unitarian ministers, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, rejecting Unitarian empiricism in favor of a German Romantic theology predicated not on history, but on human intuition. Insisting that God and morality could be found within the self rather than only through the senses and scriptures, Emerson described Unitarian empiricism as “corpse cold” and saw belief in miracles as unnecessary to Christian faith. Finding themselves under attack from inside their own fold as well as from orthodox outsiders, Harvard Unitarian leaders like Andrews Norton, dubbed the “pope” of Unitarianism, struck back and denounced Transcendentalism as “the latest form of infidelity” with potentially disastrous consequences for the “religious and moral state of the community.”²⁴ Establishment Unitarians like Norton were religious liberals, but their liberalism rested upon the assumption that Christian revelation, including the miracles, was to be accepted as the most important source and limit of truth.²⁵

Richard Hildreth’s distinctive intervention in the Transcendentalist controversy indicates that romanticism was not the sole source of intellectual dissent in this dispute, and it provides insight into the emergence of his distinctively secular approach to history. Working as a political journalist in Boston in 1840, Hildreth came to the defense of the Transcendentalists, not because he shared their Romantic predilections, but rather because he had become a far more thoroughgoing empiricist than men like Norton or Ware. In an anonymous pamphlet responding to Andrews Norton, for example, Hildreth forcefully rejected the claim that “all improvement in the civilized world, all advance in human happiness, is identified with the spread of Christian principles.”²⁶ Such an assertion, he insisted in highly polemical language, was historically false. The

²²William Ellery Channing, “Evidences of Revealed Religion,” in *Works of William Ellery Channing*, 3: 105–36, at 113.

²³Howe, *Unitarian Conscience*, 87; see also Paul E. Teed, *A Revolutionary Conscience: Theodore Parker and Antebellum America* (Lanham, 2012), 17–18.

²⁴Andrews Norton, “The New School in Literature and Philosophy,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 9 Nov. 1836.

²⁵On the Transcendentalist controversy see Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York, 2007), 98–122.

²⁶Richard Hildreth, “Letter to Andrews Norton,” in Martha M. Pingle, ed., *An American Utilitarian: Richard Hildreth as a Philosopher* (New York, 1967), 128–52, at 130.

rights of humanity had been vindicated not by theologians, but by men like Voltaire, Locke, Galileo, and Leibniz, who had “exposed the absurdity of punishing men for their opinions” or who had “exploded the horrible errors of witchcraft” accusations. But for the throughgoing liberal rationalism of Enlightenment philosophy, the old laws of Massachusetts might still stand, resulting in the prosecution of the venerable Andrews Norton himself. “You might be swinging on a gibbet, hung as a witch!” he reminded the professor.²⁷

Hildreth’s letter also attempted to debunk the ways Harvard Unitarians used historical evidence to support the truth of Christian revelation. Their claim that Christ’s miracles proved that his message was inspired by God, he argued, failed to satisfy the rules of logic and evidence. Clearly familiar with David Hume’s famous critique of the biblical miracles, Hildreth stated flatly that “whatever happens, happens in conformity with some general law” of nature, and “the allegation by the performer of [miracles] that he performs them with the direct aid of the deity does not, in these times, acquire any credit from rational men.”²⁸ Having trained for the law before taking up newspaper work, Hildreth also felt comfortable with the rules of testimony, and he used that language effectively against the “supernatural rationalism” of men like Norton. Even granting the historicity of the miracles, he argued, the performance of them was not, by itself, proof that the miracle worker was also offering a divinely authorized message. “A wonderful work affords no testimony that extends beyond itself,” he wrote. Someone might claim that their miraculous power derived from a divine source, but such a statement is “the attestation of a man merely,” which would then require additional evidence to prove.²⁹

Unlike the Romantic theologians he was defending, Hildreth operated from a startlingly empirical and secular standpoint, one that sought to separate religion from science, reason, and even moral philosophy. In a generation when morality was deemed inseparable from religious belief, Hildreth told his readers that, if the past was any guide, the notion that human happiness was dependent on a true understanding of the sacred scriptures left “small hope” for the world.³⁰ Religion, he insisted, could not be subjected to reason at all, but rather operated at the level of feeling, and was expressed most powerfully in those who had given up the joys and sorrows of ordinary life. As historian Christopher Grasso has put it, Hildreth regarded religion as “a personal matter” that had no business regulating moral, political, or social life.³¹ It was self-interested clerics, recognizing that a scientific basis for religion allowed them to claim expertise and authority over the unlearned and the credulous, who insisted upon applying it outside the private domain. In language that was typical of Hildreth’s polemical style, he charged that the inward joy and comfort that made up the essence of religious

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 145. Timothy Larsen notes that the English Utilitarian John Stuart Mill made a similar argument in his *System of Logic*, published in 1843. See Timothy Larsen, *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (New York, 2018), 98.

³⁰ Hildreth, “Letter to Andrews Norton,” 134.

³¹ Christopher Grasso, *Skepticism and Religious Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York, 2018), 268.

feeling had been hijacked by “a fat sleek clergyman, who knows Greek, and who despised mankind.”³²

The raw, anticlerical language of Hildreth’s intervention in the Transcendentalist controversy, however, must also be understood in relation to the legal persecution of the Boston freethinker Abner Kneeland, who, after several mistrials, was sentenced to six weeks in Boston City jail in 1838 for the crime of blasphemy. Kneeland was a former Universalist minister who had come to reject Christianity in favor of materialism. His weekly lectures at Boston’s Julien Hall and his weekly freethought newspaper, the *Boston Investigator*, were also gaining support from the city’s growing working class. In response to three articles published in the 20 December 1833 issue of the *Investigator*, state authorities charged him with three counts of blasphemy under a 1782 state law making it a crime to “willfully blaspheme the holy name of God ... or by cursing or reproaching Jesus Christ or the holy ghost.”³³ Because blasphemy was rarely prosecuted, and because it was several years before the authorities finally secured a conviction, the case captured the attention of the city over and raised questions about basic individual freedoms. The prosecution cited Kneeland’s association with transatlantic radicals Robert Dale Owen and Francis Wright as evidence that he was a criminal atheist who sought to have “moral restraints removed, illicit sexual relations encouraged, and the laws of property repealed.”³⁴

Although there is no evidence that Richard Hildreth knew Kneeland personally or had any direct connection to the freethought movement, he regarded the prosecution as the last “traces of that priestly domination which once prevailed among us” and which had been fatal to the “temporal happiness of the people.”³⁵ In an unsigned pamphlet published not long after Kneeland’s first, inconclusive trial in 1834, he insisted that the case raised important questions not only about religious liberty, but also about deeper issues of “legislative or judicial interference with the freedom of public controversy.”³⁶ Christianity, like any other subject of public importance, should not be shielded from open scrutiny but rather must “pass the ordeal of a free and critical examination.”³⁷ Even ridicule and mockery, which Kneeland’s paper regularly used in critiquing Christian doctrines, were often the “keenest arguments” against falsehoods of all kinds and therefore must not be prohibited by law when applied to religion. If religion was not itself “ridiculous” then “the attempts by wits to make it appear so”

³² Hildreth, “Letter to Andrews Norton,” 137.

