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William Hickling Prescott: America's first scientific historian and unstoppable overcomer

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William Hickling Prescott

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is widely regarded as America's first scientific historian. His works, which include books on the conquests of Mexico and Peru and the reign of Ferdinand II and Isabella I of Spain, were praised by critics for their adept combination of historical sources and linguistic flourishes, and were translated into many different languages. He became one of the most eminent historians of 19th century America.

His library contained 5,000 books and, perhaps more importantly, a treasure trove of handwritten sources from throughout Spanish history. Nevertheless, for long periods of his life, he was unable to read at all or, at most, for a few short minutes per day—the greater portion of his life was spent as a listener. Prescott would sit in a chair, listening attentively to a paid reader seated behind him.

In August 1811, at the age of 15, he enrolled at Harvard College. In his very first year, he was the victim of an accident that would determine the rest of his life. The accident happened after dinner in Commons Hall: "...when he was passing out of the door of the Hall, his attention was attracted by the disturbance going on behind him. He turned his head quickly to see what it was, and at the same instant received a blow from a large, hard piece of bread, thrown undoubtedly at random, and in mere thoughtlessness and gayety. It struck the open eye; – a rare occurrence

in the case of that vigilant organ, which, on the approach of the slightest danger, is almost always protected by an instant and instinctive closing of the lid. But here there was no notice, – no warning. The missile, which must have been thrown with great force, struck the very disk of the eye itself.”

Some people blame negative events for their inability to do certain things, others look for culprits. But not successful people: Prescott’s biographer writes that, “William would never use his damaged eye as an excuse, for in his mind God had seen fit to leave him with one good eye.”

Many successful people commit their goals to paper. For this approach to be effective, the goals need to be both specific and tangible—and preferably linked to a date by which they are to be achieved. Prescott had a habit of setting goals so that they would be achieved by his next birthday. But he also kept a written record of his failures and setbacks, put these notes in an envelope, and read them over and over again to constantly improve and increase his determination and discipline.

Once he had decided to devote himself to history, he first considered the recent history of America. It wasn’t long, however, before his interest turned to the history of Spain, which, after all, frequently overlapped with that of America. As the subject of his book, he chose the “

Catholic Monarchs (<https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=c58e54cba3c36503JmltdHM959a41d7c6f90&psq=life+of+william+hickling+prescott+catholic+monarchs&u=alaHF>),” Isabelle I of Castile (1451–1504) and Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516), whose reign coincided with an eventful period in world history. Upon its release, his book was highly acclaimed by reviewers and established him as an expert on the reign of Ferdinand and Isabelle. He was also widely acknowledged for setting a higher standard of documentation for primary and secondary sources.

William Hickling Prescott was the first American historian to be recognized as an equal of the European historians of his day. The book was well received not only in academic circles, but also by a wider audience—it was regularly reissued and was translated into numerous languages.

According to his friend and biographer George Ticknor, Prescott's visual infirmity was even an advantage in some respects. The fact that Prescott was largely dependent on texts being read to him, and that he was compelled to rehearse every aspect of what he wanted to write down to the smallest detail in his memory was extremely time-consuming, but it also proved to be beneficial to his work.

According to Ticknor, it was precisely as a result of this unique process that Prescott was able to develop such a natural and unmistakable style. What's more, Prescott frequently kept up to 60 pages in his memory for several days, until he could commit them to paper.

Prescott possessed a trait that all very successful people exhibit: He was convinced that any disadvantage—such as his eye disease—could be turned into an equally significant advantage: “There is no higher evidence of drawing consolation from its own resources under so heavy a privation, so that it not only can exhibit resignation and cheerfulness, but energy to burst the fetters with which it is encumbered.”

None of us has much influence over the problems we will face in life, but it is within our power to decide how we respond: “Whining about my troubles unmans me, and, is of itself the worst augury. Making light of these – quiet energy, justifiable self-reliance, cheerful views of life are the best guarantees of success as I have hitherto succeeded. I will.”

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of the book

“Unbreakable Spirit. Rising Above All Odds” (https://www.amazon.com/UNBREAKABLE-Above-Odds/dp/1962825043/ref=sr_1_3?

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