

## HISTORY

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TO attempt an account of the present state of historical studies in Cambridge would be an impossible task. Actual discoveries in history are comparatively rare and are concerned with points of detail; they could only be represented by an annotated catalogue of all the books and articles published in recent years. New interpretations of historical events would be of greater interest, but could only be conveyed as a whole by the writing of a new history of the world. There remains the possibility of discussing the contemporary attitude towards history. But here there is yet another difficulty—that of perspective. Doubtless there are principles common to all historians to-day, probably there are principles common to all Cambridge historians, principles which mark them off from historians of other times and places. But such principles are largely unconscious tendencies and only become apparent at a distance; from near at hand the features which differentiate individuals are more prominent than those which unite a school. Instead therefore of attempting a laborious and fruitless analysis of the Cambridge attitude towards history, this essay will frankly be the expression of a personal view. Such personal view may however convey, not by its conclusions but by its unconscious assumptions, something, hidden even from its author, of the underlying tendencies. Starting-points for the formulation of this view may be found in three familiar questions: Is history an art or a science? Should the historian aim at impartiality? Has history any value? The answers given to these questions are of less importance than the attempt to arrive at them, for that will involve definition of the terms used and consideration of the essential nature of history.

## I

The first of these questions—Is history an art or a science?—was formerly a common theme for essay-writing and debate, but it seems lately to have lost its popularity. Nor is this surprising, since discussions of the subject were commonly at cross-purposes and resulted in no conclusions. Even if agreement were reached, it was often vitiated by the failure to think out what any of the terms involved in the question really meant. Moreover fashions of thought have played a considerable part in deciding what the answer shall be. Fifty years ago it was hardly disputed among serious men that history was a science, destined to become more and more exact as time went on, until at some not very distant date it would be possible to lay down laws for the conduct of human affairs derived from the past history and experience of mankind. To-day the reaction against this excessive optimism about the scope of history has gone so far that it is rare to find anyone, even in academic circles, who will defend the scientific character of history.

The claim that history is a science is usually limited to-day to that part of the historian's work which consists in the establishment of the truth of particular facts by critical methods. The wider processes of history—the relating of these facts together, the analysis of their causes and effects, and the construction of a story—are claimed to be an art. The historian, we are told, can never give final or exact results, he is concerned with particular events and not with general laws, he must use his imagination to reconstruct the past, and he must present his results in literary form. In all these ways he differs from the scientist—and therefore, it is sometimes added, he is or should be an artist.

But it may reasonably be replied that these are superficial qualities, which do not reach the heart of the problem. We have not found the real difference between art and science. That history can never hope to be final or exact might disprove the historian's claim to be a scientist, but it could never



establish his claim to be an artist. Inexact science does not become art; it remains imperfect science. The historian is concerned with particular facts, but so is the scientist; the laws of science are built up on the basis of innumerable particular facts. That all previous attempts to lay down laws of history have failed does not prove that such laws do not exist, but only that we have not yet a sufficient knowledge upon which to formulate them. Imagination is certainly essential to the historian; but imagination is a quality as necessary to the great scientist as to the great artist. Similarly, it is not denied that the historian should be a literary artist in the presentation of his results; but if there is less need for the scientist to be one, that is only because he appeals to a smaller and more technical public.

Before going further it is therefore necessary to arrive at some clear conception of the nature of science and of art. They are usually regarded as differing in their subject-matter and in their method, but it would seem that such differences, though real, are secondary. The fundamental difference between science and art is one of object, and the other differences result from this. Basically, science is concerned with discovery, art with creation. These two functions exist side by side, though in varying proportions, in every human mind; they are not opposed but complementary, and between them they cover the whole field of man's mental activity. In current use, however, the meaning of both terms has been restricted, so that to-day science ordinarily means the discovery of exact knowledge, art the creation of form which has aesthetic significance. The result is that the major part of man's activity—creation without aesthetic significance and knowledge without exactness—has fallen into a no man's land in which the words "science" and "art" are used almost at random or on the basis of superficial analogies without consideration of the underlying reality.

In the case of history the matter is further complicated by the fact that the word history is used in a number of different

senses. Though in any given statement it is easy to see which meaning of the word is intended, there is constant danger that unconscious transference of thought from one meaning to another may cause confusion of argument. At least three such meanings may be distinguished. Primarily history means the past in itself, secondly the story of the past, and thirdly the process of investigating the past. In the first sense history is the subject which the historian studies, in the second it is the object at which he is aiming, in the third it is the method by which he works.

The historian cannot choose whether he is to be an artist or a scientist, for he must be both. He has the double task of discovering the truth about the past and of creating an account of it; in the first of these he is a scientist, in the second an artist. This remains true even though his science may be insufficient or his art inadequate. The real question at issue therefore is not whether history is an art or a science, but what is the relationship between the artistic and the scientific elements in history and whether history can ever hope to become an exact science or a significant art.

The basis of all knowledge and all thought is fact, and fact is only ascertainable through the human senses. Science and history and philosophy differ, not in the class of facts with which they deal, but in their method of dealing with them. All facts are ultimately historical facts, for they are all events that have taken place once for all in the conditions of time and space and have come to us through the evidence of our own or some one else's sense-impressions. The facts with which the natural scientist deals are therefore of the same nature as those of the historian, but he has more immediate contact with them. Every scientific experiment is an individual fact, a unique happening that has entered into history; but though the scientist can never repeat the *same* experiment, he can create *similar* conditions and in them perform another experiment in order to discover if he obtains similar results. The scientist is also at an advantage because he can, in most cases, neglect the events of past history and con-

centrate on those of present history, because he can create what events he needs in order to produce facts of a type which will be useful to him, because he can circumscribe his subject, thereby allowing the limitation of his investigations and the isolation of his facts from their surroundings, and finally because he knows what he is looking for in view of a particular question which he has set himself and can therefore separate the significant from the non-essential.

The historian on the other hand is at a disadvantage, because his subject is life as a whole and any limitation of its bounds will cause more or less distortion: a historical fact isolated from its context loses its true significance. He is unable to perform experiments, whether to verify the statements of his authorities or to test his own theories. He cannot re-create conditions similar to those of the past, and, even if he could, he would be no nearer finding out how any given individual would have behaved in them. You cannot dissect the mentality of a living man—still less therefore of a dead man. In all these ways the historian lacks direct contact with his subject, and has no means of establishing it. The scientist collects his necessary material himself, or at least through the collaboration of trained assistants, whose imperfections are corrected as far as possible by the use of instruments designed to measure and record more accurately than the human eye or brain. But the historian cannot collect the material that he desires; he must make use of what he has, though it be inaccurate, incomplete, defective, and untrustworthy.

The first task both of the scientist and of the historian is the establishment of a sure basis of fact; but the scientist can make direct observations of his material, whereas the historian has only the evidence of the observations made by previous men. His material is open to all sorts of abuses which it is beyond his power to counteract. The observation may have been inaccurate or unintentional: it may have been carelessly made or made without any idea of the purpose to which the historian puts it, so that it may neglect the points

about which he wants to know and concentrate on irrelevant details. The evidence may be incomplete or unreliable: there may have been no one present to observe the most momentous happenings, or if observed they may not have been recorded, or even if the observation were made, and correctly made, the record of it may have been distorted by unconscious bias or intentional prejudice. The transmission may have been defective: much historical material has been lost and that which has survived has done so not on its merits but by chance.

Historians to-day have far more mastery over their material than those of previous ages. From the earliest times, indeed, every historian must have exercised some criticism, some selection of what he would include and what he would reject or dismiss. But the growth of scientific principles of criticism has been slow, and it is probable that increasing knowledge of psychology will still further extend them. For critical principles are mainly psychological; they concern the way in which observation may suffer from lack of training or be distorted by current modes of thought, the way in which interpretation may be biased by interest or prejudice, the way in which transmission may be deflected by the mistakes of hearers and copyists. Criticism attaches in part to the material documents, but still more to their authors; critical principles are in the main a careful study of motives.

