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978-1-107-41839-4 - The World of Man: Prose Passages Chiefly from the Works
of the Great Historians, Classical and English

Chosen and Arranged by L. J. Cheney

Excerpt

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HISTORY

*So certainly, if a man meditate much upon the universal
frame of nature, the earth with men upon it (the divineness
of souls except) will not seem much other than an ant-hill,
whereas some ants carry corn, and some carry their young,
and some go empty, and all to and fro a little heap of dust.*

FRANCIS BACON, 1605

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PRAISE OF HISTORY

LORD BERNERS, Preface (1523) to his *Translation of Sir John Froissart's Chronicles* (1326–1400)

WHAT condign graces and thanks ought men to give to the writers of histories, who with their great labours have done so much profit to the human life. They shew, open, manifest and declare to the reader by example of old antiquity, what we should enquire, desire and follow, and also what we should eschew, avoid and utterly fly; for when we (being unexpert of chances) see, behold and read the ancient acts, gests and deeds, how and with what labours, dangers and perils they were gested and done, they right greatly admonish, ensign and teach us how we may lead forth our lives: and farther, he that hath the perfect knowledge of others' joy, wealth and high prosperity, and also trouble, sorrow and great adversity, hath the expert doctrine of all perils. And albeit that mortal folk are marvellously separated both by land and water, and right wondrously situate, yet are they and their acts (done peradventure by the space of a thousand year) compact together by the histographier, as it were the deeds of one self city and in one man's life: wherefore I say that history may well be called a divine providence; for as the celestial bodies above complect all and at every time the universal world, the creatures therein contained and all their deeds, semblably so doth history. Is it not a right noble thing for us, by the faults and errors of other to amend and erect our life into better? We should not seek and acquire that other did; but what thing was most best, most laudable and worthily done, we should put before our eyes to follow. Be not the sage counsels of two or three old fathers in a city, town or country, whom long age hath made wise, discreet and prudent, far more praised, lauded and dearly loved than of the young men? How much more then ought histories to be commended, praised and loved, in whom is included so many sage counsels, great reasons and high wisdoms of so innumerable persons of sundry nations

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and of every age, and that in so long space as four or five hundred year. The most profitable thing in this world for the institution of the human life is history. Once the continual reading thereof maketh young men equal in prudence to old men, and to old fathers stricken in age it ministereth experience of things. More, it yieldeth private persons worthy of dignity, rule and governance: it compelleth the emperors, high rulers and governours to do noble deeds, to the end they may obtain immortal glory: it exciteth, moveth and stirreth the strong, hardy warriors, for the great laud that they have after they ben dead, promptly to go in hand with great and hard perils in defence of their country: and it prohibiteth reprobable persons to do mischievous deeds, for fear of infamy and shame. So thus through the monuments of writing, which is the testimony unto virtue many men have been moved, some to build cities, some to devise and establish laws right profitable, necessary and behoveful for the human life, some other to find new arts, crafts and sciences, very requisite to the use of mankind. But above all things, whereby man's wealth riseth, special laud and cause ought to be given to history: it is the keeper of such things as have been virtuously done, and the witness of evil deeds, and by the benefit of history all noble, high and virtuous acts be immortal.

BREVITY OF HUMAN HISTORY

JOHN PEARSON, Bishop of Chester, *An Exposition of the Creed*. Art. I. 1659

IF we look into the historians which give account of ancient times, nay, if we peruse the fictions of the poets, we shall find the first to have no footsteps, the last to feign no actions of so great antiquity. If the race of men had been eternal, or as old as the Egyptians and Chaldees fancy it, how should it come to pass that the poetical inventions should find no actions worthy their heroic verse before the Trojan or the Theban war, or that great adventure of the Argonauts? For whatsoever all the Muses, the daughters of Memory, could

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BREVITY OF HUMAN HISTORY

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rehearse before those times, is nothing but the creation of the World, and the nativity of their gods. . . .

