



SOLON J. BUCK

Portrait by Björn Egeli, unveiled in the Conference Room of the
National Archives on April 8, 1960.

Solon Justus Buck— Scholar-Administrator

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FOR ME, as a former student and colleague of Dr. Buck and a friend through more than four decades, it is a very special privilege to take part in this program in his honor. I find it difficult, however, as my memory runs across the years, to compress my thoughts and impressions into a talk of only a few minutes. My mood is like that of a woman who, speaking across the garden fence to her neighbor, said, "Never give me the gist of the matter—just give me the details." But I am mindful that Dr. Buck himself tutored me in the art of condensation, and here I recall a six-word speech that he gave many years ago in Minnesota. We had a long program dealing with different periods in the growth of the Minnesota Historical Society. One speaker discoursed lengthily on "The Past," another expatiated on "The Present," and then Dr. Buck was called on to speak on "The Future"—a subject holding infinite possibilities. He rose and said crisply, "Ladies and gentlemen: The future will speak for itself," and sat down. Today perhaps the oil portrait will speak for itself, but the occasion seems appropriate also for a little portraiture in words.

A half-dozen years ago the University of Minnesota conferred on Dr. Buck the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, and it fell to my lot to present the doctoral citation, before the president of the university officially conferred the degree. As a setting for what I have to say today, I should like to quote that citation or summary of a career of service and contributions:

Native of our sister state, Wisconsin; distinguished graduate of the University of Wisconsin and Harvard University; for seventeen years member of the faculty of the University of Minnesota, interpreter of western history, and guide to advanced students; for an equal period modern rebuilder of our sister institution, the Minnesota Historical Society, and inspirer of public interest in our state and local history; author and editor of notable books de-

* One of two addresses made at the unveiling of a portrait of Solon Justus Buck in the National Archives conference room, Apr. 8, 1960. The writer is dean of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota and is a distinguished historian and author. The second of the two addresses at the unveiling follows this article, and Dr. Buck's own brief remarks are printed in our news notes.

picting the role of Minnesota and the West in national history; organizer of historical work in Pennsylvania and other states; one-time Archivist of the United States, Chief of Manuscripts and Assistant Librarian of the Library of Congress; great scholar, far-seeing historical administrator, hunter and interpreter of records of the past . . .

If this may fairly be considered the gist of the matter, let me suggest a few details that can help us to interpret it. Dr. Buck's basic role in our cultural history is that of a remarkable scholar-administrator, and it is a twin and interrelated role. His national career tended to move him more and more into high administrative responsibility, but underlying the inevitable administrative drive has been the scholar's constant quest for quality, exactitude, and productivity. With all the emphasis on his administrative achievements, we should not forget the scholarly foundation built by *The Granger Movement*,¹ which stands as a classic nearly a half century after its publication and has opened the way to scores of books and articles; his bibliographical work on *Travel and Description, 1765-1865*;² his *Illinois in 1818*;³ his interpretation of *The Agrarian Crusade*;⁴ his charming *Stories of Early Minnesota*,⁵ done jointly with a certain Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck; and his *Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania*,⁶ also in joint authorship with Mrs. Buck. These and other books and a prodigious output of scholarly articles would represent for ordinary mortals a full career, and they mark a secure and high place for Solon Justus Buck in American historiography.

But the imagination, drive, and constructive planning and work of the man whose portrait we unveil today could not rest content with a shelf of books and articles, however impressive. And so we honor a series of interrelated careers. One is teaching, and here I speak with firsthand knowledge, for I had the experience of being a student in his seminars and writing a doctoral thesis under his very critical guidance. His instruction turned me away from the Stuart period of English history into American western and American social history; and, alongside such great teachers as Guy Stanton Ford and Wallace Notestein, he gave me a sense of excitement about diaries, letters, and other original records, plus a rigorous training in method and in writing. I speak of these matters because I want to underline Dr. Buck's generous interest in the

¹ (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1913).

² (Springfield, Ill., 1914).

