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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

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PROSE PASSAGES

CHIEFLY FROM THE WORKS OF THE
GREAT HISTORIANS, CLASSICAL
AND ENGLISH

Chosen and arranged

by

L. J. CHENEY, M.A.

*Formerly Scholar of Jesus College
Cambridge*

“What is man, and whereto serveth he? what is his
good, and what is his evil?” *Ecclesiasticus, xviii*

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INTRODUCTION

THE study of history is chiefly a matter of thought. The true historian does not reassemble the past from its broken fragments; he re-creates it. If, to-day, owing to the negligence of our ancestors, we are overburdened with the collecting of facts, we would do well to remind ourselves that creation is an act of thought, not a synthesis from a card-index system. Accumulations of historical facts, like accumulations of other sorts of facts, are necessary; but even when arranged and sorted they do not make a history: and students of history should not wish to make too much display, among other men, of their learned compilations—one does not entertain one's guests in the kitchen, however full and well-ordered the shelves may be. Moreover, facts must be recorded in words: and words are not static symbols of a universally common significance, passionless and colourless, but the stuff of thought itself, charged with the emotion and hue of the minds they serve; and so, the facts themselves are apprehended differently by diverse minds. A historian—but the simple name is debased; we should say a *great* historian—is as much a creative artist as is a good scientist: his work is as much an act of thought. He does not subscribe to the fantastic theory of an objective past, ascertainable and recordable by mere drudgery, the toil of ants. He does know that the past can only be re-created by the thoughtful co-operation of writer and reader; that decades can be lived in chapters and centuries in volumes; that he and his reader between them, by the miracle of language, can recapture an image—if not a likeness—of that which time has utterly consumed.

History is best written at length. It is best enjoyed in the works of the masters. It is best realized from the works of the masters. There is little leisure in a democracy, and perhaps the old genus of historians has passed—not to reappear, maybe, until, after pressing the daily and requisite buttons of a standardized world, we sit down to digest each other's masterpieces. That event is preserved for a happier posterity. At

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present, the precision of the annalist, and the distraction of his daily routine, prevent the scholar from the enterprise of a Hume, a Gibbon, a Macaulay. He puts his work forward with less gusto in short studies and essays. He restricts himself to the intensive exposition of brief periods or limited themes. The quality is still, in many instances, as high as ever, the detail, indeed, more accurately determined; but the technique has altered. Much of the finest history written nowadays is contained in small volumes and single works. Sir James Frazer—I am speaking of Englishmen only—still writes monumentally as well as finely, and Mr F. A. Simpson has begun what one hopes will be a lengthy row of volumes on modern France. Professor G. M. Trevelyan, after celebrating worthily the epic birth of modern Italy, is now heroically continuing Lord Macaulay's narrative. But the bulk of the best histories are of shorter compass, and, owing to the widespread study of the past, much of the most effective commentary on past events is to be found in books whose character is not primarily historical, but philosophical or theological. Such considerations, however, do not affect the main issue here: ancient or modern, at length or in brief, the great historians are worth reading.

This book is not simply a collection of passages from the writings of the great historians. Such collections exist already, and, by themselves, are of small value. It is naturally difficult to regard them as anything more than scrapbooks, compiled arbitrarily, without any continuum of interest. It would be naturally as difficult to compile a collection of passages in illustration of one definite theme from the works of the great historians alone: no educational system has ever yet attempted to train historians: the masters are lucky accidents and what the reader of history requires is not always to be found in them. And it would be a sad charge to bring against students of history that they not only repeat each other but only read each other; since all the world should be their province. Apart from this, restriction to one definite theme, were it possible, would much impair the serviceability of a book such as this. Consequently, I have made two compromises: first, in arranging the passages under convenient headings that indicate some

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of the chief preoccupations of life; secondly, in widening my net to include a few writers of prose who are not historians.

We are likely to be confused in these days by books showered upon us in streams, copious but not always refreshing; and particularly of those two recent products, the novel and the scientific publication. Neither of these is essentially of interest to the Muse: yet occasionally and incidentally each of them shares some characteristics with purely historical work. So also with books of travel and philosophy. (We would not claim that history embraced philosophy—the two studies are manifestations of the same instinct in man and are complementary.) The great historians are, by this argument, reinforced by a host of men: those who possess the gift of re-creating life by the power of their own thought, and those who—deplorably few—can describe the work and ideas of mankind clearly and easily.

Heroical poetry—the “feigned histories” of Lord Bacon—I have purposely neglected. I am not convinced of the superiority of prose over poetry in the sense of preferring the intellectual to the emotional appeal: if anything, I value most the “emotionalized thought” which is the strongest force in literature, and which finds its purest outlet in poetry. Indeed, I have chosen deliberately some passages of prose that appeal most to the imagination. The omission of poetry is due to the limitations of space: and in some degree to this consideration: that while all educated men should aspire to write good prose, it is a decision outside his power whether a man write good poetry. The “world of man” is here depicted from a restricted palette.

The chief embarrassment in carrying out this project has been the lack of space and the abundance of materials. Every one of the sections into which the book is divided could easily have been expanded to four or five times its size. But the book will have done its work if it sends the reader to a library—or to a bookshop—to expand them for himself. I have rigorously excluded quoting historians in translation—Froissart and the Classics excepted—in spite of the lure of Villani, of Machiavelli, of Guicciardini, and of the flourishing modern French and German schools.

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It remains to justify my action. Time is short and the historians are long. In the following of my daily routine I am constrained to read more of them than are most men. That constraint has long since become a willing pursuit, and I here attempt to display a few of its pleasures. I have chosen passages for their matter rather than for their manner; happily, the two are more often than not of equal attraction; since good prose is the garment of a good mind. I have arranged them according to their matter, and, as far as a single volume can do it, I have sketched roughly the world of man. I have but opened the door to a room whose treasure is inexhaustible: he who cares to enter can soon make good my omissions.

There is one more observation to make. The present state of general education gives little time or opportunity for wide reading. I do not think highly of "potted culture", and I do not intend this book as a substitute for study. But I do intend it as a starting-place, an introduction, a series of contacts available in convenient form for the student: a collection of points of view that will stimulate his thought; a collection which, I hope, will lead him on to the wider reading without which education is stunted.

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