But criticism must remain very largely a negative thing. It can tell us when an authority is untrustworthy, when an author is likely to have been untruthful or deceived, but it cannot establish positively what was the truth. It can warn us against the faults of our authorities, but it cannot make up for their deficiencies. Criticism is the best the historian can do in his search for facts, but the distance between the scientist's direct observation and the historian's evidence of observation remains very great. Criticism can never give certainty or accuracy; the historian must be content with probability and approximation. Criticism can winnow his evidence, but it cannot supplement it. Even at the most



favourable, the historian is in the position of a judge who has to decide the truth about a case upon which he has no evidence except the written depositions of witnesses whom he knows to have been untrustworthy and suspects to have been perjurers, with the further disadvantages that large portions of their depositions have been destroyed at random and that their authors are not present to be cross-examined.

The discovery of fact, though it often occupies the greater part of his time, is only a preliminary stage in the historian's task. After he has learned the *facts* about the past, he has to go further and attempt to understand them with a view to discovering the *truth* about the past. This is even harder and more hazardous than the previous stage. In the one case the difficulty arose from the inevitable insufficiency of the basic evidence rather than from any inherent failure of technique; in the other the personal factor enters in so largely that finality or complete agreement between historians seems unlikely ever to be achieved.

The historian must endeavour to put himself in the place of men of other times and places whose lives and thoughts and actions were wholly unlike his own. For this he will need great gifts of sympathetic imagination and his success will naturally depend upon his innate powers. Criticism works in accordance with more or less generally accepted rules and almost anyone can be trained to become a competent critic, but imagination is a much more tricky business and there is no possibility of supplementing its defect by rules. Yet though the constructive historian must be born with great imaginative qualities, he must learn not to rely too much upon his imagination but always to hold it in hand and to subordinate it to his judgment. Brilliant guesses and vivid descriptive power are the basis of most great historical work, for the historian, like the scientist, works by flashes of intuition rather than by continuous deduction; but such intuition can only safely be relied upon in those whose judgment is as well developed as their imagination. The imagination must



be constantly checked and restrained, yet this must somehow be done in such a way as not to diminish its vigour.

Historical imagination must not merely lead men to see the events of the past vividly, so that they may be able to describe their appearance with conviction; it must also enable the historian to penetrate beneath the surface so that he may see the connection of events and thereby appreciate their real meaning. This will involve the arrangement of events in a sequence of cause and effect, the deducing of generalisations from the mass of observed, recorded and established facts, and the making of constant decisions as to the relative importance of different factors in the past. Here again there is no means of accurately weighing the importance of historical events and of determining the influence of events; in most cases no doubt there is a general consensus of opinion among historians, but in others the decision will depend upon the individual personality. It is because the working of the imagination and the making of value-judgments vary so greatly from man to man that, though historians are continuously building up a larger and more assured edifice of admitted facts, there is room for almost endless variations in the interpretation of history. Critical methods may be imperfect but they are common to all and in the majority of cases their results are established in such a way as to admit of no dispute among honest and intelligent men; but constructive processes are more personal, and therefore do not in the same way compel assent. The constructive parts of historical work are not merely harder than the critical, but there is even less finality about the result.

After the historian has exercised his judgment, his memory, his imagination and his reason in the effort to find out and understand the past, he has finally to employ all his powers of expression in order to convey his conclusions to his readers. It is a common error to suppose that some historians regard this as an unimportant part of their business. No one has ever denied that the historian should express himself as vigorously and as clearly as he can—that is, that he should

write the best prose of which he is capable. If any historians fail to do this, it is not because they do not think it desirable but because some men are more sensitive to the power of style than others. The only requirement of historical writing is that it should be lucid; any complaint that goes beyond that—such as attacks on its dullness or on its banality—is really a criticism, often only too well justified, not of the author's manner of writing but of his whole view of history and of his failure to see the past in its real essence and vitality.

The historian's task thus falls into three main divisions: critical, interpretative and expository. What, then, is the relation between the artistic and the scientific elements in history? It would generally be conceded that the first of these was scientific and the last artistic, but dispute arises over the central and most important. Is the understanding of the past a part of the scientific or of the artistic function? It is usually regarded as being artistic, since it is a constructive operation of the imagination. But in fact what the historian constructs is not the past itself, nor even (at this stage) a picture of the past, but a theory to explain the past. Such construction of a theory corresponds to the scientist's hypothesis. Criticism, which is often claimed to be the really scientific part of history, is only a preliminary, necessitated by the imperfections of the material; the imaginative and constructive parts of history are the essentially scientific ones. The natural scientist, like the historian, uses imagination and intuition in the making of his hypotheses, but here again he is at an advantage because he is able to verify his hypotheses by further experiment. The historian has no real means of testing the truth of his suppositions and of his reconstructions of the past; the most he can do is to recur to the original facts and see whether his theory is in accord with those facts. This may prevent him from making big mistakes, but it does not definitely establish the truth of his view of the past. Unfortunately however the fact that historical theories are not ultimately verifiable has not merely obscured the similarity between the processes of history and of natural science, but

has led historians to forget that their explanations are after all only hypotheses and to regard them as final truths. The very limitations of history have proved a temptation to dogmatism.

It is clear therefore that, if the definition of science as discovery and art as creation is accepted, both the critical and the interpretative stages of historical research are scientific. It is however equally clear that a subject of which our knowledge is so partial and so broken, our interpretation so variable and so liable to distortion, can never claim to be an exact science. But it has already been suggested that the current limitation of the name "science" to the natural sciences, which are by their method enabled to achieve a higher degree of exactness than any other branch of knowledge, is misleading since it obscures the essential fact that, while each form of knowledge has its own technique and varies in the degree of certainty attaching to its results, each follows the same dual process of establishing facts and of understanding them, and that each is within its own sphere a legitimate science. If therefore the historian vindicates his claim to be a scientist, he must not be supposed to be claiming finality or exactness for his results. Indeed there seems no reason to suppose that history can ever hope to become an exact science, since its deficiencies lie not merely in the nature of its technique, which might be improved with experience, but also in the inherent inadequacy of its material.

But if the main cause why history can never be final or exact is lack of sufficient evidence, another cause is the exact opposite—excess of evidence. On the one hand the historian has to construct a picture from such scanty and corrupt evidence as has come down to him—a picture which is certainly lacking in many details and which may even be mistaken in its main outlines. On the other hand where there is evidence sufficient to give some promise of a more accurate and detailed picture, he finds himself unable to hold all the necessary facts simultaneously in his mind. Selection is therefore essential, and since in the last resort all historical facts are

inter-related any selection must involve some degree of distortion.

In describing the historian's method of work it was assumed that the three stages could be kept wholly distinct and would follow each other in orderly and logical sequence. The ideal historian would first collect and sift all the evidence until he had reached an assured basis of facts; holding all these facts in his mind at once he would then be able to relate them to each other in such a way as to see the relationship between them and so to arrive at their inner meaning; finally he would set down that interpretation in such a way as to convey it most clearly to his readers, selecting for that purpose such facts as were most significant and most representative of the whole. But in actual practice this ideal method of work is vitiated by the intrusion of the selection of facts not between the second and third stage, but between the first and second. Selection instead of following interpretation must in practice precede it.

Except in very limited fields, the evidence, scanty though it be in relation to what we might desire, is larger than any single man can remember at once. As soon therefore as he begins to collect his facts, the historian has also to begin to select from them those which are most relevant to whatever period or aspect he is studying. But ultimately he cannot decide whether any particular fact is relevant or not, unless he already knows what interpretation he is going to put upon it and upon the whole subject. So far therefore from the interpretation arising spontaneously from the consideration of the whole body of facts and selection being made afterwards of those facts which are necessary to the exposition of that interpretation, the two processes are intimately connected at every stage.

