

General Editor's Introduction

By what right do historians claim that their reconstructions of the past are true, or at least on the road to truth? How much of the past can they hope to recover: are there areas that will remain for ever dark, questions that will never receive an answer? These are problems which should and do engage not only the scholar and student but every serious reader of history. In the debates on the nature of history, however, attention commonly concentrates on philosophic doubts about the nature of historical knowledge and explanation, or on the progress that might be made by adopting supposedly new methods of analysis. The disputants hardly ever turn to consider the materials with which historians work and which must always lie at the foundation of their structures. Yet, whatever theories or methods the scholar may embrace, unless he knows his sources and rests upon them he will not deserve the name of historian. The bulk of historical evidence is much larger and more complex than most laymen and some professions seem to know, and a proper acquaintance with it tends to prove both exhilarating and sobering—exhilarating because it opens the road to unending enquiry, and sobering because it reduces the inspiring theory and the new method to their proper subordinate place in the scheme of things. It is the purpose of this series to bring this fact to notice by showing what we have and how it may be used.

G. R. ELTON

In Memoriam

Charles Loch Mowat was born at Oxford on 4 October 1913; he died at Bangor, much too soon, on 23 June 1970. The son of the historian R. B. Mowat, he was himself a professional historian and teacher of history to his fingertips. At one time he appeared to have decided to make the United States his permanent home, but after a highly successful career at the Universities of Minnesota (1934–6), California (1936–50) and Chicago (1950–8) he returned to Britain, to become Professor of History at the University College of North Wales at Bangor, a post he held to his death. His interests concentrated on the most recent period of British history; the book that made him famous was *Britain between the Wars* (1955), still easily the most balanced and perceptive survey of the theme. When the Cambridge University Press discovered that the original version of the last volume of the *New Cambridge Modern History* had been commissioned too early and needed replacing, Mowat was the obvious man to approach, and he discharged his very difficult task with his accustomed brilliance, efficiency and speed (1961). Characteristically also he did it without causing the slightest friction or upsetting a single person—to anyone familiar with this kind of work a fantastic achievement.

There are few men like Charles Mowat, and the large circle of his friends will miss him to the end of their days. Worse still, his going is a shattering loss to the difficult area of history which he had made his own. Contemporary history is always fuller of problems than any other; it badly needed his knowledge, sanity, sense, and awareness of the need to reflect upon the methods which

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could render the accumulating mass of materials manageable and produce enduring understanding of matters in which the historian is himself bound to be involved. It is thus some small consolation that he has left us this book. With the fortitude so characteristic of him, he completed it under great difficulties during his last illness, a deed of quiet heroism. There were a few details to which he still wished to attend—a small correction here, a minor elaboration there. I had discussed the book with him throughout, and I have done what was necessary to carry out his wishes. Charles Mowat the friend and the historian is dead; Charles Mowat the teacher lives on in these pages, a shrewd, learned and inspiring helper to future generations of scholars.

G. R. E.

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CHAPTER 1

Since 1914: Recent or Contemporary?

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Historians must be able to produce sound and trustworthy history even in circumstances which do not permit them to see everything; there should be rules of scholarship applicable . . . to ensure that even a partial view of the evidence avoids the uncertainties of personal selection.

It is one of the shortcomings of more recent history that its practitioners, overwhelmed by the task of mere study, have done almost nothing so far to work out proper rules of this kind.¹

To the historian of recent times this challenge from the editor of this series may seem an irrelevance; or it may stir him to ask some fundamental questions about his work and his evidence. How does he know that his account of recent British history is a faithful portrayal of the times? What is his evidence? What of the mass of evidence which inevitably, being mortal, he has not used? What things which now seem or perhaps only in the future will seem important has he omitted, and what topics has he over-emphasised? The answers to these questions may emerge in what follows; but before getting down to cases it will be well to suggest other approaches and difficulties in the way of recent history.

Let us approach the history of Great Britain since 1914 with another set of questions. Suppose you are setting out to write a history of some part of this period, or of the whole of the last fifty or sixty years, or of some limited subject within the period, how will you start? What books will you go to first? What sources are there, as opposed to other people's accounts or impressions? How far can the value of the sources be tested? Or suppose you are a reader, and wish to read about the General Strike of 1926, or the period of 'appeasement', the blitz of London in 1940 or the post-

¹ G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1967), 89–90.