³³ Henry Steele Commager, “The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland,” *New England Quarterly* 8/1 (1935), 29–41, at 32. Grasso, “The Religious and the Secular,” 388, also notes the proximity between Hildreth’s letter to Andrews Norton and the Kneeland prosecution.

³⁴ Leonard Levy, “Satan’s Last Apostle in Massachusetts,” *American Quarterly* 5/1 (1953), 16–30, at 19–20.

³⁵ [Richard Hildreth], *An Appeal to Common Sense and the Constitution in behalf of Unlimited Freedom of Public Discussion Occasioned by the Late Trial of Rev. Abner Kneeland for Blasphemy* (Boston, 1834), 14. Hildreth’s authorship of this pamphlet is established by Douglas Emerson, *Richard Hildreth*, 170; as well as by Louis S. Friedland, “Richard Hildreth’s Minor Works,” *Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America* 40/2 (1946), 127–50, at 135. Both Emerson and Friedland had access to a manuscript entitled “Literary Memoranda” that Hildreth created around 1856. This source appears to have been lost. For a discussion of the manuscript see Emerson, *Richard Hildreth*, 169; and Friedland, “Richard Hildreth’s Minor Works,” 134–5.

³⁶ [Richard Hildreth], *Appeal to Common Sense and the Constitution* (Boston, 1834) 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

will be in vain.³⁸ Indeed, Hildreth implied that the use of blasphemy prosecutions to protect Christianity from the criticism of men like Kneeland was an indication that the religion's defenders had doubts about its ability to withstand open debate. To those who insisted that prosecution was necessary to protect "the mass of the people" from infidelity, he responded that ordinary folk were fully capable of understanding subjects of even the most "abstruse nature." After all, he concluded, the Protestant Reformation had itself begun with "the artisans and shopkeepers of the towns."³⁹

Hildreth's opposition to Abner Kneeland's blasphemy prosecution bears a striking similarity to John Stuart Mill's defense of the controversial London freethinker Richard Carlile several years earlier. In 1823, Carlile had been convicted of sedition and blasphemy based on articles he had published in his weekly newspaper, *The Republican*, and was sentenced to a lengthy stint in jail.⁴⁰ Like Hildreth, Mill voiced his opposition anonymously but did so in a series of articles in the London *Morning Chronicle*, an influential reformist daily which regularly printed letters from utilitarians and philosophical radicals. Following his mentor Bentham, Mill insisted that the prosecution of Carlile threatened a more general suppression of free discussion. "It is in vain to say that Atheistical opinions shall alone be excluded," he argued. "What reason is there why this more than any other subject should be prevented from undergoing a thorough examination?"⁴¹ At the same time, he was certain that the suppression of Carlile's views was predicated on a belief in the "the utter incapacity and incorrigible imbecility of the people." But the view that the "people are incapable of distinguishing truth from falsehood," he argued, was scarcely believable by anyone "whose judgment is not biassed by interest." There was also little, if any, utility in the prosecution of "infidels," he pointed out, since attempts to suppress them would result in far more public attention than if they were left alone. The "vague and defamatory" abuse which the clergy heaped upon men like Carlile, he implied, indicated the weakness of their own position. After all, he concluded, "true abuse is far easier, and requires less time and application than argument."⁴²

Though there is no evidence that Hildreth had read Mill's letters to the *Morning Chronicle*, their converging lines of argument in favor of free public discussion indicate that a transatlantic liberal discourse emerged in response to high-profile blasphemy cases. Both insisted that religious doctrines, like any other subject, must not be walled off from open debate, and that attempts to do so actually weakened rather than strengthened the cause of religion. They were also equally committed to the notion that "the people" could be relied upon to make reliable intellectual and moral judgments. And, finally, both implied that the use of state power to suppress criticism

³⁸Ibid., 12.

³⁹Ibid., 11.

⁴⁰On Carlile see Michael Laccohee Bush, *The Friends and Following of Richard Carlile: A Study of Infidel Republicanism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (South Lopham, Norfolk, 2016).

⁴¹Wickliff [John Stuart Mill] "Free Discussion, Letter I," *Morning Chronicle*, 28 Jan. 1823, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John Robson et al., 33 vols. (Toronto, 1965–91), vol. 22, *Newspaper Writings Part I*, 11.

⁴²Wickliff [John Stuart Mill] "Free Discussion, Letter III," *Morning Chronicle*, 12 Feb. 1823, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 22: 15.

of Christianity suggested that its defenders were unsure that their doctrines could be effectively vindicated in the court of public opinion. In this final respect, Hildreth went further than Mill in providing his readers with a venerable intellectual pedigree for the heterodox opinions Abner Kneeland was on trial for printing. Kneeland's views were not modern, he argued, but rather part of "a revival of the ancient doctrine of Epicurus," whose disciples were "not less illustrious than Virgil and Horace, Caesar, Atticus and Macaenas," authors whom every "schoolboy" read.⁴³ If Kneeland had embraced those ideas, so had "Bentham the celebrated jurist and La Place the famous astronomer," and luminaries like Bayle, Locke, and Leibniz had joined them in vindicating the "claims of humanity and the dominion of common sense against ... tyrannical bigotry."⁴⁴

Hildreth's liberal Whiggery

While liberal theology had nurtured Hildreth's critical faculties in ways that made him highly skeptical of antebellum religious culture, his immersion in the partisan warfare of the 1830s shaped his views of American democracy and his historical consciousness. After graduating from Harvard in 1826, Hildreth trained as an attorney but found that his political and philosophical orientation was better served as a journalist. In 1832, he became chief correspondent of the *Boston Atlas*, an organ of the Massachusetts Whig Party, and two years later he purchased partial ownership of the periodical and became coeditor. Hildreth's role at the *Atlas* thus commenced at a time when the emergence of mass parties was reshaping the American political landscape and elevating popular candidates, most notably the war hero and Tennessee slaveholder Andrew Jackson, to high office. Claiming a popular mandate, Jackson used executive power in unprecedented ways, including repeated uses of the veto power, the forced removal of Native peoples, and the destruction of the federally chartered Second Bank of the United States. The Jacksonian Democrats appealed to newly enfranchised voters, claiming that their policies protected ordinary Americans from corrupt monopoly, entrenched privilege, and what they liked to call the "money power." While the Whig Party emerged fully in Jackson's second term, prominent leaders like Daniel Webster and Henry Clay struggled to embrace the logic of democratic party politics and relied instead on traditional ideas of political deference to sway voters. It fell to the younger generation of Whigs to prepare their party to compete effectively in a modernizing liberal democracy.⁴⁵

In his articles in the *Atlas*, Hildreth used history to attack Jacksonian pretensions to the mantle of popular democracy. In the process, he articulated a competing set of liberal values that, like his religious liberalism, emphasized individual private judgment over and against institutional or partisan imperatives. First, he argued that Andrew Jackson was a lawless demagogue whose actions as a military commander and political leader betrayed rather than extended popular rights. "He has risen by trampling on popular rights," Hildreth told his readers, and "every new laurel which has adorned his

⁴³ *Appeal to Common Sense and the Constitution*, 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), 482–507.