No doubt this is an extreme statement of a difficulty of which in actual practice historians are hardly aware. Nor will the wise historian go far astray, provided he keeps his interpretation as flexible as possible. He must perforce start with some views about the interpretation of his subject and



this will influence his early selection, but he will be prepared to modify those views at every stage of his work, even though this may mean going through much of the evidence a second time in order to make sure that he has not dismissed as irrelevant anything which he later sees to be important. Every historian finds his views modified constantly in the course of his investigation, and such modifications arise not by conscious reasoning but by a sort of brooding over the subject. A subject does in the main give rise to its own interpretation.

There must however come a time when these tentative views are allowed to crystallise into a definite conviction. The real danger for the historian is that of allowing this crystallisation to take place at too early a stage, and consequently of basing his final interpretation upon too narrow a basis of fact. In that case he will spend the major part of his time not in finding an interpretation which will fit the facts, but in finding facts which will support his interpretation. This danger is perhaps greater for the business-like historian, who starts with a clear idea of what he intends to look for and even of what he expects to find, than it is for those who are more casual and inconsequent in their methods of work and who are therefore able to soak themselves in the atmosphere of a period before they begin consciously to theorise about it. It is a danger also against which no amount of learning affords a protection. Facts can be found which will support almost any historical thesis, and the more learned the historian the more of such facts will he be able to cite. Mere learning is no substitute for integrity of purpose and openness of judgment; indeed without them it may be the greatest of deceivers.

Most of the suspicion with which academic historians sometimes regard "literary history" is due to the feeling that it is composed upon an implicit principle of selection. The "literary historian" is tempted to interpret the past with a view to making an effect, to choose facts not for their intrinsic importance but for their literary effectiveness, to build up a striking picture of the past with little regard to its



intrinsic truth, and to force the facts of the past into a particular mould—to dramatise characters, schematise events, invent illustrative details and heighten the effect of the whole. The conscientious historian, who is aware both of the extreme complexity of the past and also of the tentative nature of his own conclusions, is distrustful of such slickness of interpretation. He feels that this is using historical material as the basis for something which, however legitimate in itself, is not the same as history.

This leads naturally to a consideration of the extent to which history can be a pure art. If historical investigation is a science but a science that must always remain inexact, can the writing of history, which is an art, ever become a really significant art? History may certainly supply the material for artistic creations, whether written or painted, but the historian is not primarily concerned with the creation of form but with the representation of the truth about the past. The art of the historian finds its closest affinity in that of the portrait painter, who has the double task of producing a good likeness and a work of art. In either case the ultimate solution of the antithesis between representation and form can only be found in the realisation that the forms of life differ from those of art. Thus history which is forced into the form of a tragedy is inevitably more or less falsified, because, as we say, real life is more complicated than that. Tragedy is a method of schematising facts for a particular purpose, while history is an attempt to relate the facts in themselves. No doubt this also involves a measure of schematisation, for without it the facts would not convey any significance, but it is a different schematisation and for a different end. History as art must keep its own forms, and not attempt to adopt those of other branches of literature.

Like the portrait painter, the historian must achieve not merely accuracy of detail, but truth of general aspect and of proportion. This latter is indeed the more important of the two, and a historian who is inaccurate in detail but correct in his broad view is less misleading than one who is accurate

but mistaken. The historian must further convey a lifelike appearance; his characters must not merely be analysed and explained but must appear in the round. This sort of effect comes very largely from the presence of small touches of detail, and here the historian has a harder task than the portrait painter, for his subjects are dead and gone, and such small details are largely irrecoverable. Attempts to achieve the illusion of life by a sprightly method of writing or by sheer invention of circumstantial detail are ultimately doomed to failure; the power of breathing life into dry bones is one given to few men and one to be highly prized by those rare historians who are its fortunate possessors.

Good histories are as rare as good portraits. And in either case the means by which they impose themselves upon us is not their accuracy but their verisimilitude. We cannot test whether the portrait of a dead man was a good likeness; we can only tell whether it looks convincing or not. Men do not judge a history by its truth—for to test that they would have to know at least as much as the author—but by its appearance of truthfulness. These two are not necessarily identical; and great historians of the past have in many cases by the excellence of their writing or the brilliance of their exposition imprinted a mistaken view so deep upon the public mind that it would seem that no later research will ever avail to correct it.

History is peculiarly open to such charlatany. Men do not indeed consciously desire to read history which is untrue. Indeed the reason why they read history instead of fiction is presumably because they want to read about something that actually happened. A frankly untrue history would have no readers; it would fail to be either history or fiction. Yet probably most of those who read history to-day are not primarily interested in knowing what actually happened, but desire simply to read a story which has the romantic setting of the past and from which they can derive heightened emotional interest by thinking that "once upon a time it really did take place". What they require of history is not a

severe standard of truth but such verisimilitude as is necessary to convey an appearance of truth. No doubt the standard of verisimilitude required for this includes to-day an appearance of impartiality and a parade of learning; without these even brilliant writing and exposition will fail to convince. But learning as we have seen is no protection against bias, and an appearance of impartiality or of judicious criticism is often deceptive. The only defence that we have is the demand that the historian should give us not merely his interpretation of the past but sufficient evidence also to enable us to form our own views about it.

## II

When we turn to the second question—Should the historian aim at impartiality?—we find that here also fashion has dictated the answer commonly given. Fifty years ago, when the scientific character of history was unchallenged, the ideal of impartiality was universally upheld, however defective its practice may have been. To-day, when it is perhaps more practised, it is fashionable to decry it, to maintain that it is unattainable, and even if attainable would be undesirable. Such a view might seem a confession of intellectual failure, a renunciation of what should be man's chief pride and constant endeavour, his power of making calm and rational judgments. If it be true that men prefer to read narratives written by passionate partisans instead of by those who endeavour to see the past steadily and see it whole, it is not for the historian to lower his standard in order to pander to the multitude who insist on living below the plane of reason.

To this it would be replied that, however desirable a calm and reasoned judgment may be, it has in practice led to the almost complete neglect of history by the general public; no purpose is served by the historian holding up the standard of human rationality unless he influences others thereby, and this he cannot do unless he persuades them to read him. Moreover the historian who strives after impartiality is aiming too high and may fail to achieve anything. Too much

emphasis on the judgment paralyses the imagination and the man who views the past dispassionately tends to forget that it was once a living reality. The impartial historian can never achieve an exact view of the past, because of the initial lack of facts and of the inevitable intrusion of his own personality; he is sacrificing the substance of imaginative reconstruction for the shadow of scientific knowledge. The great historians of former times were not impartial; indeed it was the very fact that they held strong views about men or policies or ideas that gave them sympathy to understand at least a part of the past and that infused life into their books. It is better to have a real understanding and a living vision, even though it be incomplete, than by attempting too much to fail completely and to relapse into dullness and sterility.

The truth of this indictment may be admitted, if impartiality is taken to mean the suppression of the author's personality and the delivery of final and authoritative judgments. But there is another and less ambitious ideal of impartiality, according to which the historian is not the judge who delivers judgment, but the judge who sums up the case for the jury. He has to collect the evidence from witnesses and from advocates, to sift it as far as he is able, and to arrange it in orderly form so as to bring out its significance. Parts of the evidence will have to be presented verbatim, others may be summarised or narrated, while technical points must be elucidated for the benefit of the layman. The whole presentation of the case must be such that the reader can form his own opinion of its meaning. We do not demand that the historian or the judge should have no views about the meaning of the evidence, but we insist that his primary duty is to present a clear and unbiased statement of the evidence. He may direct the jury to a particular finding, but it is essential that such direction should be kept separate from his presentation of the evidence; indeed a strong direction is often a safety-valve, for it is better that an author's bias should be thus revealed than that it should be unnoticed because implicit in his method of selecting and marshalling the evidence.