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war 'age of austerity', the Suez crisis of 1956 or the history of Harold Wilson's government, how far can you accept what you read? Is the book accurate, impartial, balanced? What are its sources?

The answer will depend on the subject and the book, but also on the author and the reader. Recent history, by which I mean history which is within the living memory of at least the older generation, means different things to readers of different ages. To the older reader it is part of his own private history; he lived through much or all of it, and he has his own personal memories (hazy or distorted or limited though they may be) by which to check the authenticity of what he reads. 'It wasn't like that at all', or 'I'd quite forgotten that', or 'I don't remember anything of that' may be his comments. On the other hand, to the younger man or woman the war of 1914-18 or the depression of the thirties, or the Second World War or the time of Harold Macmillan may be as remote as Egypt under the Pharaohs or the England of Elizabeth I. When does personal history start? One might say, for the sake of argument, around the age of twelve. Before that one remembers little about the national or world scene; childhood memories of school and holidays, brothers and sisters and friends, parents and aunts and uncles hold sway. After twelve one's private memories become mixed with a more public memory of the times; we may not be able to put a date, even a year, to a particular event, but we remember it as news. The credibility of recent history, therefore, depends more than the history of earlier times on the experience of the reader himself; his experience may give him much guidance, or little, in accepting or questioning what he reads. The same thing applies with greater or less force to the potential writer of recent history; personal experience and memory may put him on the track of research, or he may have to depend on the advice and writings of older men.

There is, however, another distinction to be made in our subject: it is really two, recent and contemporary history. Contemporary history is a term which is now much used, but with little precision as to its meaning. The Association of Contemporary

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Historians, founded in 1967, has taken the twentieth century for its domain. Other historians would take it back into the nineteenth century, as several articles in the *Journal of Contemporary History* (founded in 1966) have done. All these usages seem unjustifiable. The history of the First World War, between the wars, even the 1950s, is not contemporary to a great many people, as we have already seen. 1900 is seventy years ago, as far back as 1830, the time of the great Reform Bill, was to the man or woman of the year 1900. Moreover, as the twentieth century advances, the contemporaneity of its earlier years become even more remote. One can even quibble and say that no history can be contemporary: the present moment has passed as soon as we have lived it.

There is another meaning applied to contemporary history, one which has been developed with great force and persuasiveness by Geoffrey Barraclough. Contemporary history, to him, is a new age in history, following the end of 'modern history'. Its essential character is that it is world history: no part of the world is now unaffected by events anywhere else. 'One of the distinctive facts about contemporary history is that it is world history and that the forces shaping it cannot be understood unless we are prepared to adopt world-wide perspectives.'¹ When this new age began is open to debate; perhaps the whole period from 1895 to 1955 is the period of transition from modern to contemporary. Its marks are the dwarfing of Europe, the rise of the super-powers (Russia, the United States, China), the resurgence of new nation states in Africa and Asia following the end of the European empires, the threat of wars and civil wars between white and coloured peoples, the ever more rapid development and extension of industry and technology, the advances of science, including the exploration of space, the revolutionary discoveries in genetics and biology, the population explosion, the possibility of man's self-annihilation or self-poisoning, and the new moods of political revolution spreading from Maoist China or from Castro's Cuba, particularly among university students in almost every country. The list could

¹ G. Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (London, 1964), 2-4.

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easily be prolonged; in particular one might add the ever-accelerating rate of change in the world.¹

It is not, however, contemporary history in this sense with which we are here concerned, except indirectly. It is, rather, with that part of British history which can be called contemporary. Here, again, dating can be arbitrary. We might say that contemporary history begins at the point at which government records remain closed, which at present is thirty years; before that we are in the realm of recent history. Since each year's papers are opened thirty years later, this would give us a shifting date, 1940 at the time of publication of this book, 1941 the year following, and so forth. This is a clue to the starting-point of contemporary history, but it is hardly decisive. What matters is how much has been written about a particular time in an authoritative way, based on a variety of sources, even though without the benefit of government archives. It is a question of what has 'passed into history' in the sense of there being a generally agreed and fairly widespread view of the time. By this test the Second World War and the post-war Labour government of Clement Attlee (1945–51) belong to recent history; how much of the 1950s and 1960s—a period of almost twenty years—should still be called 'contemporary' is debatable. Contemporary history's essence is its open-endedness. Like the Mississippi, it rolls on without cease.