brow ... has commemorated some new invasion of the constitution, some new act of arbitrary power." Comparing Jackson to King Charles II, who judged his subordinates solely by their service to the monarchy, Hildreth argued that Jackson's unrestrained use of power was made possible by those who ignored illegal methods because they benefited personally from such actions. A more clear-eyed view of Jackson's record as a military leader revealed a tyrant whose threat to freedom and democracy could be seen in his "proclamation of martial law, his imprisonment of magistrates," and his "shooting of fellow citizens under a strained construction of the militia act."⁴⁶

Second, Hildreth condemned the "gross and ludicrous absurdity" that the Jacksonians were the "the only democrats of the country." Such a claim, he insisted in ways that echoed his views of religion, was like "the self-conceited fanaticism that leads some religious sects to deny all except themselves the title of *Christian* and to denounce as no better than infidels and atheists all those who refuse to subscribe to every particle of their creed." Jacksonians were not democrats at all, but rather hypocritical "Tories" whose support for Jackson's despotic usurpations violated "every single one of their own precepts."⁴⁷ If older Whigs like Daniel Webster and John Quincy Adams lamented the rise of popular democracy and longed for an older, deferential political order, Hildreth's Whiggery was of a far more liberal hue. His critique of the Democrats was not that they represented "mob rule" or placed an excessive emphasis on popular participation, but rather that they were corrupt Tories who used their power to "satisfy the greedy cravings of the office seeking banditti."⁴⁸ Such rhetoric was distinctly partisan in tone, but it represented a sincere belief that popular government was in danger from those who sought to use the facade of democracy for personal gain and to concentrate power in the hands of a corrupt few.

Nothing fueled Hildreth's contempt for Jacksonian claims to democratic virtue more than the speeches of George Bancroft, a Massachusetts Democratic Party operative whose career as a historian was launched in tandem with his search for political advantage and party patronage. By 1839, Bancroft had published the first two volumes of his *History of the United States*, and his service to the Bay State Democratic Party had netted him the highly lucrative and politically powerful position of collector of the Port of Boston.⁴⁹ The providential framework and democratic nationalism that shaped his approach to the American past, moreover, was put to good use in Massachusetts party politics. In speeches before his fellow Democrats, Bancroft lauded the rise of the Jacksonians as the culmination of a long, divinely guided process in which democracy had defeated aristocracy and other forms of entrenched privilege. In late November 1839, for example, he told a gathering of fellow Democratic office holders that their party stood for "freedom of the mind" and could justly trace its intellectual lineage to Henry Vane, Roger Williams, Samuel Gorton, and other historic New Englanders who had suffered persecution at the hands of New England's traditional rulers. The Democratic *Boston Morning Post* lavished praise

⁴⁶ *Boston Daily Atlas*, 22 Feb. 1834.

⁴⁷ *Boston Daily Atlas*, 30 July 1838, original emphasis.

⁴⁸ *Boston Daily Atlas*, 1 Nov. 1837.

⁴⁹ Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat* (New York, 1984), 166–7.

on the speech, which united “extensive learning to an ardent attachment to liberal principles.”⁵⁰

Hildreth's palpable disgust at Bancroft's use of history to bolster a party he believed was inherently *illiberal* was exacerbated by the recent success of the Democrats in the 1839 gubernatorial elections, a contest decided by a mere three hundred votes. His response in the *Atlas* seethed with sarcasm. “Now all this is very fine and monstrous pretty,” he wrote. But as Bancroft was himself a recipient of a corrupt spoils system and his audience was filled with Democratic “office holders and office seekers,” whose appointments depended upon ideological conformity, the speech was “perfectly ridiculous,” and “were Mr. Bancroft a man of common sense, it would be impossible to conceive how he could have kept his countenance while delivering such a discourse.”⁵¹ Hildreth pointed specifically to Bancroft's recent abandonment of his earlier antislavery principles as an indication that the historian's “freedom of the mind” would always be sacrificed to the demands of partisan allegiance. “Mr. Bancroft, since he became a politician, has totally sacrificed on the altar of party his abolition principles,” he charged. While Bancroft had never held strong antislavery views, he had spoken out against the domestic slave trade and even called for the abolition of slavery in the nation's capital. But even his most sympathetic biographer concedes that as his political fortunes improved, his opposition to slavery evaporated and the recently published second volume of his *History*, as we will see, blamed the British for forcing slavery on American colonists.⁵²

Hildreth was, as his articles in the *Atlas* show, an intensely partisan Whig, an outlook that clearly shaped his worldview. But the Whig political culture he adopted was, ironically, somewhat anti-partisan in character, and it allowed his thought to develop in ways that transcended a narrow political creed. As historian Daniel Walker Howe has shown, New England Whigs were committed to a conception of the public good that self-consciously avoided, as former president John Quincy Adams put it, the creation of “profligate factions.”⁵³ Though a tight-knit political organization was essential to promote their understanding of the public good, many Whigs were averse to the notion of political parties as positive ends in themselves. Progress, they believed, could only be achieved when “passion” and “partiality” were put aside in favor of larger goals of moral, economic, social, and political “improvement.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Hildreth's association with the Massachusetts Whigs deteriorated when, for openly political reasons, they distanced themselves from the temperance movement, a cause he believed would free individuals from enslavement to drink. The party, he complained, had been seized by “a small, interested faction” driven by “private and selfish purposes” that were wholly averse to “the true ends of the Whig Party.”⁵⁵ Increasingly committed to a vision of

⁵⁰ *Boston Daily Atlas*, 22 Nov. 1839. On the role of providence in Bancroft's *History* see also Richard C. Vitzthum, “Theme and Method in Bancroft's *History of the United States*,” *New England Quarterly* 41/3 (1968), 362–80.

⁵¹ *Boston Daily Atlas*, 22 Nov. 1839.

⁵² Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 172–3.

⁵³ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979), 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁵ Richard Hildreth, *My Connection with the Atlas Newspaper* (Boston, 1839), 23.

moral and social progress over the requirements of strict party discipline, Hildreth was unwilling to sacrifice principle for partisan expedience.

On the level of policy, however, the liberal nature of Hildreth's Whiggery is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than in his embrace of free-banking legislation. In the aftermath of Andrew Jackson's destruction of the Second Bank of the United States, many in his party remained committed to a financial system based on public-private partnerships. Hildreth, however, joined a group of northern Whigs who had come to believe that the existing system of bank incorporation not only corrupted the political system but also created financial instability. He and other advocates of "free banking" argued that state governments should cease issuing specific Acts of incorporation for each bank and instead pass general incorporations law requiring all lending institutions to meet the same organizational and specie reserve requirements. This would remove the "monopolistic" elements of the traditional system and create a competitive financial environment in which banks would rise and fall according to their operating policies. As one historian has described it, free banking was designed to "remove partisanship and corruption from the process and make competition a democratic virtue; everyone agreed to the same rules received the same treatment."⁵⁶

In 1840, Hildreth published a lengthy work advocating free-banking laws and abounding with references to the classic English liberals Adam Smith and David Ricardo. The book surveyed the history of banking in both England and America and repeatedly called attention to the ill effects of political interference with the currency system. "The direct interference of government in any branch of trade had generally proved very disadvantageous to it," he argued. But this has "been the case especially with respect to the business of banking."⁵⁷ Using countless examples from the history of the Bank of England, he argued that suspensions of specie payments, with their disastrous consequences for the overall economy, were "directly traceable in their origin ... to an unfortunate and impolitic connection between the banks and the government."⁵⁸ But in the free-banking law passed in the state of New York in 1838, he saw the beginning of a new financial system that, while not perfect, would avoid the evils of monopoly and extend credit to underserved sectors of the economy. "Fraud, mismanagement and fluctuation are incidental to all business transactions," he admitted. But as free competition had mitigated such evils in "every other branch of trade," so "free competition in banking will be attended with the same results."⁵⁹ As in the world of religious ideas, so too the world of banking and commerce should be liberated from monopoly and entrenched privilege.