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In this sense the duty of the impartial historian is not merely to give the facts and to put a just and balanced interpretation upon them, but also to state the case from every side and every possible point of view. The mistaken and prejudiced views of an event or of a person held by contemporaries are as important for the understanding of the past as are the more correct views which the historian may be able to discover by his detachment or by his knowledge of previously hidden facts. Thus in a question like the origins of the War, we can now arrive at far juster views of the real policies of different nations than was possible at the time; yet the cruder views formerly held have themselves entered into history and have affected the beliefs and actions of men and nations. The historian of the early twentieth century must convey to his readers not merely the true course of diplomacy but also the various mistaken views of it which have at any time been current. Similarly in assessing a man's character the historian must convey not merely what he really was—or what the writer thinks he really was—but also what he seemed to himself, to his friends, and to his enemies. These may be very different; yet all are necessary for a real appreciation of his place in history. Incidentally this is the main respect in which history differs from pure biography, for the biographer is concerned only to depict a man's real character and deals with external events and outside judgments only in so far as they may have influenced his development, whereas the historian is less concerned with the man in himself than with him in relation to other men, whether of his own or of a later age.

Such an ideal of impartiality does not involve the exclusion of colour and of partial views from the picture; indeed it demands their presence, but at the same time insists that the historian should endeavour to present all aspects of the case fairly and in proper proportion. Nor does it involve the limitation of his emotional sympathies or the restriction of his imagination, but rather their extension by being applied as widely as possible. A fair but lifeless narrative is as much



a failure to write impartial history as is a vivid but one-sided one. Impartiality properly understood means no more than the effort to see the past in all its manifold variety and in the complexity of its cross-issues. It only becomes misleading and dangerous when it is taken to be the equivalent of a complete objective view; for this can never be obtained, since, as we have already seen, the historian's own personality must enter in at every stage of his work.

It is the existence of this strongly personal element in history which accounts for its lack of finality and for the constant changes in the views held by historians. If history consisted merely of the collection and classification of facts about the past, it would be possible to look forward to the day when a final and permanent version of it would be reached. Ultimately all the available facts would be known, and, though we should not have achieved a perfect picture of the past, since important facts might still be missing, it would be a picture agreed upon by all historians, admitting no dispute, which could only be altered by the discovery of fresh evidence. But in practice there is no such agreement among historians; differences of opinion exist and, so far as can be seen, must always exist. Even without the discovery of fresh evidence, new views are constantly being put forward, for different men will interpret the same evidence in different ways. Moreover different historians will have particular sympathy for different aspects and periods and characters of history, and from that sympathy may derive peculiar insight into them. Though it may sometimes lead to exaggerations and apparent contradictions, it is for the ultimate enlargement of our knowledge of history that there should be these differences of sympathy and interest and admiration.

Such differences of historical interpretation are caused not merely by the temperament of the particular historian but also in part by the temper of the age in which he lives. It is often remarked that no generation is satisfied with the history written by its predecessors; even though no new evidence has come to light, it will insist upon re-writing history for

itself. The critical preliminaries, such as editions of texts, discussions of sources, weighing of evidence, collections of established facts, may be taken over; but the essential parts of history—judgment of character, estimation of motive, interpretation of events—are constantly being revised. Not merely does the language of one generation often seem florid or stilted or quaint to the next, but modes of thought are constantly changing also. The historian is concerned not merely to understand the past himself, but also to make it intelligible to others; he must therefore explain it in the terms of contemporary thought. Different aspects of man's life in the past come into the foreground, the relative importance of the various factors in the moulding of affairs is reassessed, new periods even acquire prominence and interest, according to the prevailing modes of thought and conditions of life in the historian's own day.

An instance of this may be found in the fact that fifty years ago most historians were interested in the ages of great achievement, whereas to-day there is perhaps a greater interest shown in the ages which used to be considered periods of decline or decadence, such as the Hellenistic Age or the later Roman Empire or the close of the Middle Ages. It is not simply that such periods, having been comparatively neglected hitherto, provide greater scope for new discoveries. There is a deeper cause for our sympathy with them. They were periods of transition, when old ideals were breaking up and new ideals were not yet fully formed or widely accepted, when the conflict between them was intense but often unperceived or misdirected or only half-realised by contemporaries—periods therefore which are more comprehensible to us who live in another such age than they were to those who lived when there was greater certainty and community of ideals.

In the same way it would be generally true to say that fifty years ago most historians were interested in constitutional or political history. History was treated as the story of the development of individual and national liberty. The

nineteenth century was the great age of politics, of liberalism and of nationality; it was natural therefore that those should have been the aspects of the past which stood out as the most significant. To-day economic questions are more vital in public life than strictly political ones, and men are more interested in social and in economic history than in the history of ideas or of institutions.

With this change in dominating interest has gone a corresponding change in the assessment of the relative importance of various factors in the making of the past. The individualist and the idealist interpretations of history have given place to the economic. Our grandfathers were impressed by man's increasing mastery over circumstances, we rather by the sense of his impotence in the face of blind forces and of human stupidity. It was as natural that they should think of ideas as being the free offspring of the human soul as that we should regard them as merely the rationalisation of their environment, the product not the cause of historical changes.

In an age when the importance of economic factors is daily being borne in upon us in a way unknown hitherto, it is not surprising that historians should tend towards the economic view of history. If thought and action are not free but conditioned by their environment, there seems to-day to be little doubt that in that environment economic factors are the most important. The Marxian need not hold that every action is due to conscious economic motives, but simply that it is the underlying economic forces which ultimately shape men's thinking and their actions. Yet attractive and apparently convincing as this theory of history may be to-day, there is no reason to suppose that it will prove more permanent than those which it has displaced. Paradoxically its proof is its own refutation. That an economic view of history should have arisen in an age dominated by economic problems is a good instance of the way in which theories are the outcome of the circumstances of the day, but it also suggests that when those problems have been solved and some new aspect of

life has come to occupy the forefront of our minds, a new conception of history will arise also.

Though he may recognise the transitoriness of all such interpretations of history and though he may even succeed in understanding the methods of thought of another age, the historian can never wholly free himself from those of his own. Nor can he help seeing the past from the angle of the present day. When he attempts to make a general survey of the past, he sees it in perspective and must to some extent give it a teleological interpretation. The present appears as the culmination of the past; history leads up to the world to-day. Even if he avoids the fallacies of reading into history a purpose of producing the present and of supposing that those things are most important in the past which bear a superficial resemblance to to-day, he cannot escape the fact that his main lines and his proportions and his values are the result of his perspective. It is obvious that this must be a false perspective, since the present moment is not the fullness of time but a point of no particular significance upon the way, and therefore that his vision must be somewhat distorted. But though the historian may be aware of this and though he may and should from time to time make the effort to see history from outside, he knows that he can never really succeed; he can never wholly escape the implications of the fact that he is himself a part of the time-process which he is studying.

Perhaps the most serious consequence of this is the tendency towards the over-simplification of historical causation. History is very largely the study of changes and the historian must see events in a relationship of cause and effect; but, owing to the fact that he looks back along history from an angle instead of regarding it directly from above, he may easily misconceive the nature of that relationship. History appears to consist of a series of chains of cause and effect, whereas in reality the relation of cause and effect is not that of a chain but of a network. An event is not the product of a single cause but of the interaction of several causes; it does



not produce a single effect but combines with other events to produce many effects. It is an optical illusion which over-emphasises certain of the lines and makes it seem as though the main events followed directly from each other instead of being the result of constant and elaborate interaction.

Historical events are not simple entities but complex unions of different factors springing from a multiplicity of causes. Yet from the nature of history they cannot be adequately analysed or dissolved into their component parts. For the essence of historical study consists in the attempt to understand facts by setting them in their context. Historical facts cannot be isolated, and if they could would become meaningless. This, together with the inadequacy of our evidence and the impossibility of performing experiments, means that we can have no exact knowledge of the nature of the facts or of the working of the various factors in history. We may distinguish different elements in an event and estimate the contribution of each to the whole, but we can have no certainty about the result, for our evidence is not sufficient to assure us that we know them all and our method provides no means by which we may properly check our estimate of their comparative importance.

