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Dictionary Hill

A gravity hill is an anomaly. It's a place where the law of gravity doesn't apply. Objects can be seen to roll uphill. Water flows uphill too, and cars, when put in neutral, magically ascend slight slopes as if pulled by invisible strings. It's not gravity that is suspended, though, but perception that is being tricked into believing that what's actually downhill is uphill. This optical illusion occurs if the horizon line is hidden and the relative incline of a slant or slope is thus obscured. There used to be a gravity hill in Spring Valley, on La Presa just off of Birch Street. People from as far as LA drove here to experience the sensation of defying gravity. So I make the trip too. But gravity seems to be firmly in place again, thanks to the construction of houses that drew the horizontal back into the landscape. No sensation of rolling uphill, just amazement about the sheer steepness of the terrain. At the end of La Presa, a Thomas the Train ride-on toy lies shattered next to the interlocking concrete barriers that separate the cul-de-sac from the rugged hill. It may be that Thomas' breakdown was caused by exertion from rolling up hill in the heat, but really the collapsed toy looks as beat-up as the area around it is run-down. Or maybe he is just stored by the driveway, waiting to be assembled by the kid who lives there for another fun ride.

The hill that once defied gravity carries many names. Some are known, others forgotten. Lookout Mountain is one of them. Today the little mountain goes by Dictionary Hill. In 1910, a development company had bought 480 acres of federal land and established a subdivision called San Diego Villa Heights. The subdivision was created for promotional use by a San Francisco-based publishing company. Small building lots were given as premiums with a $109 subscription to a 25-volume encyclopedia, the *Library of Universal History and Popular Science*,

View South

bound in half-leather. Upon full payment of the installments, the owner was to receive a deed for the complimentary lot at no further cost. "It is guaranteed," the order form reads, "that these lots are high and dry, free from swamp and damp, wet land." Located on the southern side of the hill, the lots were indeed free of swamp. But the surveyor who had laid a perfect grid over the land didn't account for the topography. At 50x120 feet, many of the narrow plots were crammed onto ridges and steep slopes and proved unsuitable for building construction. Almost none of the subscribers took ownership of their lots, nor did the developer take steps to provide the necessary infrastructure. Literally and figuratively, the few new owners who arrived on the hill were left high and dry.

Downloaded from the internet, volume 1 of the *Library of Universal History and Popular Science* comes as a digital scroll of 435 pages, made from pixels instead of parchment paper. I skip over the nondescript cover, but before I get to the title page I linger over the two pages of marbled endpaper. Paper made from colors floating on water, pulled into ornamental shapes with fine tools like hair or fiber. Colors absorbed by a sheet of paper leaving a watery design on the surface: a perfect way to fix the wetness of water onto the dryness of a page. Less than marble, the endpaper's shades of earthy brown and red remind me of the red volcanic rock that forms Dictionary Hill, a toxic fluid dried into stone. It seems as if a piece of the terrains' rocky surface has been mapped onto the marble endpaper, a secret trace of the complimentary plots of land that were given away with the encyclopedia. The repeating undulations of the pattern

resemble the contour lines that project Dictionary Hill on the region's topographical map, which was compiled much later in the 1950s. On the map, the winding brown lines show the hill's elevation, while the straight street grid of the original surveyor is superimposed in white. Over the course of the century a neighborhood did develop on the hill, and the red color shading the contour lines on the map marks not rocks, but the built-up area that covers them.

After scrolling down a six-page stretch through a desert of empty, yellowing pages, I arrive at another rock formation. A photograph of a monumental statue of Ramses II, carved into the sandstone cliffs at Ipsambul temple in Egypt, foreshadows the specific historical and geographic focus of the *Library of Universal History and Popular Science's* first volume. The encyclopedia's introduction, it turns out, is written by none other than Hubert Howe Bancroft. The famous California historian was no stranger to the area. In 1883 he had bought a small adobe building at the bottom of the hill and established his Helix Farm there, a summer residence and olive and citrus farm. The two-room adobe was the first white settlement in east county San Diego, built on the site of a former Kumeyaay village. Tucked away in a dead-end street and not exactly well known, the Bancroft Ranch House is a small museum today with an ever-growing archive of historical artifacts, mundane objects, community life, and personal stories.

Titled "The Educational Value of the Study of History," the encyclopedia's introduction reveals Bancroft as a compelling writer. He situates all things known as equal members in a vast confederation that he calls the republic of science, in which each member depends on the others. There's the parliament of things, the democracy of objects so frequently evoked today, *avant la letter* in a place where one would least expect it! But Bancroft soon takes a different path, when he describes the task of history to discriminate from the vast amount of facts about the past the ones charged with historical valence. "It can hardly be wise to make the memory serve the purpose of an old-fashioned garret in a country house,—a receptacle for all sorts of odds and ends of property, precious and worthless. Surely, such indiscriminate memorizing must be a waste of energy, and the perversion of a noble faculty."

Surely Bancroft didn't envision his country house to be a small-town museum one day, filled to the brim with all sorts of odds and ends, precious and worthless!

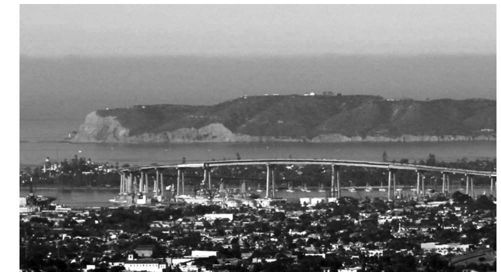
Rather, he associates the study of history with the approximate and probable, compared to science's claim to absoluteness and exactitude. Learning to discern the truth and gain understanding of the causal relation between pertinent historical facts is the very training that the study of history may provide. More than merely expanding his mental horizon, it will make man more modest and more temperate. And tolerant, too. What separates the writing of history from contemporary commentary, Bancroft muses, is the advantage of the retrospect and the allegiance to unbiased and non-partial presentation, "with respect to all subjects whatsoever." In short, the study of history just as much as the writing of it is nothing less than what makes man a complete human being.

