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Article Summary: Reprint of the regular monthly "Perspective" column written by J H Plumb for the August 31, 1968, issue of *Saturday Review*



**“A FRESH DIMENSION  
OF INTELLECTUAL DELIGHT”**

For every history book that is reviewed in the national press there must be twenty more that are never mentioned, and for these twenty there are hundreds of articles in local historical journals, in addition to an endless proliferation in learned journals. Indeed, the fabulous extent of historical activity as well as some of its more immediate pleasures cannot be appreciated unless one turns to local history or to the work of small regiments of scholars dedicated to Dr. Johnson, Edmund Burke, Tom Paine, Benjamin Franklin, etc., etc., etc., who regale each other with tidbits in the form of newsletters. Without a newsletter or a journal neither a university nor a liberal arts college can really hold up its head. I suspect that throughout America there are more men and women concerned with history than with any other intellectual activity.

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Take Nebraska. After all, Nebraska has not been a state for very long; in fact, it was not admitted to the Union until 1867, but like most other Midwestern states it was historically conscious from the start and established its State Historical and Library Association in the same year that it entered the Union. Now, a hundred years later, the association has 4,500 members, a splendid building, massive archives, a flourishing journal, a healthy balance of more than \$100,000; further, it discharges a public service of growing magnitude. In one year 2,500 researchers used the association's 9,812 microfilm reels of local newspapers—the *Stromsburg Headlight*, *Hickman Enterprise*, *Cherry County News*, and the rest. Nor is a passion for local history peculiar to Nebraskans; down in Tennessee or up in Wyoming it is just as furiously active. And in New England, of course, local history is a powerful industry: the publications of the long-established Massachusetts Historical Society fill shelf after shelf with immensely valuable record material. But today Massachusetts possesses no superiority: every state has local history and historians in abundance. Probably even Alaska has; their journal has just not come my way.

What does it all add up to? The obvious educational benefits for schoolchildren and their projects need no argument. The local historical society provides in this case a necessary and admirable public service. But the matter goes deeper than that, both socially and intellectually. The founding fathers of Nebraska knew that they were part of a remarkable historical process, and they wanted it recorded down to the last detail. They knew that Nebraska *was* history. Those who followed them needed roots, a feeling of belonging to a continuing society, and nothing provides this more quickly than a sense of one's past. Undoubtedly local history helps to create social identity and perhaps adds its mite to social stability. But besides social purpose, local history contains, as few other subjects do, an intellectual delight of the most varied kind for the amateur as well as the professional.

Perhaps the greatest pleasure of local history is its immediacy. It brings one face to face with ordinary men and women who once walked the streets that we walk and are now dead and almost forgotten. The bundles of letters which are so frequently the core of an article in a journal of local history have a poignancy that is rarely matched. They express hopes and fears, affection, love, want, despair; in them our common humanity is bared. Written without a thought for posterity, they reveal human character as sharply as any novel.

Even account books and bills are given human warmth by time as are the inventories of houses. These unadorned records offer insight into the frugality of our ancestors, the utter simplicity of their personal lives: they speak of the stoicism with which they faced the harsh realities of prairie, desert, or mountain. Similarly the early newspaper files tell us how the first tiny communities began so very quickly to tame the frontier; the advertisements for schools and academies, music and dancing masters, remind us that the frontier was not all saloons, gunmen, and Indians. As one turns over the passages of *Nebraska History* or the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, or the official publications of any of the Western states the men and women long since dead spring into a new life.

Already tens of thousands realize the joys that local history can bring. They are taking an active part in surveying archeological sites, rebuilding forts, marking historic places, sifting the huge mounds of records that flow into the archive departments, strengthening their bonds with their environment, tying themselves into the fabric of their society. I cannot imagine that anyone with curiosity, imagination, and compassion could fail to be a subscriber to one or two of these excellent journals, which are usually edited, printed, and produced with professional skill.

Almost all the great history of the twentieth century, particularly the history of Europe, has been grounded in local history: Maitland, Marc Bloch, Tawney, Trevelyan rooted their research in particular places. Between them

they must have walked thousands of miles; they rarely wrote about any place without seeing it with their own eyes. Every landscape was for them a book. And they read their history in local journals, knowing that there was no other way of getting the immediacy of history and realizing that their generalizations about society had to be based on hundreds of particular examples. No professional historian can read too much local history; without this vast amateur contribution he would be lost. In local history there is something for everyone.

And the same is true of both learned journals and the new little periodicals devoted either to a great historic figure or to some facet of history whether it be satire or railway transport. Almost every aspect of history now has a journal, and soon nearly every historic figure will likewise be honored. It may seem a trifle eccentric to suggest to an average reader that he should browse in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. Yet it contains treasures, and not merely for the specialist. Take the *Transactions*, Volume 57, Part 7 (American Philosophical Society, \$2). This is an exceptionally scholarly paper by Paul Kaufman entitled "The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History," which should fascinate anyone who is interested in books and the role that they have played in social life. During the seventeenth century, when they started, libraries were earnest, moral places, normally possessing a strong puritan bias tinged with political liberalism. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, they, like our own, were flooded with cheap quasi-pornographic fiction, about which Mr. Kaufman writes with great wisdom. The whole article is full of fresh information—the borrowings of Coleridge and Southey from Bristol Public Library, the deep preoccupation of the new middle class with the slave trade in the late eighteenth century, the fascination with India, the renewed interest in radical philosophy sparked by the American Revolution—all of which come vividly alive.

Mr. Kaufman's article is only one of many that lie buried in learned journals, locked away from the general public. Indeed, as one reads journal after journal the impression grows of a vast literary world that the national press scarcely ever glances at and of scores of books that never get reviewed except in their own specialist publications. What, however, is more remarkable is the boundless enthusiasm that exists for scholarly pursuits, the delight that it must bring not merely to academics but to hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women. A sociologist could produce a fascinating study on this neglected aspect of our cultural life.

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These small journals, which arrive unexpectedly at the breakfast table, are incredibly cheap, but in time, they become exceedingly valuable. Collections of little magazines, runs of learned journals have appreciated in value almost as much as pictures by French Impressionists. Anyone who loves books should subscribe to one learned journal and two little ones—for pleasure and for profit. I assure you a new world will open up: a fresh dimension of intellectual delight.