The fact that past events cannot be subjected to complete analysis means that we are not, and presumably never will be, in a position to formulate exact laws of history or to apply them to the present day. We have a vague idea of what effects followed from what union of causes, but we are not able to unravel the strands sufficiently to discover the precise effect which any given cause has produced or will produce. Before we could lay down the laws of historical causation we should have to know exactly what effect resulted from every cause in isolation and from every possible combination of causes, and before we could apply this knowledge we should have to have an equally perfect analysis of all the forces at work in the world to-day. Failing this knowledge the "lessons of history" must remain hazardous analogies, which usually prove to be deceptive. We may tentatively conjecture



but we can never confidently predict from one historical event what is likely to take place in other circumstances. Even where the superficial resemblances are great, it remains true that history cannot repeat itself. Doubtless the same result always follows from the same cause; perhaps the same combination of causes may take place twice; but, in order to produce exactly the same result, they would have to combine within the same environment—and that environment has been permanently modified by the first event and therefore can never be the same again. However similar the situation may appear to be, there must always be some differences; when we attempt to make historical analogies, our calculations are always upset by the presence of some factors that we have overlooked.

The same optical illusion which simplifies the relationship of cause and effect may also make it seem inevitable that everything should have occurred just as it did. Since the present is the product of the whole of the past, it follows that, had anything been different, the present would in some degree have been different also. But it is difficult to imagine the present—which includes not merely the external world to-day, but our ideas and standards of value also—as other than it is, and it is easy unconsciously to assume it as the basis of our view and to read history backward. In that case everything that has ever happened fits into its place in the network of cause and effect so neatly that it is hard to imagine that anything could have been different. The fallacy of this is obvious, since, had the combination of causes at any point been different, the whole subsequent network would have been different but would have appeared no less inevitable. It will however often be found that this point of view exercises a subtle influence on many who would reject historical determinism and is implicit in their method of marshalling facts and of presenting the course of events.

An appearance of inevitability is indeed almost inseparable from any summary or general survey of history, for abbreviation necessarily takes the form of omitting details and

strengthening the main lines of the picture. As a result it may seem inconceivable that, had some particular man never lived or some great battle gone the other way, the whole course of subsequent history would have been altered. No doubt the immediate details would have been different, but surely the underlying tendencies, the trend of the age or the logic of circumstances, would have produced the same result in the long run. But this is very largely the effect of the range or scale of our reading of history. As events become more remote in time or as we take a wider survey over them, details disappear into the general outline, essential similarities become more noticeable than superficial differences, and changes appear to be the product of tendencies rather than of individuals. Yet it is well constantly to remind ourselves that such tendencies are not real entities but simply the deductions which we draw, often unconsciously, from the mass of details. The underlying tendency of a movement or the spirit of an age is not something existing apart from the individual persons participating in that movement or living in that age; it is the highest common factor that we find among them.

Though it is true that men are not entirely master of their circumstances, there can be little doubt that individual action may modify those circumstances. Indeed it often seems absurd that quite trivial or apparently accidental happenings should have been followed by great consequences and should seem to have deflected the natural course of history, until we realise that they were not the motive force or sole cause of the resulting changes, but that they added to the combination of causes that which determined the form which change should take. The ultimate question of determinism—whether it would have been possible for that combination of causes to have been different—is a metaphysical one with which the historian cannot deal; all he is concerned to state is that historical changes are not the result of impersonal and inevitable tendencies but of particular events. Whether those events were ultimately inevitable or determined, they have

the appearance in the actual course of history of being willed or accidental; and it is with that appearance that the historian is concerned.

But even if the historian recognises how much the course of history has been conditioned by contingent circumstances, he cannot speculate upon the way in which it might have been different. Since, owing to his lack of accurate analysis, he does not know the exact influence which any given factor exercised upon events, he cannot tell how they would have been modified had that influence been removed, still less the influence which some other factor might have exercised in its place. He may perhaps tentatively envisage some of the more immediate consequences which might have followed had any given event turned out differently, but he cannot hope to trace the wider ramifications extending to furthest time and place. At best he can only suggest a few differences within the framework of history as we know it, whereas in reality that framework itself would have been different.

For this reason therefore he cannot profitably discuss the ultimate value of any event. He may discover its effect upon its own generation or upon a particular community, but not whether it was for the good or ill of mankind as a whole that it took place as it did. Looking back upon history he is tempted to say that some victory or other event was fortunate for the future of civilisation, when what he really means is that without it the future of civilisation would have been different. He cannot tell whether we are better off to-day as the result of some event which did take place than we should have been as the result of another which did not. Even if he knew what to-day would have been like in that case, he would be unable really to decide whether it was better or worse, for our standards of value as well as our circumstances are the product of history and might have been different. Nor could he rightly assume that what might have been best for us to-day would necessarily have been best for humanity considered as a whole throughout all time and place.

The historian may, however, reply that he does not assume present standards to be final or secure, but takes them as the only ones available; he does not attempt to judge the intrinsic value of an event, but only its actual contribution in the making of history as it is. But, even if he were consistently to bear this distinction in mind, he would not altogether avoid his difficulties. It is tempting to regard events as good or bad according as they seem to have hastened or retarded the coming of the present day. But this neglects the fact that the present is the product of the interaction of all past events; had some of them been absent it would have not come more quickly but would have been different. Logically therefore he is bound to admit that, since everything has contributed something to the making of our world, everything has been good; and if he attempts to define degrees of goodness, he must say that those things have been best which seem most important or most striking, regardless of their immediate consequences. No calamity, however disastrous in its own generation, has proved finally irretrievable; it has worked into the network of history and has produced some consequences that seem to have been good—or rather without it those consequences could not have followed and the present world must have been different. If the historian attempts to set events in their place in the general scheme of history and at the same time to pass judgment on them, he cannot avoid the platitudinous complacency of saying that everything has been “a good thing” in the long run.

The truth is that even the historian's value-judgments are really judgments of fact, and should be frankly recognised as such. He cannot be consistent in his judgments but must praise in one place what he condemns in another. This is true not merely of events but also of persons in the past. Ideas of right and wrong have varied in the course of ages, and there is little advantage in judging men of one age by the standard of another. The historian may attempt to make history its own judge at each stage by commending those



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men who were progressive and those policies which met the necessities of their own day. But this attempt results in a peculiar "historian's morality", which proves upon analysis to be merely a justification of everything that has succeeded. In an elementary form this is generally realised as in the common saying that a revolt is always unsuccessful, because if it succeeds it becomes a revolution. But in fact this fictitious set of values, based upon success and not upon merit, runs all through history, for it is only after the event that we can tell whether something was progressive or whether it met the necessities of its day.

A real antithesis exists between conservative and radical, because they represent two different types of mind, but not between progressive and reactionary, for to have been progressive merely means to have been on the side which had the larger share in moulding the next generation and which therefore seems to have anticipated the future. Until the twentieth century all revolutions claimed to be reverting to the better life and ideals of an earlier age; it was only afterwards that men were able to see that they introduced something essentially new. Had they failed, not merely immediately but in the long run also, they would have seemed to us to have been abortive or reactionary movements. Much that we condemn in the past as having been reactionary and therefore doomed to failure might easily have proved to be as new and stimulating had it ever come to its full development. Historians are peculiarly liable to praise the policy of one ruler on the grounds that, even though it does not quite accord with our ideas, it was the best thing that could have happened at that time, and to condemn a similar policy at another time as having been belated or premature or impracticable in view of the circumstances. The only real difference between them is that one succeeded where the other failed; had the position been reversed the future would have been different, and with it our opinion of them.

As a result of his training the historian usually has a concrete and somewhat unphilosophical mind; he is more at

home in weighing facts and criticising evidence than in analysing the nature and quality of his method and his vision. Nevertheless, though he may not fully understand the reasons why he is unable to achieve complete objectivity, he is aware of the dangers which accompany any attempt at making broad generalisations or at surveying the whole field of history, for he knows by experience that this involves dangerous simplification, false foreshortening, and the making of unverifiable hypotheses. As a result he prefers to specialise and to concentrate upon limited periods where he may hope to master all the available evidence and by constant contact with the original authorities to keep in touch with actual facts and to see them in all their vitality and complexity. Within such an enclosed field, cut off from any reference or perspective relationship to the present day, he may, indeed, obtain an almost objective vision; by the exercise of all his skill and ingenuity he may discover what men did and thought, and may describe a period as it was, without the need of judging its value or of speculating on its ultimate consequences.

