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History Politics and Eugenist Warnings

W E Heitland

Excerpt

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## BEHIND AND BEFORE

## § I

THAT the possible relations of Statesmanship to the study of History form an interesting subject of speculation, has long been admitted. Recent events—the great War and its sequel—have given to this admission a practical and painful bearing. In making a fresh attempt to discuss the questions involved in the subject it is unnecessary to apologize therefor otherwise than by confessing a sense of one's own insufficiency. From time to time in these latter years many a student must have felt troubled by serious doubts when noting strange and significant turns of public policy. He must again and again have wondered whether measures full of grave consequence had been adopted (often suddenly) with sound knowledge of the conditions existing in each particular case. He must have reflected that the conditions arising from present circumstances, closely connected with the past, would in most cases be extremely complex. This complexity, very evident to a student aware of the limitations of his own knowledge,—was it equally clear to public men working under great pressure<sup>1</sup>, instructed mainly by the officials of the hour, and, however able and willing to learn, lacking the leisure to digest? As time went by, and various steps taken had to be retraced, he would more surely detect evidence of unhappy miscalculation in public policy. That the

<sup>1</sup> This situation is well illustrated in the earlier chapters of Mr Winston Churchill's book, *The World Crisis*.

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## 2 Statesmen and Students

psychology<sup>1</sup> of peoples, their circumstances, their resources, their traditions, had been misunderstood or even ignored, would appear probable, in some cases certain: and he would be tempted, rightly or wrongly, to censure the action of Government as ill advised from lack of knowledge. But he might also reflect that, if the Government erred from lack of the equipment needed for duly appraising circumstances (that is, from inadequate knowledge of the past), so too might his own judgment<sup>2</sup> be at fault for lack of a full knowledge of the present. The latest and perhaps the most convincing details would not be at a private critic's disposal.

But when all is said and done, and full allowance made for the difficulties besetting alike action and criticism, there still remains a feeling that in public policy, as in other departments of human affairs, some relation must exist<sup>3</sup> between study and decision. Hence it comes that men have for centuries been groping their way towards ascertaining what this relation really amounts to. That is, how far and by what methods the present generation can guide its action for the benefit of the future by a just appreciation of the past. This striving has expressed itself in many ways, more particularly in dogmatic assertions superficially attractive. That history repeats itself, that

<sup>1</sup> See the striking criticisms of G Le Bon, *The world in revolt* (Eng trans 1921).

<sup>2</sup> I venture to illustrate this from my own experience. Eager search for information as to the condition of foreign countries had led me to right conclusions in most cases, but as to Russia I found myself quite wrong.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix E, *Knowledge and Action*.

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### Valuation of facts

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it is philosophy teaching by examples, that nations (or bodies politic) have their course of growth and decay like human beings (or bodies natural), and that this analogy offers a sound basis for reasoned conclusions, are specimens of these dogmas. Facts can be cited in apparent confirmation of such views, and the ordinary citizen subjects them to no more rigid scrutiny: thus they become current and insensibly take possession of the popular mind. This prepossession shews itself in many ways; for instance in the demand for more 'history-teaching' in schools. This rests on a notion that the mere acquisition of historical facts has a value independent of their correlation and interpretation. A fairly-educated and sensible man once said to me that by History he understood the bare narrative of events in the order of their occurrence; all the rest was mere opinion of this or that historian, for which he had no use. In short, give him a chronological record, and he could and would draw his own conclusions. I have detected the same notion at the back of the minds of many other men, and am convinced that it is widespread.

Now, would the ordinary citizen apply this principle to matters within the scope of his own trade or profession? Surely not. To verify details, to appraise their importance both severally and in correlation, to estimate successfully the probable influence of external facts on internal working, are qualifications vitally necessary for successful management, and he knows that their presence is what distinguishes the professional from the amateur. Though no Socrates, he knows when he really does know

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#### 4 Aims of study

anything and when he does not. Of his own capacity, as of other men's, he is a severe judge. Thus a famous 'crammer' some years ago, finding that pupils were failing in the particular subject which he himself taught, dismissed himself as he would dismiss an incompetent assistant, and engaged a competent assistant to remedy his own defects. This was 'business,' that is, common-sense. I pass on to consider what are the aims of studies in general, be their subject matter what it may. Thus I hope to make clear the bearing and limits of my argument.

The general aims of study may be classified under three heads: (*a*) the making of specialists capable of extending and deepening this or that study, (*b*) the simple gratification of human curiosity, (*c*) the increase of human competence<sup>1</sup>. It is with this last that I am here concerned. But they all overlap each other to some extent: in practice we can only treat each by itself provisionally, according to our point of view at the time.

Let me take concrete examples, such as Physiology and Engineering. The practising Doctor or Engineer applies the results of study directly to professional problems that call for solution. If his attempt at solution fails, it follows that either the results of study need correction, or the problem has not been rightly conceived. If it is the special science that is at fault, further study is needed to bring its results nearer to the perfect certainty after which science strains, and so to render it a

<sup>1</sup> Of the last, the preparation for examinations as a means of personal advancement may be regarded as a commercial satellite.