Mountain View

Or at least some of them. As Bancroft lays out his understanding of history, he also reveals himself as a man of his class, time and social horizon. "We commonly think of American History," he writes, "as beginning with the year 1492." But patriotism, he goes on, should not fall into the trap of narrow-minded provincialism. It is therefore important to look to the European forefathers and their ancient predecessors in order to achieve full self-understanding. The more strongly he argues for a universal approach, the more he qualifies as to whom this universalism applies. For "[a] nation emerging from savagism, until it has a written record makes little advancement." Bancroft's word's adumbrate what the series editor spells out a few pages later in language plain and unmistakable: "The only race which has figured in history is the Caucasian. The history of the civilized world is the history of the Caucasian race."

Bancroft brings up a beautiful image of history as a bow of light: "[I]t flashes its rays far back over those rough waters through which our ship has been ploughing, and it throws at least some illumination forward upon the deeps of time toward we are about to sail." One can imagine how the original inhabitants, their willow

bows shouldered in skeptical anticipation, stood atop the hill and watched the ships of Juan Cabrillo arrive at the bay in 1542. The Portuguese explorer sailing under Spanish flag was the first European to voyage the coast of present-day California. While Cabrillo's ships were sailing into the unknown, the Kumeyaay had learned about the arrival of white men already through messages passed on from tribes in the interior and related the news to Cabrillo's crew. "And in another day following in the morning came to the ship three Indians large," the expedition's log states, "and by signs told us that walked by the inland inside men like us bearded and dressed, and armed like the ones on the ships, and they showed that they had ballistas and swords, and they made gestures with their right arm as if they were spearing, and they went running as if they were on a horse, and that they killed many Indians of the native, and for that reason they were afraid; these people were well proportioned and large." Three layers of mimetic action are compressed into these lines. There is the double description of a testimonial that is first acted out and then written down; the third step is performed much later in the verbatim translation of the log from Spanish to English. Along the way, the actions of victims and aggressors become eerily conflated into a string of past events: they showed, they made gestures, they went running, they killed, they were afraid. The Kumeyaay's gestures capture a past event; Cabrillo's log keeper describes the Kumeyaay's gestures. Unspoken, both reports spell out the atrocities committed by the men-at-arms traveling with conquistador Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, en route through the New World earlier the same year.


Coronado Bridge

The Kumeyaay's social structure entailed an extended system of lookouts and runners. Early white settlers, too, had dubbed the hill Lookout Mountain, and came up here to spot their cattle or to check if the steamer had come in, before making the 12-mile trip to the harbor. The name Dictionary Hill came later, a twisted residue of the encyclopedia that some of the new settlers stacked on

their shelves. A lookout becomes Lookout Mountain; Lookout Mountain becomes Dictionary Hill. The small hill's change of name relates to a larger shift in the way historical knowledge is captured and produced. In terms of local history it marks the shift from looking to reading, from *looking at* something to *looking up* something. In terms of historiography it parallels the movement from oral testimony to written account; from local to global; and from particular to universal. Historical events cease to be embodied knowledge; at the same time the writing of history is written out of history.

Skyline

Wind hits the microphone and transforms into roaring thunder. The audio drags the image with it turning the sunny hill into a high desert plain. Vibrant reds faint and subtle shades of green are muted by noise. The open space mocks my normal-range lens and recedes behind a screen of dust. It all looked different when I hauled my equipment up the hill. The wind brushed lightly over the costal sage and caressed my bare arms getting heavy with the weight of the tripod. I stop to rest a couple of times and look towards the ocean, my eyes squinting in the sun. The higher I get, the more familiar features appear. There are the high rises downtown that make up San Diego's teething skyline and the elevated curve of the Coronado bridge soaring across the bay, 200 feet high and tall enough to allow passage for the ships of Pacific Fleet stationed at the Navel Base nearby. 12 miles east and 1,000 feet above sea level, I climb the final stretches to the peak. A flurry of butterflies breezes by. These are the visitors who truly defy gravity, floating swiftly on wind currents and thermal uplifts to save energy for future engagements. Atop the hill males compete for the best spots

to impress the arriving females. First documented in the 1960s, the "hill-topping" mating behavior of insects on Dictionary Hill has since been threatened by other's competing for prime real estate with a view. A string of developers has proposed building projects crowing the peak. The last such plan sought to raze 35 feet off the top of the hill in order to built a subdivision of 211 homes. The planned gated community would have cut across the open space, turning the last wildlife and plant habitat in densely populated Spring Valley into a landscape shaped by concrete trenches and retaining walls: Welcome to Highland Ranch. The development fell flat in 2010, thanks to the efforts of the Dictionary Hill Open Space Advocates (DHOSA), a community group that called attention to the project's massive environmental impact.

Stamped out of the ground as a promotional gimmick of a publishing company, the Dictionary Hill neighborhood has been ill conceived from the very beginning. But rock is more enduring than paper. And more valuable, for that matter. While the *Library of Universal History and Popular Science* is long outdated and spends its digital afterlife in the public domain, most of Dictionary Hill is still parceled into lots that are privately owned, though hoping to thrive, one day, as a public space.

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