Even here however his interpretation is liable to a slight distortion, though it is the reverse of those which have been already considered and arises from the fact that he is outside that which he is studying. Since the facts are present to his mind simultaneously, or at least not in the chronological order in which they were unfolded before contemporaries, it is practically impossible for him not to make events and characters more consistent than they appeared to be in real life. Knowing the outcome of an event he naturally emphasises in it all those elements tending to that result, whereas contemporaries had no such principle of implicit selection; they were surprised and puzzled at each step, failing to see its real relationship with those that had gone before and not surmising its implications for the future.

Similarly, knowing all the facts of a man's life, or at least all such as have been recorded, the historian bases upon them his conception of his character and sees it as a continuous

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development; but contemporaries had not this foreknowledge, with the result that each revelation of a new facet surprised them and seemed inconsistent. It is easy to idealise the men of former days and to praise them for having lived up to their principles or followed a consistent policy, because such principles are largely what we read into them after the event. Yet while the historian can hardly help depicting character as more consistent than it appeared to contemporaries, he can certainly never avoid making it more simple than it really was. For he knows only that small part of it which has been revealed in actions and in sayings, and must disregard all the submerged depths which never came to the surface and which have therefore left no trace upon history. That is why historical characters are so often less convincing and less life-like than fictitious ones; the historian must do the best he can with the inadequate evidence that has come down to him and dare not invent missing traits even though they are necessary to give a full appearance of rotundity.

On the whole, however, these are minor difficulties and the historian may feel that the comparative sureness of his knowledge and his vision within a limited period compensates him for the sacrifice of larger views and wider surveys. Yet surveys and syntheses must be made. It is no use for the historian to plead their necessary imperfections as his excuse for not attempting them, for that is merely to abandon them to those who have neither the equipment necessary for making them nor the training which reveals their inadequacy. The various difficulties and distortions which have been considered above prevent the achievement of finality in history, but are not after all very serious in practice. That generalisations are finally unverifiable does not mean that they cannot be checked to a great extent; that they are ultimately based upon falsehoods and fallacies does not mean that they will not serve for ordinary purposes; that they are always transitory does not mean that they are not worth making.

Moreover, the reason why historical syntheses finally break down is not so much that they are untrue as that they are by

their nature incomplete. The facts of history always escape from our grasp when we attempt to reduce them to an orderly scheme, because that scheme is merely our rationalisation of something which we know in part and comprehend imperfectly. There can be no such thing as a single or final interpretation of history; even apart from all the differences derived from the historian's personality and from the angle of his vision, the meaning of the facts themselves will vary according to the aspect of history which we are studying. The same facts and events enter into the history of different nations, yet the value of the events and the very significance of the facts will vary in each case, because their context and their background are different. Nor can this be remedied by writing cosmopolitan or international history, for that is no more "the whole truth" than are the others; it may valuably supplement but cannot entirely displace sectional histories. Each has its part to play and each reveals some aspect of the relationship of past events. History is one, but to our imperfect apprehension it appears to be many-sided and even self-contradictory. Provided that the facts are not misrepresented and that the different schemes of history are recognised as complementary and not regarded as self-sufficient or mutually exclusive, it is all to the good that men should regard history in as many different ways as possible.

There still remains the danger of all wide views and general surveys, that, by omitting details and reducing history to a series of broad tendencies, they may separate events from their context and give a false impression of the nature of the historical process. Even if the historian is not led astray himself, how shall he convey the reality to his readers? The greatest art of all in the writing of history is to convey all the complexity, the indeterminateness and the cross-currents of the past in a narrative that shall itself be lucid and clear-cut.



## III

The deficiencies and the dangers of history are so manifest that it is natural to ask, Can such an unsatisfactory subject have any value, or even any justification? Its foundation is so uncertain, its technique so variable, its interpretation so subjective and its conclusions so unreliable, that cynics have remarked that, whatever else may be true, history at least must be false. Yet while it is thus hampered as a science from ever achieving complete truth of fact, it must always aspire towards it and therefore must remain inferior as art to the purer forms of creative literature, which can abandon fact in the wider interests of truth of value.

Moreover, while it is undoubtedly true that a knowledge of history has in many ways influenced the course of events—for what men think about the past does modify their attitude towards the present—it is at least open to question whether this influence has hitherto been for the good. History has tended to degenerate into mere antiquarianism or into propaganda; it has led to the fictitious idealisation of the past; it has confused men's rational judgment in the present by emotional appeals to past situations or by legalistic quotation of inapplicable precedents; it has fostered sectional loyalties instead of forwarding the unity of mankind. If history is always to provide analogies and precedents, based upon uncertain facts and applied with doubtful validity, it would indeed be better that men should resolutely put it behind them.

No doubt even in this case history would still continue to be studied. Delight in the solution of puzzles or in the accumulation of knowledge will always lead some men to the investigation of the past. History may be justified as an amusement for historians, but if it is to establish any claim upon a wider public it must show that it has some general utility. It is true that scientific research in every sphere must be disinterested, facts must be studied as if they had no use, investigations made without thought of their possible appli-

cation, because only so is a clear judgment and an undistorted view attainable; but the final reason why such research is worth while is that it may contribute to man's understanding of the structure, physical or metaphysical, of the universe and thereby to the improvement of his position in it. That natural science has improved man's understanding and his power is undeniable, but the harm that has been caused by history is perhaps more patent than the good. The world to-day may seem to provide the justification of science but the condemnation of history.

The fundamental reason why men study history is not the hope of bettering themselves or others by it, but the fact that they have a natural curiosity about the past. They want to know what men were like in other times and place, how they lived and thought, what they did and felt, and whether they really resembled us to-day. They may look mainly to the external appearance of an age or to the individual actors therein; their interest may be romantic or social or psychological; but all agree in wanting to know about something which took place under conditions unlike our own. To satisfy this curiosity in himself and in others is the first object of the historian, and even if he did nothing more he would have justified his existence. To provide recreation for his fellows is no unworthy object of a man's labour.

If this were all the benefit that could be looked for from history, it would remain a subject for a limited number of specialists and for amateurs to pursue in their spare time. History might perhaps establish its claim to be a small technical school at a university, but it could not rightly become one of the major educational subjects. Nor have historians ever acquiesced in such a view of their functions; they have always maintained that the object of historical teaching is not mainly to produce historians but to educate citizens. And they would add that the course of study intended to produce the latter will also be that best fitted to prepare the former, because on the one hand the wider the interests and general culture of the intending historian the greater will be his

aptitude and understanding even within his chosen field, and on the other hand there is no one who would not benefit by a certain acquaintance with the discipline and technique of serious historical study. That is a high claim, and, if it is to be substantiated, we must enquire in what way the study of history may contribute to the formation of a man's mind.

While it has generally been admitted in the past that history should form a part of education, the reasons given for this have varied considerably. History has been regarded as a school of political or of ethical wisdom, in which men might learn to follow the great examples of former days. But we have learned to distrust historical analogies and we can see the impoverishment which history itself suffers through this conception of its functions. It leads to an excessive emphasis on individuals and to a magnification of certain periods, supposedly edifying or instructive, out of all proportion to their actual importance in the course of history or their contribution to the making of our world. It leads also to that idealisation of the past, which is perhaps the most pernicious consequence of a little knowledge of history, since it results in practice not in reverence for our fathers but in depreciation of our contemporaries. Rather than this, we should learn to estimate both at their true value; one of the chief advantages which ought to follow from a knowledge of history is liberation from the spell of the past.