Liberalism, utilitarianism, and antislavery

By the time his book on banking was published in 1840, Hildreth's perspective on American history and culture had altered in two additional ways. First, he had become

⁵⁶Sharon Ann Murphy, *Other People's Money: How Banking Worked in the Early American Republic* (Baltimore, 2017), 111.

⁵⁷Richard Hildreth, *Banks, Banking and Paper Currencies* (Boston, 1840), 119.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 113.

an ardent abolitionist, a perspective that had emerged from living on a Florida plantation for several months. Second, he had become immersed in British utilitarian thought, particularly the work of Jeremy Bentham, whose *Traité de législation* he famously translated into English from the French of Pierre Étienne Dumont in 1840.⁶⁰ While these aspects of his thought have often been treated in isolation from each other, and from his work as a historian, a closer look demonstrates the clear linkages between them. Indeed, Hildreth's bold critique of American slavery was fundamentally grounded in what he saw as its negation of economic, political, and moral utility, and his historical work drew strongly on utilitarian historiography. The combined impact of these influences shaped his understanding of America history in ways that departed sharply from the Romantic culture of his contemporaries and led him to a more empirical and critical approach to the theme of American democracy.

Bentham's influence on Hildreth is difficult to trace, but it appears to have begun during a vocational crisis over the moral value of his legal career. Though he had trained with an eminent Boston attorney in 1829, he quickly became disillusioned with legal practice and found Bentham's critique of lawyers quite persuasive. In his personal scrapbook, Hildreth quoted Bentham's 1821 letter to the liberal Spanish reformer Count Toreno which declared that "if there is a class of men ... whose personal interest is in constant, necessary and direct opposition to the public interest, it is lawyers."⁶¹ It is also likely that Hildreth first encountered Bentham through the work of John Neal, a lawyer and literary critic from Portland, Maine, who published a short biography of the English philosopher in 1830, and who also translated sections of his work from Dumont's French. As philosopher James Crimmins has shown, Neal's work received a fair amount of attention, though most of it negative, in the American press during the 1830s. One clerical critic, writing in the *New York Review* in 1837, for example, was scandalized by Neal's attempt to introduce Bentham's "sordid" ideas to the American public. Given Hildreth's anticlerical views, however, it is likely that such criticism had the opposite effect on him than the one intended.⁶²

Hildreth's decision to complete a full translation of Bentham's legal philosophy took place simultaneously with his exposure to the horrors of plantation slavery. In 1834, suffering from what was likely the early stages of tuberculosis, Hildreth traveled to Florida to recuperate. Though he never directly named the family on whose plantation he lived for eighteen months, they were wealthy, educated Virginians and contextual clues suggest that their holdings were near Tallahassee, a region dominated by cotton production and slave trading.⁶³ Hildreth makes it clear that his sojourn in the South was a period of intense observation and reflection. Near the plantation where he lived were slaveholders, slaves, and poor whites from several parts of the South, including

⁶⁰ See Jeremy Bentham, *Theory of Legislation by Jeremy Bentham, Translated from the French of Etienne Dumont by Richard Hildreth*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1840).

⁶¹ Jeremy Bentham quoted in Richard Hildreth, *The Contrast; or William Henry Harrison versus Martin Van Buren* (Boston, 1840), 59. See also James Crimmins, *Utilitarianism in the Early American Republic* (New York, 2022), 89; and Emerson, *Richard Hildreth*, 41.

⁶² Caleb S. Henry quoted in Crimmins, *Utilitarianism*, 89.

⁶³ On slavery in the Tallahassee area see Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821–1860* (Gainesville, 2017), esp. Ch. 3.

aristocratic Virginians and South Carolinians and a “ruder class” of poor whites from North Carolina and Georgia.⁶⁴ Though clearly horrified by the violence and brutality he witnessed, Hildreth approached his observations with the care of a scholar, making note of the political, social, economic, and moral effects of slavery on southern life. The result of those observations was two books, an antislavery novel entitled *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* published just after his return to Boston in 1836, and a “formal treatise” entitled *Despotism in America: An Inquiry into the Nature ... of the Slave-Holding System in the United States*, first published in 1840.

Both works bear the unmistakable imprint of utilitarianism on his thinking, and present slavery as both deeply rooted in American history and an existential threat to the nation’s democratic values. In *The Slave*, Hildreth depicted southern society as lawless, morally corrupt, economically backward, and utterly destructive of individual moral autonomy and initiative. The main character, Archy Moore, is the enslaved son of a white plantation owner and a female slave. Moore is described as naturally intelligent and ambitious to develop his moral and rational abilities to their fullest extent. But he is stymied by an unnatural system that consistently turns his noblest, most human strivings against him. Following Bentham, Hildreth argued that human beings were driven by the desire for happiness, and that society should be organized to maximize the freedom of its members to realize that goal.⁶⁵ Slavery, by contrast, was a system of tyranny in which even the most enlightened planter compels “his fellow man to labor, that he might appropriate the fruits of that labor to his own benefit.”⁶⁶ Other antislavery writers had argued that uncompensated, coerced labor disincentivized productive work in the slaveholding South, but Hildreth went further by insisting that in denying enslaved people any prospect of future happiness, the system made life itself unbearable. “Human happiness ... is never in fruition but always in prospect and pursuit,” he wrote. “It is the pleasure of the pursuit, and the struggle, it is the very labor of their attainment, in which consists the happiness they bring.”⁶⁷

In choosing to write a novel rather than a more conventional antislavery tract, however, Hildreth hoped to demonstrate how slavery impoverished the inner life of the individual rather than focusing, as Bentham did, on the legal or institutional aspects of the system. Much of the book is preoccupied with Archy’s intense longing to create a family with his beloved Cassie, an enslaved woman who, in the morally upside-down world of southern slavery, is also his half-sister. Prevented from realizing even this basic human desire, Archy at times falls into despair and drinks whiskey to blunt his own feelings. “Reality was to me blank, dark and weary,” says Archy of his resort to the bottle. “Action was forbidden; desire was chained; and hope was shut out ... I was obliged

⁶⁴Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, vii. Though originally published in 1836 under the title *The Slave*, the novel sold poorly until Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* created a sensation in the early 1850s. To capitalize on this new market, Hildreth reissued the novel under a new title and with an explanatory introduction. See also Jean Fagan Yellin’s analysis of *Archy Moore* in *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776–1863* (New York, 1972), 87–120.

⁶⁵On the centrality of happiness to Bentham’s utilitarianism see Crimmins, *Utilitarianism*, 5, 8, 9; and Bart Schultz, *The Happiness Philosophers: The Lives and Works of the Great Utilitarians* (Princeton, 2017), 66–8.

