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978-0-521-09567-9 - Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship

Herbert Butterfield

Excerpt

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## I

## THE HISTORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

## I. ITS RISE AND DEVELOPMENT

The history of any science is calculated to throw considerable light on the nature of scientific enquiry and on the processes that lead to scientific discovery. It helps us to disengage those factors outside the science itself which may have affected the development of any branch of the subject—now the improvement in industrial technique; now the necessities of war; now the progress of mathematics, for example. By the use of history the scientist may become more conscious of the forces that are liable to affect his work, more alive to the nature of the methods he is using, more sensible of the direction in which he is going, more cognisant of the limitations under which he labours, more aware of the things which ought to be regarded with relativity. If to all the other perceptions of the scientist were added an internal knowledge of the history of his own subject, that combination would be capable of producing a higher state of awareness and a greater elasticity of mind.

Lord Acton, at the end of his life, set out to illustrate the new place which history had come to hold in the realm of the intellect, and the change it had produced in the structure of human thought. In this connection he pointed out more than once that there were now two ways in which every branch of science was to be studied: first by its own forms of technical procedure, and secondly by an examination of its history.<sup>1</sup> If all this is open to dispute in the case of the natural sciences, there are independent grounds for asserting its validity and for stressing its particular application when the science in question is actually that of the historian. Our knowledge of the past is

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge University Library, Add. 5011, 341: 'Each science has to be learned by a method of its own. But also by one and the same method, applicable to all, which is the historical method.' Cf. *ibid.* 390: 'History is not only a particular branch of knowledge, but a particular mode and method of knowledge in other branches.' See also pp. 97–8 below.

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seriously affected if we learn how that knowledge came into existence and see the part which historical study itself has played in the story of the human race. Indeed, since there exists a science or a technique which we call the history of historiography, perhaps the best way to explain even this is the historical way—that is to say, by showing how the subject came to develop and what has been happening to it in recent times.

First of all we may say that the history of historiography is not merely the study of past historians. The Renaissance humanists, in their researches into classical literature, did not neglect the historical writers of the ancient world. Before the end of the sixteenth century we meet with an *Histoire des Histoires*,<sup>1</sup> but such books for a long time were a mere rope of sand, providing comments only on a succession of individual authors. In 1694 Edmund Bohun reissued a work, then over half a century old, on *The Method and Order of Reading both Civil and Ecclesiastical Histories*, by Degory Wheare, the first Camden Professor of History in Oxford. Bohun added a Preface in which, after describing Wheare's plan, he declared: 'I am very much tempted to alter his title and to call this Piece, *The History of the Greek and Latin Historians*.'<sup>2</sup> Treatises pur-

<sup>1</sup> Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinière, *Histoire des Histoires, avec l'idée de l'Histoire accomplie* (Paris, 1599). See further, Appendix 1, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> See 'The Preface to the Reader'. This edition includes 'Mr Dodwell's Invitation to Gentlemen to acquaint themselves with Antient History', which, in complete contrast with La Popelinière, urges the absolute superiority of the Ancients even in the art of war. 'We improve only on the Invention of those Barbarous Nations which overran the Roman Empire upon the decay of [its] Politics and Military Skill. . . . So far we are from superstructing, as is thought, on the Inventions of the Antients themselves. For as the Romans were decayed when they were overcome. . . . so the Greek Commonwealth were decayed and ruined long before. Thus it comes to pass that the principal Excellencies of both the Greek and Roman Constitutions are so far from being ingredient in our modern Discipline, as that indeed they are not capable of being now retrieved otherwise than by antient Monuments.' I have discussed this whole attitude to historical study and the time-process in *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London, 1940), 26–41.

A. Momigliano, in 'Ancient history and the Antiquarian', *Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici* (Roma, 1955), 75–6, writes: 'To the best of my knowledge, the idea that one could write a history of Rome which should replace Livy and Tacitus was not yet born in the early seventeenth century. The first Camden Praelector of history in the University of Oxford had the statutory duty of commenting on Florus and other ancient historians (1622). . . . Both in Oxford and in Cambridge Ancient History was taught in the form of a commentary on ancient historians.'