In the same way history has sometimes been regarded mainly as an inspirer of patriotism. But this leads to consequences no less disastrous. History is corrupted by being presented always with a national bias, and by seeming, even within that limited sphere, to be concerned only with great men and noble deeds. Not merely is the history of other nations and the life of ordinary men overlooked, but, since few deeds are wholly noble, falsification, if not of fact at least of light and shade, becomes inevitable. Patriotism itself suffers from this method of writing history; for most of what commonly passes for patriotism is simply mass-emotion superseding the never strong operation of the individual reason—not a virtue

to be encouraged, but an instinct to be checked and trained by education. Moreover, a love of one's country that rests upon the glories of its past is of little worth; it will only endure if it is rooted in the present and embraces all its imperfections. Patriotism, if it is to survive in the modern world, must become realistic and critical. History may prove a powerful help towards the formation of such a new ideal of patriotism, but it will not be by the writing of patriotic history.

To-day the ethical, political and patriotic views of the function of history have largely given place to another—that a knowledge of history is necessary for the understanding of our surroundings. Evolutionary ideas have shown us that all life is a process of change and growth. No action or idea or institution arises spontaneously; to understand it we must discover its past. Indeed it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the enquiry "what something is" is synonymous with the enquiry "how it came to be". And this is true not merely of those institutions which pride themselves upon their slow and continuous growth, but also of revolutionary ideas which claim to be new departures but which also are shaped in the womb of the past. There are no new beginnings: the world is strewn with relics which have come down from the past, and even new things owe their particular form to the circumstances and time of their origin. The world to-day can only be understood in the light of its history.

Such a view of the function of history provides it with a wider scope and greater utility than did the older ideas. All men need some understanding of the world they live in and therefore all men should know some history. At the same time history would still suffer from a falsification of its real proportions. The immediate past would bulk too large in our view, for, however firmly we believe in the unity of history and insist that the present is the product of the interaction of all events that have ever happened, we cannot deny that, for the purpose of understanding the present, recent events are of more significance than those of the remote past. History



would be foreshortened, with the early periods treated in broad outline, gradually increasing in detail and in definiteness towards the foreground. Such a method of writing history has great advantages and will always be used for certain purposes—indeed in another sense it is necessitated by the fact that we possess more evidence for later than for earlier periods—but it is open to the objections, already recounted, of being an over-simplification and a tendentious interpretation of the past.

This view of the function of history requires therefore to be supplemented by another. We go to history to learn not merely how the present came to be, but how anything comes to be—in fact, what is the nature of the historical process. And for this purpose the history of recent times is in many ways inferior to that of more distant ages where it is possible to study a section of the past in itself and without reference to to-day. Moreover, acquaintance with men and manners of very different ages and types will stimulate imagination and widen interests and enlarge our sympathies. When presented with a world whose ideas and values were wholly unlike our own, even the dullest student will be forced to think for himself. Every programme of historical education should comprise three elements—an outline of all human history, a fuller knowledge of more recent times, and the detailed study of at least one period, preferably one which seems at first sight to have little bearing on the present.

Despite all the deceptions to which it is liable and the abuses to which it gives rise, history may claim to be indispensable. It cannot be disputed that an understanding of the world to-day, of its institutions and ideas and peoples, and of the way in which they may react upon each other, is essential. The more we know about our circumstances, the more control we shall have over them. Such knowledge we may hope to derive from history and from history alone. But even here the use of history is for the individual; it cannot be exercised by specialists on behalf of the community. There can be no such thing as applied history, and, though

there is an ever-increasing knowledge of the past, each man must work out for himself the bearing of that knowledge upon public and private concerns.

Besides the acquisition of this knowledge there is another consequence of historical study, a value which lies not in the result but in the process, not in knowing but in learning. Every subject creates a peculiar temper of mind in those who study it, a method of approach which extends beyond its own sphere and influences their whole attitude towards the world. The historian's approach is different from that of the philosopher or scientist or classical scholar. Where they are concerned primarily with questions of value he keeps close to fact. Where they ask, Is this true or good or beautiful? he merely asks, Is it? or, Has it been? His first concern is not whether an event was good or bad, an idea wise or foolish, but simply whether the event took place, whether the institution existed, whether men believed in the idea. Many of the most powerful forces in the past have been based upon mistakes or lies, but the historian learns that to demonstrate their falsehood is not to disprove their importance: in history to explain is never to explain away.

The historian also learns something of the complex relationship of events, the interwoven network of cause and effect, the continuous process of development and change where there is no possibility of halting or of making a fresh start, yet where nothing is wasted and even the mistakes of one generation contribute to the making of the next. He learns no less how small an extent the present occupies in comparison with the historical past, how small an extent the historical past occupies in comparison with geological or astronomical time. If we are sometimes depressed at the ease with which man reverts to the manners and emotions of his primitive forefathers, history may remind us how few generations separate us in comparison with the whole existence of man and suggest that the wonder is rather that in the short span of which we have record there should be any traces of progress at all.

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From such a contemplation of the past—and also from the realisation of the unexplored vastness of the future—we may learn not to over-estimate, for good or ill, the importance of the brief moment which is the present. And with this sense of proportion should go an increasing tolerance towards our contemporaries and a greater power of possessing our souls in patience. The issues and opinions of to-day are no more firmly held and no more hotly debated than those of the past, which now seem so remote and lifeless. In all ages optimists have looked forward to the dawning of a new and better day, while pessimists have prophesied the imminent coming of the end. In all ages men have quarrelled and misrepresented and maligned one another, yet from a distance we can see that justice and truth and goodness were not confined to either side. There never has been a man so evil or so misguided that there was not something to be said in his favour if men had only taken the trouble to understand him. There never has been a cause, whether political or intellectual or religious, so mistaken or so bigoted or so foolish that it had not some basis and some justification.

The controversies which divided men so sharply in the past often strike us as trivial and childish. Their issues are dead, their dilemmas unreal; we wonder how it was that men failed to see the solution which appears so simple and so obvious to us to-day. But if we penetrate the surface of particular deeds and words to the reality beneath, we usually find that the essential problem is still with us, changed in form but undiminished in intensity. Great controversies come to an end not because their problems have been solved but because they have been rendered obsolete by changes in the modes of thought. The views which once divided men look small in comparison with those that united them; but this appearance is due to the distance of our view, to the changes of emphasis, and to the fact that we no longer share the background against which those differences become significant. We cannot doubt that in the future our own controversies, so passionate and apparently so fundamental, will

likewise appear unimportant as our underlying similarity manifests itself. No man can wholly escape from his own age; though he rejects the conclusions of contemporary thought, he must still formulate his ideas and express his views according to its terms. Contemporary differences are slight in comparison with historical ones; one man to-day may claim intellectual kinship with the thirteenth century, another with the eighteenth, but actually they have more in common with each other than either has with Aquinas or with Voltaire. It is right that men should differ and quarrel with each other and even that they should feel those differences to be of vital importance, else there would be no incentive to thought or to change; but it is well also that they should sometimes realise both their essential agreement with their opponents and also the transitoriness of all particular controversies and methods of thought. To see things *sub specie historiae* is the best substitute we have who cannot see them *sub specie aeternitatis*.

No less than the knowledge of historical facts and the cultivation of a historical frame of mind, an acquaintance with historical method has a value for all men and not merely for those who intend to become professed historians. Any adequate scheme of historical education must include some work on original sources, some attempt not merely to learn but also to write history. The reading of history entirely in secondary sources almost inevitably leads to a misunderstanding of the historical process, for, as we have seen, the historian cannot help schematising his material and simplifying its relationships. Only when he attempts to grapple with the subject for himself will the student realise its full complexity; he will make many mistakes and will think that he has wasted much valuable time, but he will have learned, not least from those very mistakes, more about history and about historians than the wisest teacher could have imparted to him.