⁶⁶Richard Hildreth, *The White Slave: Or Memoirs of a Fugitive* (New York, 1969), 78.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 84–5.

to find relief in dreams and illusions.”⁶⁸ In response to proslavery propaganda depicting enslaved people as childlike and content to leave weighty cares to superior whites, Hildreth argued that it was the long-term effects of coerced, uncompensated labor, not race, that had undermined the ambition and work ethic of enslaved people. “Tyranny is ever hostile to every species of mental development,” he wrote, “for a state of ignorance involves of necessity, a state of degradation and of helplessness.”⁶⁹ Indeed, while the focus of his novel was on the slave system, Hildreth had clearly come to regard American slavery as an extreme example of the larger struggle against systems of aristocratic privilege and minority rule, systems which rested upon antiquated custom and religious bigotry. “The tyrants of every age and country, have succeeded in prostituting Christianity into an instrument of their crimes ... Nor have they ever wanted time-serving priests and lying prophets to applaud, encourage and sustain them.”⁷⁰

By 1840 the varied themes of Hildreth’s liberal, utilitarian, and antislavery thought had begun to shape his distinctive understanding of and approach to American history and culture in ways that diverged sharply from George Bancroft’s *History of the United States*. Bancroft certainly understood that American history was often the scene of struggles between freedom and oppression, but his model of historical causation was based upon a providentialism that sharply limited human agency and presupposed the victory of popular democracy.⁷¹ “Nothing appears more self-determined than the volitions of each individual; and nothing is more certain than that the providence of God will overrule them all,” he wrote in the third volume of his *History*, published in 1841.⁷² Bancroft believed that human freedom was real, but only on the individual level. At the “aggregate” level the “general laws” guiding the course of history were set down by a benevolent God and those seeking truth and justice would always have “messengers from heaven” to fight on their side.⁷³

Hildreth, of course, rejected providentialism and denied the existence of any general laws beyond those present in human nature itself. Working from a utilitarian point of view, he adopted an empirical method that deliberately disavowed religious modes of understanding the past or present. “I pay no attention to what I have been taught except in so far as my own examinations confirm it,” he told the antislavery activist Caroline Weston. “It is my object to investigate and expound human nature as it is, not as I, or others, might wish it to be.”⁷⁴ In the introduction to *Despotism in America*, for example, he insisted that there was no reason, beyond wishful thinking or blind national prejudice, to assume the ultimate triumph of democracy over despotism in the United

⁶⁸Ibid., 88.

⁶⁹Ibid., 101.

⁷⁰Ibid., 114.

⁷¹The only extended comparison of Bancroft and Hildreth as historians is Susan Hill Gray, “Historic Causation in Histories of George Bancroft and Richard Hildreth” (unpublished MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 1967).

⁷²George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, vol. 3 (Boston, 1841), 399.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴“Letter from Richard Hildreth, Demerara, [Guyana, South America], to Caroline Weston, Nov. 26, 1841,” Correspondence, Demerara, Guyana, South America, 26 Nov. 1841, Digital Commonwealth, at <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/qz20vn09k> (accessed 10 Nov. 2025), library.

States. Such an assumption, while advocated by “every writer, native or foreign who has touched upon the subject,” was “not a true representation of the case.”⁷⁵ In his anti-slavery novel, Hildreth had drawn explicitly upon direct observations of tyranny in southern society rather than relying on theoretical principles or secondhand accounts. An honest observer, reliant on facts alone, was bound to conclude that while the experiment in democracy had taken root in some parts of the United States, in others it was “overshadowed, and is reduced to creep sickly on the ground” by another, equally powerful, experiment in despotism.⁷⁶

During the 1840s, Hildreth employed his distinctive form of liberal utilitarianism to identify and attack other despotic tendencies in American life and, unlike some of his earlier publications, his name appeared on the title pages. In his *Theory of Morals*, published in 1844, for example, he argued that the oppression of women, and most specifically the sexual double standard that permitted a degree of promiscuity among men while condemning women for the same activity, was rooted in a “mystical ascetic” or religious system of morals rather than a “forensic” or inductive system based on the natural impulses of human beings. Sexual desire was at least as strong in women as in men, he insisted, and yet women were prevented, under pain of social opprobrium and dire legal penalty, from fully acknowledging or expressing their desires. This irrational situation, he believed, stemmed in part from the fact that men regarded women not as equals but as only objects of self-aggrandizement. “The idea of sole possession is so gratifying to the sentiment of self-comparison, that men naturally everywhere have held their wives to strict fidelity,” he noted.⁷⁷ While Hildreth did not advocate free love or the abolition of marriage, as other antebellum radicals did, he insisted that free marriage choice, much easier access to divorce and remarriage, and sexual equality would alone produce happy marriages. In cases where divorce occurred, moreover, “the custody of the children should appertain to the mother, while the father should be bound to bear the chief burden of their support, at least until the mother obtained another husband.”⁷⁸ Hildreth’s equation of motherhood with nurture and fatherhood with pecuniary support was consistent with conventional gender ideas, but his larger critique of marriage was not.

The furiously negative reaction to Hildreth’s *Theory of Morals* anticipated the responses to his *History of the United States*, which he began writing around the same time. Andrew Peabody, a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister and the editor of the prestigious *North American Review*, condemned *Theory of Morals* as an “undisguised profession of bald, blank atheism.”⁷⁹ The system of morals advanced in the work, Peabody argued, would “permit every unmarried woman to become a prostitute and forbid not every disappointed man to die by his own hand.”⁸⁰ Boston’s Orestes Brownson, a recent convert to Roman Catholicism and the editor of *Brownson’s*

⁷⁵Hildreth, *Despotism in America*, 8.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷Richard Hildreth, *Theory of Morals: An Inquiry Concerning the Law of Moral Distinctions and the Variation and Contradictions of Ethical Codes* (Boston, 1844), 195.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 200.

⁷⁹[A. P. Peabody], “Hildreth’s Theory of Morals,” *North American Review* 60/2 (1845), 393–404, at 399.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 394.

Quarterly Review, was no friendlier but cut even closer to the heart of the matter. “Mr. Hildreth is, substantially, a Benthamite ... and Jeremy Bentham was, as one of Dickens’s characters says of another, ‘a humbug.’”⁸¹ In embracing aspects of Bentham’s philosophical method, Brownson insisted, Hildreth had covered himself in the “intolerable stupidity, ignorance and dogmatism of that prince of utilitarians.”⁸² Like Peabody, Brownson insisted that for there to be a moral law, there must be a divine lawgiver, and since Hildreth was “as skeptical as Hume and as positively atheistic as D’Holbach,” his moral theory was not worthy of the name. But what truly stoked Brownson’s ire was Hildreth’s insistence that human beings could build a moral system from the data of historical experience and from observations of human nature, with no reference to the interventions of higher power. “So, all in the life of man originates in man and we need not look beyond man for the explanation of his history,” Brownson wrote with exasperation. “Man must be sufficient in himself; then, so far as concerns himself, in the place of God!”⁸³ While this was damning for Brownson, it expressed Hildreth’s understanding of history quite precisely.