Hence in strictly contemporary history one begins by being completely at sea—in fact, worse than that, for at sea one should have adequate charts and tables. The subject is undefined. No historian has yet written about the period, selecting events, constructing a framework which his rivals and successors must either follow or controvert. All other historians, consciously or not, stand on their predecessors' shoulders; the contemporary historian must stand on his own feet. He must decide what to include, what to emphasise, without the benefit of documents or memoirs

¹ In addition to Barraclough's *Introduction*, see his article, 'Universal History', in H. P. R. Finberg (ed.), *Approaches to History* (London, 1962). Cf. C. L. Mowat, Ch. 1, 'Introductory survey: on the limits of modern history', *New Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. XII, 2nd edition, *The Shifting Balance of World Forces* (Cambridge, 1968).

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or any agreed account. He must go by his own memory of the years, reinforced by the reading of newspapers and periodicals, contemporary books discussing political, economic and social problems, reports of scientific advances and of technological innovations. His choice of material, more than that of other historians, will be highly personal, governed partly not by what seemed important two or three years ago but by what seems important now and which he thinks may be important in future years. Thus his account can only be provisional, a piece of historical journalism—and if it achieves that level it will have served its purpose well. For it is the journalist and the commentator who will, in one medium or another, be his principal source. And his first ally will be the editor and compiler; those who write annual reviews for newspapers or encyclopaedias or year books, and the authors of the *Annual Register*. The stored memories of computers will in future become more important for him.

We may, however, be exaggerating the contemporary historian's difficulties. The problems of 'sources', authenticity, accuracy, judgment which he faces are not very different from any other historian's. What he lacks are the memoirs and diaries which will later fill out, or perhaps distort, the narrative, and the use of the government's records. And these at best take time to get incorporated into the history of the period, and when they do are more likely to alter points of detail than the main outlines. What he chiefly lacks is perspective.

Recent history, at any rate—history from 1914 to whatever point the shifting line of acceptance has reached—is really conventional history, when it comes to its sources and standards. Writer and reader may be under some handicaps as compared to the historian of Victorian England; they may also have certain advantages. The sources of both are largely the same, and much that is said in the volume in this series for the period 1800–1914 applies equally to recent British history. The problem of selection, given the enormous mass of material evidence of all sorts surviving from the Victorian age and from the first half of the twentieth century, is similar.

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Similar also are the choices about the scope and kinds of recent history which may be written. Those historians who so far have written about the period on any considerable scale have attempted to give a narrative of the traditional sort, using the political history (including foreign policy and war) as the frame and working in economic and social history as the narrative proceeds. A. J. P. Taylor's *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), W. N. Medlicott's *Contemporary England, 1914–1964* (London, 1967), A. F. Havighurst's *Twentieth-Century Britain* (New York, 1962) and my *Britain between the Wars, 1918–1940* (London, 1955, paperback edition, 1968) follow this plan. Arthur Marwick's *Britain in the Century of Total War* (London, 1968) is more analytical in its attempt to assess the effects of the two wars, and inevitably brings together political, economic and social forces. On the other hand, *The Deluge* (London, 1965) by the same author is a history of the First World War, as experienced in Britain, with the political and military sides left out. No one has attempted an over-all history of that war, though Paul Guinn, in *British Strategy and Politics 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1965) has made a pioneering study of the inter-action of politics and military strategy. Both wars have had their military and naval history written in official volumes. For both there is also a notable series of books on the economic and industrial aspects, including studies of manpower and labour, agriculture, shipping and land transport, economic blockade, rationing and government controls.¹

In fact, historians of recent Britain have in general followed traditional lines. There have been valuable economic histories,² many diplomatic studies,³ a few rather light-hearted surveys⁴ of

¹ See below, Ch. 7, pp. 184–6.

² A. J. Youngson, *Britain's Economic Growth 1920–1966* (London, 1967); S. Pollard, *The Development of the British Economy 1914–1954* (London, 1962).

³ See F. S. Northedge, *The Troubled Giant: Britain among the Great Powers 1916–1963* (London, 1966), and W. N. Medlicott, *British Foreign Policy since Versailles, 1919–1963* (London, 1968) for guidance.

⁴ R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* (London, 1940; paperback, 1965); R. Blythe, *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties* (London, 1963).