Merely to read history would give men a knowledge of the facts and something of the historical mind, but the only



mental qualities which would be trained thereby are memory and pictorial imagination. If this were all that history had to offer, it could only claim a very subordinate place in an educational curriculum. Memory and pictorial imagination might be as well or better trained elsewhere, and a necessary minimum of facts required for the understanding of the present could quickly be imparted and its extension left as an occupation for the leisure hours of those who cared to do so. But in the investigation and writing of history a far wider range of powers is called into play. The different elements in the historian's task, descriptive writing, interpretation of facts, critical investigation of sources, attempts to understand ideas and to sympathise with men, develop and train very diverse qualities of mind—balanced judgment, imaginative sympathy, power of selection and of synthesis, intellectual honesty in the presentation of a case, urbanity of view and of expression, ability to write clearly, and a breadth of interest that must embrace all knowledge and all manifestations of life.

The most characteristic feature of a historical training is criticism, and there is nothing more generally needed in the world to-day. The scientist learns to criticise observation, the lawyer verbal evidence, but criticism of written sources is the special field of the historian. Perhaps the greatest benefit which might be derived from a more widespread study of history to-day would be a diffusion of the knowledge of critical principles. For there is little benefit in teaching men to think correctly and for themselves, unless they have an assured basis of information upon which their judgment and reason may work. But to-day men are completely in the hands of newspapers for their knowledge of contemporary affairs, and newspapers have most of the deficiencies of historical documents. Their contents are sometimes intentionally biased and misleading, always and necessarily incomplete and out of proportion. Direct falsification of news is not perhaps a serious danger, except during times of war or special stress, and articles containing obvious

propaganda are easily discounted; but there remains the enormous power of distortion through the selection of news and the emphasis thrown upon it. We can reject the interpretation put upon affairs by our newspapers, but if the wells are poisoned by the suppression or skilful distortion of facts we are helpless, because unaware of our own helplessness. A knowledge of historical method cannot remedy this, but it will make us aware of it and so put us upon our guard. Only when men learn systematically to criticise their newspapers, to search for every possible interested tendency, to discount all judgments of character and motive and interpretation, and to doubt the adequacy, if not the veracity, of all statements of fact, will they avoid being swept away by the dangerous mass-movements of opinion, which appear to be increasing in extent and in frequency and which constitute the most serious and most degrading menace to rational civilisation to-day.

But we require to criticise not merely the statements of our newspapers, our statesmen and our propagandists, but also to investigate more closely the current use of words and of ideas. It is a commonplace that words may be misleading unless we consider the ideas which they are intended to convey, for words are used in different senses and a similarity of words may conceal a divergence of idea or a difference of words conceal an identity of underlying meaning. The study of history will soon convince that this is no less true of ideas themselves, as well as of facts and of values, which must always be considered in their actual setting, for otherwise they will become misleading or meaningless. Collective and general statements about groups of people need to be split up into their component elements and brought down to earth by reference to individual men. Ideas cannot be properly understood in the abstract but must be considered against the background of the whole outlook and mentality of the particular person who is using them. Values can only be apprehended in relation to some particular object. As we realise the difficulty of discovering the truth and the constant

need for individual reference, we shall become less ready to apply our cant terms and ready-made judgments to our surroundings. Good and bad, sincere and hypocritical, reactionary and progressive—these, and countless other epithets of judgment like them, have in the majority of cases to which we apply them no real meaning, because we have forgotten that the individual must always be the final standard.

Though sanity and judgment, tolerance and a sense of proportion are qualities which should be trained by the study of history, it must be admitted that in practice they appear to be no commoner among historians than among other men. Some never learn to apply experience outside the sphere where it was originally gained, and thus their knowledge of the past remains separate from actual life and does not affect their attitude towards contemporary affairs. Others transfer their attitude towards the present back into the past and project into it the passions and the ideas of to-day, to the confusion of their judgment and their understanding of historical issues. Yet others are aware that history should modify their actions and their thoughts but misconceive the way in which it should do so.

The conscientious historian is so much concerned to describe the past impartially that there is danger of the atrophy of his power of making decisions in the present. Because he is concerned primarily to understand and not to judge the past, he may forget that understanding as a historian is after all only preliminary to judgment as an individual. Because he knows that nothing in the past is either wholly good or wholly bad and that every positive choice has entailed at least some negative loss, he may decline to choose between different courses of action in the present. Because he sees that in the complex interaction of the past no plan has ever turned out quite as was expected and that actions have often produced results unintended by their authors, he may come to the conclusion that all conscious planning and individual action is useless because we cannot tell what will be its result. Because he knows that a knowledge of the origin and develop-

ment of an idea or institution is essential for its understanding, he may come to think that such knowledge is sufficient also for its appreciation. It is only too easy to slip into the type of conservatism that substitutes the citing of precedents for the making of real judgments, or that believes that what is old is necessarily valuable or beautiful or worth preserving, or that, upon the ground that it is wisest to let events take their own course and to leave time to heal all wounds and right all wrongs and gloss over all mistakes, is content merely to let things slide.

Yet properly understood history is a potential force for good. Understanding of history will convince men of their own unimportance, of the incompleteness of their knowledge, and of the transitoriness of the circumstances, intellectual no less than material, of the contemporary world. It will provide them with a method of criticism by which to test the statements and ideas that are presented to them from all sides. It will give them some insight into the structure of the world, into the complexity of human life, the relationship of cause and effect, and the actual circumstances of to-day.

It may be said that these things could be developed as well by the study of some abstract subject or of the present without regard to the past. But the advantage of history for this purpose lies in its concreteness and in its breadth. History does not take abstract problems or imaginary situations but those which have actually arisen under the conditions of time and space; it deals with real human life, similar in kind to that of to-day, yet sufficiently remote to allow us, if we will, to remove it from the sphere of immediate emotional disturbance and to see it as a whole with consequences as well as causes. Moreover, if we go to history to learn and not to read our own ideas into it, we are brought into contact with a far wider range of thought and character and action than we could encounter in even the fullest life. History enlarges the field of our experience and thereby enables us to extend and to improve the basis upon which we make our



judgments and form our principles. History cannot give men the answers to the questions of to-day, but it may give them the understanding that will enable them to formulate those questions aright and the knowledge that is an essential preliminary to any attempt to find the answers.

For in the last resort history embraces all knowledge, and nothing that man has done or said or thought is alien to the historian's purpose. Art, literature, thought, science, discovery, industry, commerce, politics, war, individual and corporate life—all contribute to the fullness of history. The various arts and sciences must in practice be separated in order that through specialisation they may be brought to their highest development. When we attempt to bring them together again, there are two methods by which we may make a synthesis—the historical and the philosophical. Philosophy and history must both embrace the whole of human experience; philosophy arranges it according to its essential nature, history according to the order of its appearance. The philosopher is concerned with the analysis of the ideal relation of different forms of knowledge and creation, the historian with the description of the actual connection between these forms in the development of the human race.

History is concerned not merely with great men, noble actions, successful events, good institutions, true ideas, but with everything that has any bearing on the life of man. To-day there is a tendency perhaps to concentrate upon the petty, the ludicrous and the sordid—a tendency which will one day seem as curious as that of an earlier generation to idealise the past, but which is easily explicable from the conditions of to-day. The “debunking” of history is not entirely the result of cynicism or irreverence—salutary though irreverence may sometimes be—but is in part a method of defence against the modern world. In an age when old ideals have perished and new ones have been prematurely nipped in the bud, when the humanist conception of civilisation is dying and we are not sure whether we like the scientific one which promises to replace it, when mankind seems to have lost

his sense of direction and knows not whither he desires to go nor how he is to get there, when we can seriously question whether more harm is not done by well-meaning idealism than by sheer incompetence, when finally there lowers above us the never distant possibility of another catastrophe in which not merely we ourselves must perish but everything that constitutes civilisation as we know it—in such a day man does not require inspiration but reassurance. And history replies by telling him not of the greatness of man in the past and of his achievements, but of his littleness and of his mistakes. If man has survived so much already, perhaps he may even yet survive to-day. Only by a frank recollection of the worst from the past can we find courage with which to face the future; only from a knowledge of despair dare we believe that there is still hope.