Hildreth’s *History of the United States*

The first volume of what became Hildreth’s six-volume *History of the United States* was published in 1849, and its preface contained a full-scale critique, along liberal, secular, and utilitarian lines, of contemporary historical writing. Without mentioning Bancroft by name, he condemned historians whose work amounted to “Fourth of July orations ... in the guise of history.”⁸⁴ Rather than gratify the nationalistic prejudices of his readers, Hildreth proposed a history that described “our ancestors such as they were,” with “their faults as well as their virtues.”⁸⁵ American institutions had not been created by the hand of God, he insisted, but rather by “living and breathing men,” who were sometimes “rude, hard, narrow, superstitious and mistaken.”⁸⁶ The point of good history was not to weave past actors into some larger religious or philosophical framework that presupposed the victory of democracy over tyranny, but rather to explain their actions in political and intellectual context. He went even further in the introduction to the 1853 editions of his first three volumes, saying that he would not apologize for the “undress[ed] portraits I have presented of our colonial progenitors” or for “bursting the thin, shining bubble so assiduously blown up by so many windy mouths, of a colonial golden age of fabulous purity and virtue.” Hildreth insisted that objectivity, at least as he understood it, was a far greater gift to his fellow Americans than “fripperies and clap traps.”⁸⁷ A clear-eyed recognition of the despotic as well as the democratic elements in American history was critical in the open-ended, ongoing struggle between them.

⁸¹ Orestes Brownson, *The Works of Orestes Brownson*, vol. 14, ed. Henry Brownson (Detroit, 1884), 240.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 236–7.

⁸⁴ Hildreth, *History of the United States*, 1: vii.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

Students of American historiography have often cited Hildreth's implicit critique of Bancroft and other nationalist historians of the period, but they have not fully appreciated his debt to utilitarian approaches to history.⁸⁸ As Callum Barrell has recently argued, scholars have usually assumed that early utilitarians were "ahistorical" and "privileged universal principles above historical evidence."⁸⁹ Their goal, after all, was to employ the abstract and universal principle of utility to reform law, government, society, and economic policy rather than to use history or tradition as guideposts for change. But Barrell has shown that English utilitarians, especially James Mill and John Stuart Mill, were deeply interested in the past as it illustrated the secular processes of change and offered examples of how the principle of utility had functioned in earlier times. Perhaps more importantly, classical utilitarianism rejected romantic nationalist notions of historical continuity like those in the writings of Bancroft or of British Whig historians like Thomas Macaulay. For James Mill, the idea that liberty or constitutionalism was somehow "intrinsic" to the character of the English people, or that events like the English Reformation or the Glorious Revolution illustrated perfect continuity with present-day expansions of liberty, was nothing more than a national "prejudice" and reflected Whiggish uses of history for partisan ends. As we have seen, Hildreth regarded Bancroft's democratic providentialism in similar ways, as politically motivated myth making that numbed American readers to the struggle between despotism and democracy occurring in their midst.

The historiographical principles that Hildreth prefaced to the first volume of his *History* were at least in part derived from James Mill's *History of British India*, a work published in 1817 that Hildreth read in the early 1830s.⁹⁰ In the preface to the first volume of that work, Mill quoted Pierre Bayle to say that "the perfection of a history is that it is disagreeable to all sects and all nations, because it proves that the author flatters neither and that what he says is true."⁹¹ To Mill, "real liberality, or strength of mind," required the historian to court the "malignity of the intemperate and narrow minded of all parties."⁹² His desire was not to play up nationalist prejudices or support grand philosophical frameworks, but to write an empirically based work that could be useful in reforming the East India Company's government of India. Though later critics raised serious criticisms of Mill's work, including the fact that he had never been to India and had no knowledge of its various languages, what is most important here is that Hildreth's methodology mirrored the approach Mill had taken to his subject. Rather than begin with theory or nationalist assumptions, he insisted that historians were to generate an empirical basis from which useful conclusions could be drawn from the

⁸⁸ A notable exception to this Eileen Cheng, *The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth: Nationalism and Impartiality in American Historical Writing, 1784–1860* (London, 2008), 188–207, who was the first to recognize his view that history was made by "human action" rather than by forces outside history itself.

⁸⁹ Barrell, *History and Historiography*, 13.

⁹⁰ Emerson, *Richard Hildreth*, 41. As noted earlier, Emerson and other mid-twentieth-century scholars had access to a manuscript copy, now lost, of Hildreth's literary memoranda. See note 35 above.

⁹¹ James Mill, *The History of British India*, 3 vols. (London, 1817), 1: xxiv, my translation of the French of Pierre Bayle.

⁹² *Ibid.*, xxvi.

past. As Barrell puts it, utilitarians like Mill and Hildreth refused to peddle theories that “ignored the facts—and worse—the laws that governed historical change.”⁹³

A few comparative examples will clarify the impact of this utilitarian historiography on Hildreth's historical writing. First, unlike his chief rival, George Bancroft, Hildreth refused to downplay the role of slavery, and hence despotism, in American social and political development. In the first volume of his history, Bancroft had gone out of his way to suggest that proto-democratic American colonists were not to blame for introducing slavery to North America. Rather, the practice had been “introduced by the mercantile avarice of a foreign nation” and “subsequently riveted by the policy of England, without regard to the interests or wishes of the colony.”⁹⁴ By contrast, Hildreth insisted that slavery and the slave trade had been adopted by “the free consent and co-operation of the colonists themselves,” a decision with “disastrous effects on the social condition of the United States.”⁹⁵ In his description of the laws of Virginia, Hildreth explicitly contrasted the inheritance laws of England, in which social status followed the father's line, with the 1662 Virginia statute in which slavery followed the status of the mother. Such an alteration, he noted, resulted from the need to clarify the slave status of “mulatto children” and thus was “convenient for slaveholders.”⁹⁶ In contrast to Bancroft's insistence that American colonists embodied the most libertarian elements of English political culture, Hildreth told his readers that the adoption of the 1662 law was “a very questionable exercise of authority” and hardly compatible with their “professions of reverence for English law.”⁹⁷

Hildreth's disdain for colonial Virginia slaveholders is not surprising in a reform-minded New Englander of his generation, but his refusal to exempt New England from complicity in slavery is more unusual, especially in comparison with Bancroft's labored attempts to obscure it.⁹⁸ Determined to see New England Puritan culture as the progenitor of American democracy and ordered liberty, for example, Bancroft had lauded the 1646 Massachusetts General Court for its denunciation of Thomas Keyser and James Smith, two slave traders who had sailed from Boston to “traffic” in African slaves. “Throughout Massachusetts the cry of justice was raised against them as malefactors and murderers,” Bancroft insisted, and he heaped praise upon Puritan magistrate Richard Saltonstall for taking special legal action against the two men.⁹⁹ Saltonstall, Bancroft argued, “felt himself moved, by his duty as a magistrate, to denounce the act of stealing negroes as ‘expressly contrary to the law of God and the law of the country.’”¹⁰⁰ Since Bancroft was himself a strong advocate for colonizing emancipated slaves in Africa, moreover, he was delighted to tell his readers that the enslaved people had

⁹³ Barrell, *History and Historiography*, 222.

⁹⁴ Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 1: 159.

⁹⁵ Hildreth, *History of the United States*, 1: 119.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 520.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Here I differ from Cheng, *Noble Garb of Truth*, 191, who argues that Hildreth largely followed other New England historians in minimizing the region's complicity in slavery.