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porting to deal with historical method are older—and they were much more numerous before 1700—than one might imagine; but here again we are liable to be misled by pretentious titles. The Abbé Lenglet du Fresnoy produced his *Méthode pour étudier l'Histoire* in 1713, and prefaced it with a critique of well over a score of men who had written on this subject in the two preceding centuries; and amongst these he gave an important place to the famous Jean Bodin.<sup>1</sup> He closed his work with a catalogue of the principal historians and appended some critical remarks concerning their literary achievement. On the other hand, it need hardly be said that the history of historiography is not by any means to be regarded as a branch of literary criticism. Although the eighteenth century showed an increasing awareness of the importance of the history of the arts and sciences, it generally left the historical writers to annotated bibliographies or gave them fuller treatment only in the general histories of literature.

The history of historiography seemed at one time to mean—and with many people still appears to mean—something like a chronological series of encyclopaedia-articles on individual historians, with a résumé of their careers and achievements (and a grouping into ‘schools’ or ‘movements’) after the manner of old-fashioned text-books in the history of literature. It seems to be the case that, in respect of the history of natural science, this kind of encyclopaedic compilation has even seemed at times to serve an immediate purpose; and at a certain point in the proceedings it has ranked as a useful auxiliary. Things have been advanced a stage when some scholar, examining the masses of obscure books and minor treatises, many of which may have been unopened for centuries, has produced a comprehensive survey of a considerable field—a guide to the vast literature which is available for the research

<sup>1</sup> Lists of early works on historical method are to be found also in J. G. Meusel's edition of Struvius, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 1, i (Lipsiæ, 1782), 2–11; and J. C. Gatterer, *Handbuch der Universalhistorie*, 1 (Göttingen, 1761), 58–60.

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student. Even in the history of natural science, however, it is not clear that, if there had been a more conscious control of policy, this cumbrous intermediate process could not have been eliminated. When the history of historiography is conceived in this primitive manner, it is very easy, and very proper, to say that students would do better to read a few of the great historical works themselves—read Gibbon, Ranke and Macaulay, for example—than to wade through another book about books, spoon-feeding themselves with second-hand knowledge. In reality, the protest against the encyclopaedic and biographical treatment of the history of historiography is as old as the demand for the subject itself, and goes back to the eighteenth century.

It was important that the men of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment set their face against the older kind of rambling chronicle-histories, and against the kind of compilations which merely accumulated disjointed facts. They even went to the opposite extreme, so that narrative itself came to be at a discount and required the Romantic movement to give it a new stimulus at a later time. The apostles of the Age of Reason hankered after a kind of history which both they and we would call analytical—the kind which subjects the movements of the past or the processes of change to scientific examination, as though they were phenomena in astronomy or physics. It is just at some such stage of conscious transition that the student, sensible of his conflict with his predecessors, and highly aware of the fact that he represents something new, will begin to take stock of the general position, and to see in the contrast between the past and the present something which requires to be explained. As Srbik has pointed out, the historian himself is an historical creature, and in the latter part of the eighteenth century he was beginning to take a more detached view of himself as existing within history.<sup>1</sup> Out of these two things—the new view of historical study and the new consciousness in the

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Ritter von Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte vom deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart*, 1 (München und Salzburg, 1950), 1.

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historian himself—the demand for a genuine history of historiography arose.

In fact the need for such a thing was being felt, and the call for it was repeatedly made, before anybody ever set out to supply the article itself. The whole story centres around the university of Göttingen in the decades immediately before and immediately after the year 1800. It goes back to the time when what we call the ‘academic historians’ were beginning to take command of the ship, and the famous German school of history was just coming into existence. The Göttingen professors reflected on the aims and methods of history; they surveyed the state of the whole study as though it were a science; they measured the progress taking place in Germany and in other countries; and they developed a whole group of auxiliary techniques.<sup>1</sup> The demand for a history of historiography emerged in a natural way out of the discussion of just these problems, which themselves were close to the practical world. The cry came as soon as the movement towards a more technical kind of history—the movement which was to achieve such great victories in the nineteenth century—had secured a firm kind of base, namely a foothold in a university.