³ (Springfield, Ill., 1917).

⁴ (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1920).

⁵ (New York, 1925).

⁶ (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1939).

education and encouragement of succeeding generations of scholars both through his own writings and through his formal instruction. I am only one of many who are grateful to him as to a master teacher.

The administrative story is a long one that reaches from Illinois to Minnesota to Pennsylvania and then to the Nation, and I shall touch upon only one segment of it—Minnesota. Here, too, I can speak from firsthand knowledge because I was associated with him all through the 17 years of his Minnesota Historical Society career and his teaching career at the university, first as a student and then as a colleague until he chose to leave the land of sky-blue waters for the smoky atmosphere of Pittsburgh.

In American history we have too fond a liking for *firsts*, for initial settlements, foundings, and institutional beginnings; and we sometimes fail to realize that refoundings and turns of direction can be more significant historically than absolute firsts. This generalization is nicely illustrated in the Minnesota Historical Society, which was actually founded in 1849 but was rebuilt from 1913 and 1914 on, when the team of Dean Ford and Dr. Buck appeared on the Minnesota scene. A placid antiquarian society, housed in the basement of the State Capitol, was transformed from a skull-capped institution with a genteel genealogical fragrance into a modern, scientific historical society that took rank among the very best in the nation. Dr. Buck, enticed to Minnesota by Dean Ford, who is justly known as a "fisher of men," accepted the superintendency of the society, ignored the cries of anguish from the skull-caps, and proceeded to reorganize and revolutionize the institution. He launched its quarterly magazine, now in its 37th volume; engineered the transfer of the society into a new, glistening, modern building; re-formed the staff; brought about increased financial support; scouted the State for vast and important additions to the manuscript collection and extended the search for materials to other parts of the country, to Canada, and to Europe; expanded the library; modernized the museum; started a movement for adequate handling of the State's archives; initiated summer tours that were described as peripatetic seminars in history; marked historic sites; encouraged the establishment of county historical societies—a movement that grew in succeeding years until every one of the State's 87 counties had a society of its own; stirred wide popular interest in history; promoted research; edited Dr. Folwell's four-volume *History of Minnesota*;⁷ and generally, in

⁷ William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (4 vols.; St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1921-30).

the society's administration, set standards that were observed and studied throughout the nation. He himself emerged as a national leader in the area of preserving historical materials and advancing historical work—all this alongside his writing, teaching, and participation in regional and national historical conferences and organization. My own training in administration, like my training in research, came in close association with Dr. Buck, for in the midst of all this excitement he chose me, perhaps for Scandinavian flavoring in a blue-eyed State, to join him as assistant superintendent in his administrative and editorial adventures. He was a tough-minded chief, highly critical, often exasperating in his passionate concern with details, but always alert to improvements in methods and procedures, never content to rest on his laurels, and, I must add, always appreciative of ideas and responsibility in his staff associates.

As I now review this story, I realize that he was schooling himself through those years, preparing for the later career that came in other regions and in national fields of service. I can barely mention his influence in the formative years of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, his directorship of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey and editorship of the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, and his 20 years of service as treasurer of the American Historical Association.

The kind of scholarly, administrative, and organizing energy and achievement I have described does not come to an abrupt end when its dynamic human center moves away. Good institutions are ongoing; ideas and movements continue to grow, changing with time and need, but pushing forward as the years go on; and so, like the books on the Buck shelves, the work I have sketched merges into the living present and will carry forward into a long future. The unveiling of this portrait today is symbolic of another kind of portrait built into American institutions and ideas and ongoing education and culture that contribute to the enrichment of human life and understanding.

And now let me only add that if my words often have been couched in the past tense, I have come here with a lively sense of the presence of Dr. and Mrs. Buck, whose friendship means very much to me and whose work and influence are present and ongoing. I cannot close without voicing my admiration for a man of great integrity who merits the accolade of "scholar and gentleman" and for a lady of rare ability and grace, whose portrait, I suspect, will one day be unveiled in a like ceremony.