⁹⁹ Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 1: 174.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

been “restored at the public charge to their native country with a letter expressing the indignation of the general court at their wrongs.”¹⁰¹

Refusing to accept Bancroft’s romantic providentialism or his facile notions of historical continuity, Hildreth analyzed the events in 1646 quite differently and in much greater depth. In the first volume of his *History of the United States*, he obliquely castigated Bancroft’s interpretation of the whole affair, saying that a “too precipitate admiration” for Saltonstall had “been magnified into a protest on the part of Massachusetts against the slave trade.”¹⁰² Not only had the traffic in slaves been a “regular business” from the very start of New England’s colonial commerce, but the buying and selling of slaves in Africa was perfectly legal under New England law. The case had come before Saltonstall, not because of an outcry against slave trading in Massachusetts, but rather because of a lawsuit between “the master, mate and owners” of the vessel in question over the legal ownership of the cargo. Testimony revealed that the enslaved Africans had been obtained not through normal commerce along the slave coast, which was explicitly permitted in colonial law, but rather through a violent, unprovoked attack on an African village. To make matters worse, the attack had also occurred on a Sunday, thus adding the charge of Sabbath breaking to the offenses committed by the slave traders. Hildreth showed that the charge of “man stealing” which Bancroft saw as evidence of Massachusetts’s early opposition to slavery was in fact only opposition to slaves being obtained illegally and in violation of Sabbath laws. He concluded by saying that the Boston magistrates released the slave traders because they “doubted their authority to punish crimes committed on the coast of Africa,” and implied that the return of the Africans would hardly have prevented their re-enslavement in the normal course of colonial commerce.¹⁰³

If opposition to slavery had not been planted providentially in the cultural soil of New England Puritanism, neither were American notions of freedom of conscience. No other example expresses Hildreth’s differences from Bancroft on this issue more clearly than their differing presentations of the antinomian controversy of 1637, a conflict which nearly destroyed the clerical–magisterial alliance that ruled the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Antinomians, most notably Anne Hutchinson and her brother-in-law Rev. John Wheelwright, argued publicly that the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith was at odds with the covenant theology preached in most Boston pulpits. They openly criticized the Massachusetts clergy for preaching a “covenant of works,” a doctrine associated with Roman Catholicism and therefore anathema in Protestant circles. The wife of a prominent Boston merchant, Hutchinson not only confronted ministers on the errors in their Sunday sermons but also had the temerity to lead weekly study meetings at her home in which she instructed both men and women

¹⁰¹ Ibid. On Bancroft’s support for the American Colonization Society see M. A. De Wolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2 vols. (New York, 1908) 1: 198–9. It is worth noting that Bancroft couched his support of colonization not in terms of philanthropy toward enslaved people, but in terms of slavery’s negative effects on whites.

¹⁰² Hildreth, *History of the United States*, 1: 282.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 283. Hildreth’s analysis of this affair has been largely affirmed by recent historians. See Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York, 2016), 36–42.

on the theological lapses of the colonial leaders. The establishment, however, was committed to a morally disciplined, Bible Commonwealth modeled on Calvin's Geneva. They insisted that while good works were not a means of salvation, they were indeed evidence that the soul of the believer had already been saved by divine grace. Terrified that antinomian ideas would open New England society to radical, perhaps even diabolical, ideas, Governor John Winthrop used his influence to banish both Wheelwright and Hutchinson, to forcibly disarm their prominent followers, and to impose new restrictions on who could enter the colony.¹⁰⁴

The highly authoritarian response to antinomianism created interpretive problems for Bancroft's *History*, as it cut against the grain of his larger argument for New England's role in the origins of democracy. The great mission of Puritanism, he had argued, was "a religion struggling for the people," and its central work had been "to engraft the new institutions of popular energy upon the old European system of feudal aristocracy."¹⁰⁵ Quoting former president John Quincy Adams, he told his readers that New England was the preeminent "colony of conscience."¹⁰⁶ Yet in order to deal with the apparent contradiction between his general principle and the specifics of the historical evidence, Bancroft effectively dismissed the unpleasant details of the antinomian affair as "transient persecution," a byproduct of the "peculiarities" of seventeenth-century culture. Knowledge of it should not detract from the deeper and more important truth that Puritanism had empowered the voice of the majority as "the voice of God."¹⁰⁷ As biographer Lilian Handlin has put it, Bancroft invited his readers to separate the "temporary from the eternal," or the potentially contradictory fact from the more important underlying truth.¹⁰⁸

But Bancroft went even further in insisting that the persecution of Hutchinson itself should be seen as a victory for democracy. First, because some of Hutchinson's followers had threatened to appeal to King Charles I for greater freedom of religion against the Puritan establishment, they were not unlike "the Tories during the [American] war of independence" who, under suspicion of monarchist loyalties, had been forced to give up their arms. To the "people of New England," then, the controversy was not about freedom of conscience at all but rather about defending their colonial liberties against the "power of the English government."¹⁰⁹ And in a final stroke of interpretive redirection, Bancroft argued that Hutchinson's banishment was itself good for democracy as she resettled among other Puritan exiles in Rhode Island, where her ideas had contributed to that colony's embrace of religious liberty. Puritanism, according to Bancroft, was democratic even when it persecuted, banished, and disarmed those whose only crime had been to criticize the authorities.

¹⁰⁴ On the antinomian controversy see Michael Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641* (Princeton, 2014); and more recently Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson: An Extraordinary Woman, the Puritan Patriarchs, and the World They Made and Lost* (New York, 2021).

¹⁰⁵ Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 1: 460–61, and quoted in Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 136.

¹⁰⁶ Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 1: 464.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁰⁸ Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 136.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 389.

Hildreth's understanding of the same events reflected his deep suspicion of religious authority and his insistence that human agency, rather than a divine plan, shaped history. First, while he recognized certain democratic tendencies in the earliest New England settlements, his larger narrative traced the rise of a countervailing theocratic element that sought to consolidate its power over both Native Americans and dissenters by the late seventeenth century. If Massachusetts Quakers, Baptists, and antinomians sometimes appealed to the king against the ruthless persecution they faced in the colony, this was hardly because of their royalism but was rather the "sole means in that day of curbing the theocracy and compelling it to yield its monopoly of power."¹¹⁰ Such dissenters "feared less the authority of a distant monarch," he argued, "than the present rule of watchful and bitter spiritual rivals."¹¹¹ In a complete reversal of Bancroft's depiction of New England leaders, Hildreth argued that the Puritan fathers resisted the king's authority not because of any inherent democratic sentiments, but rather that they might more effectively oppress and expel their domestic critics. Unlike Bancroft, who largely downplayed the persecution of dissenters as an irrelevant "peculiarity" of the seventeenth century, Hildreth regarded the conflict between theocracy and freedom of conscience as both a past and a present reality.