The first of this series of Göttingen history professors, J. C. Gatterer, wrote in 1760, that is to say, at the very beginning of the German movement:

I do not know why this branch of learning has suffered the unfortunate fate of not having admirers and practitioners who up to now ever thought of producing a HISTORY OF HISTORY worth reading.

He mentioned the names of one or two people who had seen the necessity for such a work and had made an attempt to meet the case; but these experiments had been so inadequate that they only magnified the urgency of what he described as one of the greatest needs of historical science at this time.<sup>2</sup> Gatterer was moved in all this partly by utilitarian motives, though

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter II, below.

<sup>2</sup> *Handbuch der Universalhistorie*, I (1761), I.

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he does not appear to have left us an explanation of all that was in his mind. He thought, for example, that the planning of an historical work—the lay-out of a treatise on universal history in particular—would be improved if one made a methodical comparison of the policies followed by historians in the past.<sup>1</sup> He was interested also in the general problem of historical criticism, and deprecated the casual ways of reviewers. In 1772 he declared that from the very beginning of journalism the critics had been making a serious mistake in their general treatment of historical literature. Confronted with a new work on some specific subject they ought to have stated first what the ancient writers had achieved in this field of study, then what had been added to knowledge since ‘the reinstatement of the sciences’ (that is to say, since what we call ‘the Renaissance’). Finally they ought to have pointed out whether the new book had made any further contribution to this body of knowledge or whether indeed it did not come short of what somebody somewhere had previously achieved. Journalists had gone wrong on this point from the very beginning, however, and what they had failed to achieve would be made good now, said Gatterer, if there were a proper history of historiography. In fact, every branch of science ought to be supplied with its history in the way that had happened so fortunately already in the case of physiology.<sup>2</sup>

In 1785 his colleague, Schlözer, called attention to the same need; and, in attempting a brief sketch of the History of World-History, he noted that the subject had not been adequately worked up as yet; though he hoped that a more

<sup>1</sup> *Versuch einer allgemeinen Weltgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1792), Vorrede. H. Wesendonck, *Die Begründung der neueren deutschen Geschichtsschreibung durch Gatterer und Schlözer* (Leipzig, 1876), 209. Cf. *ibid.* 63–4, 104; F. X. von Wegele, *Geschichte der deutschen Historiographie* (München und Leipzig, 1885), 762, 787, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Allgemeine Uebersicht der ganzen teutschen Litteratur in den letzten 3 Jahren’ in *Historisches Journal*, 1 (Göttingen, 1772), 269–70. ‘Ihren Mangel, was das Vergangene anbetrifft, könnten ausführliche Geschichten jeder einzelnen Wissenschaft ersetzen, wenn wir sie nur über alle Wissenschaften so hätten, wie über die Physiologie von dem Herrn<sup>n</sup>. von Haller. Also ist auch von dieser Seite überall nichts als Mangel und Dürftigkeit.’

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comprehensive survey would be carried out by somebody or other, sooner or later.<sup>1</sup> In his edition of the Russian chronicle of Nestor in the early years of the nineteenth century, this man, Schlözer, provided a remarkable illustration of the way in which the exposition of a subject could be bound up with the history of the historiography of that subject. In 1811, Schlözer's pupil, Friedrich Rühls, said that there was a palpable need for an intelligent history of historical study—'not a mere enumeration of the various historical writers and their books', but a work of a genuinely fundamental character, which should show 'the development and the shaping of historical research and historical writing' amongst the various peoples. Such a work, he said, must make constant reference to the way in which outside factors and external events influence the historian; it must point out the relations between history and the other sciences; and it must show the effect which historical study itself has had on the course of human history. He added:

Not for a moment has any attempt ever been made to carry out such a work as this; for, in particular, the compilations on the history of literature are too paltry and too far from meeting the case.<sup>2</sup>

It was amongst the men who were devoted to what they called 'universal history' that the demand for a history of historiography arose. These Göttingen scholars produced highly-documented work in specialised fields, but when they discussed the issues of larger policy they functioned as what we should call 'general historians', bringing the whole range

<sup>1</sup> *Weltgeschichte nach ihren Haupt-Theilen*, I (Göttingen, 1785), 120, sect. VII, 'Geschichte der Weltgeschichte'.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Rühls, *Entwurf einer Propädeutik des historischen Studiums* (Berlin, 1811), 261. In the field of ancient history, however, Friedrich Creuzer had already published, in 1803, *Die historische Kunst der Griechen in ihrer Entstehung und Fortbildung*. A. Momigliano, in 'Friedrich Creuzer and Greek Historiography', *Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici*, 234, describes it as 'nothing more nor less than the first modern history of Greek historiography', and calls attention to the *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen* (which on 27 February 1804 devotes particular attention to this book), as well as pointing out, p. 242, Heyne's 'memoir on the origin of Greek historiography in the Göttingen *Commentationes* of 1799'.

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of the study under consideration. Rarely—and perhaps hardly even in the case of Ranke—have the higher strategies of the historian, and the relations of the parts of the study to the whole, been so consciously and comprehensively considered by directing minds. Furthermore, like Ranke and Acton, who are their lineal descendants, these men (though they had inadequate material to work upon) believed in ‘historical thinking’ as something like the counterpart of ‘scientific thought’. On the one hand they were in reaction against the superficialities of the Enlightenment, but on the other hand they were its disciples in that (like Ranke once more) they believed in the possibility of carrying history to higher levels of generalisation. Like Ranke, they were particularly interested in what they called ‘the interconnectedness of events’ and one of the books of Schlözer contains an essay under this very title.<sup>1</sup> As the case of Lord Acton would suggest, if the history of historiography is a hobby-horse, it is the hobby-horse of the general historian—even the ‘generalising’ historian. If it is a specialisation it is so not in the way that the microscopic study of a diplomatic episode is specialised, but rather after the manner of biochemistry, which employs particular techniques but has a wide range of subject-matter.

Even at this early stage in the story it was further realised that the man who studies the history of history must avoid the disjointed chronicle, the temptation to give a straggling, meaningless string of names. He must examine the internal development of historical scholarship, always relating it to movements in general history, to the progress of other sciences and to the conditioning circumstances which affect its fortunes. He must see, for example, how historical study corresponds to the form of a country’s constitution, to the state of public opinion, to the availability of evidence, and to the activity of universities, learned societies and periodicals. Some of the

<sup>1</sup> *Vorstellung der Universal-Historie*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, 1755), 255, ch. ii, ‘Vom Zusammenhange des Begebenheiten’. Cf. Schlözer, *Weltgeschichte*, 73–7, on the ‘Verbindung der welthistorischen Materie’; and L. Wachler, *Geschichte der historischen Forschung und Kunst*, 1 (Göttingen, 1812), Vorrede, vi.



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early attempts to show what the history of historiography ought to be like are little essays in general history which try to seize on the strategic factors in the story and are very sparing even in the use of proper names. And, though it is true that in this period the vision of the historian's objective had considerably outrun the ability to assemble the materials requisite for the proper execution of the design, the earliest samples (in essay form) of what the history of historiography might be like are interesting demonstrations of the way in which the idea of the mere 'chronicle' comes to be transformed into the idea of 'general history'.<sup>1</sup> Where once there had been a mere succession of names, a discussion of historians in sequence, we now find, for example, rough sketches of the way in which the Reformation affected historiography. We are shown the way in which it altered the place of historical study in German education and the way in which its controversies (because they were to a considerable degree historical) helped the development of a more scientific method. Since each religious group had necessarily driven the other to more intensive criticism, it was soon possible to reach the paradoxical conclusion that the most violent partisanship may serve the cause of impartial history itself.<sup>2</sup> Even in the eighteenth century, in fact, there is