If we search into the nations themselves, we shall see none without some original: and were those authors extant who have written of the first plantations and migrations of people, the foundations and inhabiting of cities and countries, the first rudiments would appear as evident as their later growth and present condition. We know what ways within two thousand years people have made through vast and thick woods for their habitations, now as fertile, as populous, as any. The Hercynian trees, in the time of the Caesars, occupying so great a space as to take up a journey of sixty days, were thought even then coeval with the World. We read without any show of contradiction, how this western part of the World hath been peopled from the east: and all the pretence of the Babylonian antiquity is nothing else, but that we all came from thence. Those eight persons saved in the Ark, descending from the Gordiaean mountains and multiplying to a large collection in the plain of Sinaar, made their first division at that place; and that dispersion, or rather dissemination, hath peopled all other parts of the World, either never before inhabited, or dispeopled by the flood. . . .

Now by the experience of our families, which for their honour and greatness have been preserved, by the genealogies delivered in the Sacred Scriptures, and thought necessary to be presented to us by the blessed evangelists, by the observation and concurrent judgment of former ages, three generations usually take up a hundred years. If then it be not yet three thousand seven hundred years since the birth of Abraham, as certainly it is not; if all men who are or have been since have descended from Noah, as undoubtedly they have; if Abraham were but the tenth from Noah, as Noah from Adam, which Moses hath assured us: then it is not probable that any person now alive is above one hundred and thirty generations removed from Adam. And indeed thus admitting but the Greek account of less than five thousand years since the flood, we may easily bring all sober or probable accounts of the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Chinese, to begin since the dispersion at Babel.

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NATURAL SELECTION

CHARLES ROBERT DARWIN, *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. 1859

AUTHORS of the highest eminence seem to be fully satisfied with the view that each species has been independently created. To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual. When I view all things not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled. Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity. And of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant futurity; for the manner in which all organic beings are grouped, shows that the greater number of species in each genus, and all the species in many genera, have left no descendants, but have become utterly extinct. We can so far take a prophetic glance into futurity as to foretell that it will be the common and widely spread species, belonging to the larger and dominant groups within each class, which will ultimately prevail and procreate new and dominant species. As all the living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Cambrian Epoch, we may feel certain that the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world. Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of great length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elabo-

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NATURAL SELECTION

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rately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting round us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth and Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the conditions of life, and from use and disuse: a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.

REALITY A SYSTEM OF ENDS

WILLIAM RALPH INGE, *The Church and the Age*. 1912

ASK you to consider how our belief that reality is a system of ends, a concatenation of finite purposes willed by the Creator and appointed by Him to be actualised in time, must necessarily affect our judgment of all particular events. We may conveniently draw a distinction between phenomena and facts. A *phenomenon* is a particular occurrence, viewed in isolation, as if it were not part of a system. A *fact* is the working out of some unitary idea. If our view is correct, phenomena are only abstractions: we do not get at the truth of things by regarding them in isolation, or in any other way except as links in a chain by which some particular thought in the mind of God, some particular design in the will of God, is being expressed and actualised. A *fact* has always a beginning, middle, and end, and until we know the end as well

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as the beginning, we are not in a position to estimate the fact correctly. Now all facts that are really interesting are still unfinished. The world is still in the making, and mankind is in the making too. If it is the characteristic of a teleological series that its rationality is not intelligible until the last term is available for observation, it is no wonder that many things in our experience perplex and baffle us. It is also just what we should expect, that the largest and most far-reaching and exalted of God's purposes, those which have in view the representation and realisation of the grandest ideas and the most divine designs, are precisely those which cause us most difficulty. "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." Even the past is not over and done with when it forms part of a living, growing organic scheme. This is the philosophical proof of the doctrine of repentance and forgiveness. In an organic whole losses may be repaired, waste products utilised. God may even "restore to us the years that the locust hath eaten".

