

GEOLOGIC PAST

Highlighting articles from past issues of GSA Bulletin

“Earth Sciences as the Background of History”

John C. Merriam, *GSA Bulletin*, March 1920

In his address to the Society on 29 Dec. 1919 (published in the March 1920 *GSA Bulletin* [v. 31, p. 233–246]), then-GSA president John C. Merriam discusses the lack of context in historical discourse, stating that history “as read and taught” rarely includes “all influences actually involved” (p. 234–235). Fore-shadowing a discussion heard frequently in the twenty-first century, Merriam speaks of technology’s role in establishing the global community, commenting that the world of 1919 “cannot return to the kind of isolation possible in the age before space was narrowed by electricity and steam” (p. 233). He argues that in this smaller, more interconnected world, historical debate must be grounded in context, and that society must achieve an understanding of its past in order to recognize the direction of its future.

Merriam next considers the sciences involved in studying humankind’s past—including astronomy, geology, geography, paleontology, biology, and anthropology—and points out that the synthesis of these fields forms the lens through which history must be evaluated. He goes on to discuss the contributions of each of these sciences and how their influences have shaped human perception, noting that “what [comes] first is commonly, if not always, fundamental” (p. 241).

Merriam concludes his address by suggesting that science can aid in broadening human perspective, writing that “the wider outlook of science in all of its phases lifts us up to the

identical viewpoint from which the philosopher and the poet obtain their comprehensive vision” (p. 245). True to his geoscience roots, Merriam continues, “it is the geologist and paleontologist only who see the panorama of ages unrolled in fullest length and in truest reality” (p. 246). Merriam casts the scientist as interpreter, teacher, and guide, declaring that it is the scientist’s responsibility to “point out the lesson of the foundations of the earth, and to show that strength may still come from the hills” (p. 246).

John Campbell Merriam (1869–1945) served as GSA president in 1919. A geologist and paleontologist, Merriam taught at the University of California at Berkeley, chairing Berkeley’s newly minted paleontology department in 1920 and leaving the university that same year to serve as president of the Carnegie Institute of Washington. Perhaps most famous for his studies of fossils found in California’s La Brea tar pits, Merriam discovered remains of *Smilodon californicus*, otherwise known as the saber-toothed tiger, which went on to become California’s state fossil. Reference: www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/about/history/jcmerriam.php.

Editor’s note: The Geologic Past series is usually written by regular staff without byline; this month, editorial intern Stephen Craft put his hand to the task and thus we give credit where it is due.

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