<sup>1</sup> In his *Entwurf*, 261 ff., Friedrich Rühls has a chapter entitled 'Allgemeine Geschichte des historischen Studiums' in which he points out that the higher kind of historical writing depends on constitutional and political relationships and is impossible in despotic states. He quotes Johann von Müller for the view that great historians flourished in the ancient world only so long as the feeling of liberty prevailed, and that only in the Italian struggle for independence and in Great Britain had they found any worthy successors. By far the greatest majority of Arabian manuscripts, he says, are historical in their contents, but they display not the slightest notion of criticism. Luther helped history by making it more important in German education, and by setting the example in the use of the vernacular; but the Protestants were uncritical and it was the Catholics who set the example of criticism, especially the Jesuit, G. Henschen, in his profound researches into various of the old French kings. Already in the sixteenth century the mania for the collection of historical materials had started in France and Germany. Bodin increased the importance of history by showing how necessary it was for the study of law. Finally, the rise of political science contributed to the development of history, and here the works of Montesquieu and of various English writers were of special significance.

<sup>2</sup> See Friedrich Rehm, *Lehrbuch der historischen Propädeutik und Grundriss der allgemeinen Geschichte*, 2nd ed. (Marburg, 1850), 88–100, 'Geschichte der historischen

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a clear idea that the history of historiography is more than a chronicle and that it can be treated in the 'analytical' way that 'general history' requires.

In 1812 and 1820 another Göttingen student, Ludwig Wachler (inspired and assisted by still another Göttingen professor, Heeren), produced a two-volume work on the history of historical scholarship since the beginning of the sixteenth century. The volumes were part of a considerable series, also associated with Göttingen, which set out to provide a large-scale history of the arts and sciences.<sup>1</sup> Wachler was concerned to relate the historical writing of a given period to the general intellectual climate of the age, which he would describe in the introduction to the successive sections of his book. He saw that the history of universities, historical societies and periodicals was relevant to his theme.<sup>2</sup> At the same time he did not escape the tendency to encyclopaedic compilation and he, too, fell into the habit of setting out strings of names. This may explain why it was still possible for men to go on demanding a history of historiography which should be more than a study of successive individual authors.<sup>3</sup>

After this there was a pause, and perhaps there came a period when historians were sufficiently occupied in other fields; for at the next stage in the story it seemed to be the whole of the past that was requiring to be retraversed by the *Forschung und Kunst*. Rehm wrote in 1830, and seems to follow the Göttingen writers of the eighteenth century in his appeal for a history of historiography.

The Prague professor, K. J. Vietz, in *Das Studium der allgemeinen Geschichte nach dem gegenwärtigen Stand der historischen Wissenschaft und Literatur* (Prag, 1844), gives on pp. 170–211 what he calls 'Andeutungen zu einer Geschichte der Welthistorie und ihrer Literatur'. He, too, is influenced by the Göttingen school, and insists that the history of historiography must be more than a recapitulation of book-titles. On pp. 193–4 he sketches the history of the Four-Monarchy system which for some time had provided the basis for the periodisation of world-history.

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wachler, *Geschichte der historischen Forschung und Kunst seit der Wiederherstellung der litterarischen Cultur in Europa*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1812–20), in the series 'Geschichte der Künste und Wissenschaften'. See the Dedication to Professor Heeren. Hallam calls attention to this series on pp. vi–vii of his *Introduction to the Literature of Europe*, 1 (London, 1837), and says: 'So vast a scheme was not fully executed; but we owe to it some standard works, to which I have been considerably indebted'. On Wachler, see also p. 178, below.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. op. cit. II, 771–3.

<sup>3</sup> See Rehm and Vietz, p. 9, n. 2, above.