A REASONABLE CREATION

ANICIUS MANLIUS SEVERINUS BOETHIUS, *De consolazione philosophiae*, c. 523. Book IV, Prose VI. Translated by Geoffrey Chaucer. 1377–81

THE engendringe of alle thinges and alle the progressiouns of muable nature, and al that moeveth in any manere, taketh his causes, his ordre, and his formes, of the stableness of the divyne thoght; and thilke divyne thought, that is y-set and put in the tour, *that is to seyn, in the heighte*, of the simplicitee of god, stablissbeth many maner gyses to thinges that ben to done; the whiche maner, whan that men loken it in thilke pure clenness of the divyne intelligence, it is y-cleped purviaunce; but whan thilke maner is referred by men to thinges that it moveth and disponeth, thanne of olde men it was cleped destinee....And thus ben the thinges ful wel y-governed, yif that the simplicitee dwellinge in the divyne

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A REASONABLE CREATION

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thought sheweth forth the ordre of causes, unable to ben y-bowed; and this ordre constreineth by his propre stabletee the moevable thinges, or elles they sholden fieten folily. For which it is, that alle thinges semen to ben confus and trouble to us men, for we ne mowen nat considere thilke ordinaunce; natheles, the propre maner of every thinge, dressinge hem to goode, disponeth hem alle.

ACCIDENT IN HISTORY

WILLIAM EDWARD HARTPOLE LECKY, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*. Vol. I, chap. i. 1878

WHOEVER will study the history of the downfall of the Roman Republic; of the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire; of the dissolution of that empire; of the mediæval transition from slavery to serfdom; of the Reformation, or of the French Revolution, may easily convince himself that each of these great changes was the result of a long series of religious, social, political, economical, and intellectual causes, extending over many generations. So eminently is this the case, that some distinguished writers have maintained that the action of special circumstances and of individual genius, efforts, and peculiarities, counts for nothing in the great march of human affairs, and that every successful revolution must be attributed solely to the long train of intellectual influences that prepared and necessitated its triumph.

It is not difficult, however, to show that this, like most very absolute historical generalisations, is an exaggeration, and several instances might be cited in which a slight change in the disposition of circumstances, or in the action of individuals, would have altered the whole course of history. There are, indeed, few streams of tendency, however powerful, that might not, at some early period of their career, have been arrested or deflected. Thus the whole religious and moral sentiment of the most advanced nations of the world has been mainly determined by the influence of that small nation which

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inhabited Palestine; but there have been periods when it was more than probable that the Jewish race would have been as completely absorbed or extirpated as were the ten tribes, and every trace of the Jewish writings blotted from the world. Not less distinctive, not less unique in its kind, has been the place which the Greek, and especially the Athenian, intellect has occupied in history. It has been the great dynamic agency in European civilisation. Directly or indirectly it has contributed more than any other single influence, to stimulate its energies, to shape its intellectual type, to determine its political ideals and canons of taste, to impart to it the qualities that distinguish it most widely from the Eastern world. But how much of this influence would have arisen or have survived if, as might easily have happened, the invasion of Xerxes had succeeded, and an Asiatic despotism been planted in Greece? It is a mere question of strategy whether Hannibal, after Cannaë, might not have marched upon Rome and burnt it to the ground, and had he done so, the long train of momentous consequences that flowed from the Roman Empire would never have taken place, and a nation widely different in its position, its character, and its pursuits, would have presided over the developments of civilisation. It is, no doubt, true that the degradation or disintegration of Oriental Christianity assisted the triumph of Mohammedanism; but if Mahomet had been killed in one of the first skirmishes of his career, there is no reason to believe that a great monotheistic and military religion would have been organised in Arabia, destined to sweep with resistless fanaticism over an immense part both of the Pagan and of the Christian world, and to establish itself for many centuries and in three continents as a serious rival to Christianity. As Gibbon truly says, had Charles Martel been defeated at the battle of Poitiers, Mohammedanism would have almost certainly overspread the whole of Gallic and Teutonic Europe, and the victory of the Christians was only gained after several days of doubtful and indecisive struggle. The obscure blunder of some forgotten captain, who perhaps moved his troops to the right when he should have moved them to the left, may have turned the scale, and determined the future of Europe. Even the changes of the