In Hildreth's telling, the banishment of Hutchinson was part of a larger oligarchic seizure of political and cultural power in Massachusetts, not unlike the one that had jailed Abner Kneeland two centuries later. Indeed, to read Hildreth's analysis of New England's colonial history in proper context, it is critical to recall his response to Abner Kneeland's conviction for blasphemy in 1838. That event remained at the heart of his decision to highlight the religious intolerance of New England's founders, and it also helps to explain one of the most scathing reviews of his work. In the first volume of his *History of the United States*, for example, Hildreth reminded his readers that the colonial government of early Massachusetts had found it "necessary to support, by civil penalties, the fundamental doctrines on which the theocracy rested."¹¹² His evidence was a 1649 statute imposing the death penalty on those who blasphemed God's "holy name, either by willful or obstinate denying of the true God," or who "shall curse God or reproach the holy religion of God." Such a law, he concluded, was but "a public device to keep the ignorant in awe."¹¹³ Then, in what amounted to an unusual intervention in a history concerned mostly with factual accuracy, he had noted that this same law, though no longer carrying the death penalty, was "still to be found in the Massachusetts statute book." Indeed, he noted that it had "lately been held to be constitutional by the Supreme Court of that state, upon argument in a contested case," despite language to the contrary in the state constitution. "Constitutions," he noted with a level of sarcasm almost unmatched in the six volumes of his work, "go for very little when in conflict with the hereditary sentiments of their expositors."¹¹⁴ While Hildreth did not name the Kneeland case explicitly, the fact that the 1782 law used to convict Kneeland was based on the 1649 statute leaves little doubt about his meaning.

¹¹⁰Hildreth, *History of the United States*, 1: 456.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid., 369.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

There was at least one reviewer who certainly did not miss the reference. Francis Bowen, the editor of the deeply conservative *North American Review*, spoke for the New England elite in censuring Hildreth's unflattering picture of Puritan intolerance and condemning the language he had used in reference to religion in general. Bowen insisted that basic "decency" should have restrained Hildreth from combining his description of a seventeenth-century statute with "sneers against the judicial exposition of the law in Massachusetts of the present day."¹¹⁵ He also denied that prosecution for blasphemy was inconsistent either with the Massachusetts Constitution or with more general principles of religious liberty. Like the laws against libel and slander, he contended, "the scoffer and the ribald may be restrained by the terrors of the law from polluting the ears of the young."¹¹⁶ Even if God needed no protection against "coarse jeers and blasphemous expressions," the "feelings of the community" would suffer if "the object of worship" were exposed to ridicule or abuse. The community had every right to protect anything it deemed sacred, "be it a rock or a stone," from blasphemous and insulting speech, and "no one, under pretense of avowing his own faith, has the right to insult that of his neighbor."¹¹⁷ As for the implementation of blasphemy laws in the present day, Bowen argued that such laws were rarely implemented as their very presence on the statute books prevented the unscrupulous from speaking in ways offensive to the religious community. While Hildreth and Bowen certainly differed in their views of New England's history, they were even more at odds over the extent of individual liberty and the value of a secular discursive space.

Hildreth's *History of the United States* was not a success during his lifetime. Yet its secular, utilitarian approach to the past and its rejection of romantic providentialism represented an important form of liberal cultural dissent in the antebellum United States. His insistence on human agency as the sole force shaping history was a far-sighted warning to his generation that the victory of American democracy over tyranny and despotism was by no means a foregone conclusion. Individual liberty and moral autonomy were always contingent upon their ability to resist the ever-present threats of tyranny, monopoly, and privilege. If such a point of view rankled the idealistic nationalism of his contemporaries, it was applauded by a later generation of historians as a precursor to their own quest for a more "scientific" approach to the past.¹¹⁸ Given the cosmopolitanism of Hildreth's outlook, he would perhaps have been most pleased by the assessment of the British historian George P. Gooch. In a survey of nineteenth-century American historians published in 1913, Gooch argued that Hildreth was by far the most modern. "Hildreth," he wrote, "belongs by spirit to a later generation. His

¹¹⁵ Francis Bowen, "Hildreth's History of the United States," *North American Review* 73/3 (1851), 411–48, 430.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 431–2.

¹¹⁸ On the rise of scientific history and its rejection of providential nationalism see Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review* 89/4 (1984), 909–28. On later historians' admiration for Hildreth see Emerson, *Richard Hildreth*, 167–8; Douglas Emerson, "Hildreth, Draper, and Scientific History," in Eric F. Goldman, ed., *Historiography and Urbanization: Essays in Honor of W. Stull Holt* (Baltimore, 1941), 139–52; and John Braeman, "Richard Hildreth," in Clyde N. Wilson, ed., *American Historians: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 30 (Detroit, 1984), 131–2.

business-like narrative taught Americans that their history must be studied in the same critical spirit as that of other nations.”¹¹⁹

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The foregoing analysis of Hildreth's liberal, utilitarian view of history provides a fuller answer to what Arthur Schlesinger Jr called “problem of Richard Hildreth.” Though certain that Hildreth deserved an important place in American intellectual history, Schlesinger recognized that he was difficult to place. Clearly out of step with the romantic culture that dominated antebellum intellectual life, his highly empirical approach to historical writing and his iconoclastic attitude toward aspects of the American past had limited his audience and generated animus from those who venerated the founders. Hildreth collaborated with some of the great figures of New England Transcendentalism, but he had rejected their romantic intuitionism, rooted as it was in German idealist philosophy. Neither could a good case be made that Hildreth's *History of the United States* could be analyzed as a direct response to Bancroft's writing. A cause-and-effect relationship between the two works, Schlesinger believed, was “improbable” because the two men “had at no time the stimulus of direct competition.”¹²⁰ Though he tentatively suggested that Bentham's influence explained at least some of Hildreth's intellectual distinctiveness, Schlesinger was also certain that his “eccentricities and reserves” were equally to blame for the obscurity into which he had fallen.¹²¹

This article has shown that Bentham's work was important to Hildreth but acted only as one point in his overall development as a philosopher, social critic, and historian. The liberal utilitarianism that characterized his thinking by the 1850s was far more focused on the inner freedom and growth of the individual than on anything he had found in Bentham's work on legislation. Well before his encounter with classical utilitarianism, Hildreth's outlook had been shaped by the liberal religious environment of eastern Massachusetts, the outrageous spectacle of state suppression of religious dissent, and the intense, at times craven, politics of the second American party system. His direct exposure to the system of chattel slavery, moreover, provided the most glaring example of how entrenched privilege, reinforced by religious authority, could blot out the contributions of individuals to the public good. By the time he took up his pen as a historian, Hildreth had developed a broad-based critique of the despotic social, intellectual, and religious forces that threatened the full realization of American democracy.

As for George Bancroft, the evidence presented here shows that Hildreth was indeed offering a direct response to the work of his fellow historian, overtly rejecting his providential nationalism. Immersed as he was in Massachusetts party politics during the 1830s, Hildreth had long been aware of Bancroft, regarding him as a self-interested partisan whose historical vision was a rhetorical tool to conceal the tyrannical and corrupt aims of the Democratic Party. The rivalry between Hildreth and Bancroft was not simply a function of their competition to sell works of history, but was, at least for Hildreth, a more fundamental difference over the meaning of individual freedom and

¹¹⁹ G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1913), 407–8.

¹²⁰ Schlesinger, “The Problem of Richard Hildreth,” 228.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

the role of divine versus human agency in the unfolding drama of American history. To Bancroft, the flaws of America's founders or examples of their complicity in various forms of despotism were less important because the guiding hand of providence would ensure the ultimate victory of democracy over its opposite. Hildreth's liberal, secular, and utilitarian values meant that history could only be valuable to the present if it discarded national prejudices and romantic theory, and recognized instead that history was a human narrative, made up of human choices, either for democracy or for despotism.