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## Sciences and Arts

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more trustworthy instrument for the uses of professional art. If the error is one of diagnosis, then evidently some element or elements in the problem have been overlooked or not sufficiently appraised. But if the results of study are sound, and the problem rightly conceived, the solution offered is bound to be successful. It is true that diagnosis may be vitiated by ignorance of important details which the professional man could not have before him at the critical moment. Facts may be inadvertently or deliberately concealed, and the patient may die or the bridge collapse prematurely. Practical action in a given case at a given time is ever exposed to accidents. But errors thus occasioned do not invalidate the scientific conclusion; they only illustrate the pitfalls of professional art.

In short, so long as you are dealing with subject matter the condition and behaviour of which can be ascertained, your science is really science, and its conclusions can be successfully applied in the art and practice of a profession, occasional accidents, due to human weakness, notwithstanding. Accidents generally arouse further inquiry, and their lessons tend to promote further ascertainment of causes. And, the more perfectly this is achieved by science, the more assured efficiency is given to art, concerned with effects. But let us suppose the existence of a subject matter less material and more elusive in character, in dealing with which it is not possible to ascertain the relation of causes and effects with scientific accuracy. In such a case the results of study will surely be more or less provisional. A con-

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## 6 The case of history

clusion will imply the unexpressed reservation 'that is, provided no other cause has been overlooked or is still unknown.' And if for any reason the practical art that should apply these provisional results must all the time necessarily continue in function, it must surely be unable to apply them with confidence and firmness. For, if doubt arises, and the study is renewed and a higher degree of certainty thereby attained, there has still been a lapse of time. Hence the problems with which the art has to grapple are likely to be no longer quite the same as they were at the moment when a renewal of study was seen to be required.

Now in the case of History, taken as the study of past generations of men in association, the difficulties arising from the nature of its subject matter cannot be ignored. To tell us that History is past Politics and Politics present History does not help us much. We can hardly say that at the present stage of mankind's career History has reached a static condition; in short that there exists an authorized<sup>1</sup> version of the doings and fortunes of associated Humanity. We know that no such version exists of the life-story of any people or nation, let alone the human race. The history of even so articulate a people as the Greeks remains a subject of research and active debate. In so far as History is past Politics, it is Politics in which causes and motives antecedent to effects and actions can seldom be determined with the moral certainty practically equivalent to proof. For the

<sup>1</sup> In the *Times* of 12-23 Jan 1922 there was a significant controversy under the heading *History to Order*.

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## Politics. Time.

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records from which History works can never be warranted to reach such a standard of completeness. Therefore its conclusions must be more or less provisional verdicts. It cannot in any imaginable future attain the status of an exact science.

And yet Politics, taken as the conduct of affairs of associated men, must be continuously in function. So far as it is an art, it operates in the choice of action. Looking from the present to the future, it seeks the desirable within the range of the possible; and the possible is mainly conditioned by the results of the past, which it is the task of History to ascertain. But Politics, as a practical art, works under strict limitations of circumstance; above all, under conditions of time. For things are ever moving on, and to dally is generally to be out of date. History may reverse its verdicts at leisure. Politics cannot undo an act or annul its consequences: reversal of policy does not restore the precedent situation unimpaired. If then Politics as an art depends on some science for its principles, and that science is not exact, the principles thence derived must be more or less elastic. This position seems to be illustrated in the relations between Economics and Political Economy. The rigid theory of the former may be as scientific and unanswerable as you please in ideal circumstances. To buy at the lowest price and sell at the highest is no doubt the way to immediate profit. But the fact remains that low first-cost may carry with it incidental disadvantages enough to outweigh the advantages of high immediate profit. In other words, the indirect gain attached to

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## 8 Personalities

acceptance of a higher scale of first-cost may render an apparently uneconomic bargain cheaper in the end. This truth is commonly recognized in the transactions of individuals; in those of states it is liable to be obscured by the recriminations of political partisans. So Political Economy, travelling by the road of Economic History, tends to allow a certain elasticity of practice and to become less doctrinaire in character than it was in its earlier days.

To return to Politics. In the continuous exercise of this art moments occur when a decision (that is, action) must be taken without leisure to reconsider principles, and to determine how far and in what respects they may need to be modified for present application. The capacity of doing this in strictly limited time is a function of what we call 'commonsense,' which expresses itself in happy improvisation<sup>1</sup>. And this capacity exists in very various degrees in various persons. Hence the great importance of personalities; for policies, to whatever causes they may be ultimately due, take effect through the agency of persons. This has always been so, though the partisan corruption of historical record may obscure the influence and responsibility of one statesman and exaggerate those of another. Therefore, while History cannot ignore the influence of individuals on the course of events in the past, it is most necessary to bear in mind that to attempt the judgment of personalities<sup>2</sup> is a task beset with infinite opportunities of error. Not only is the judge fallible

<sup>1</sup> Cf Lord Morley, *Notes on politics and history* (1913) p 58.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A.



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## Motives. Accidents. 9

himself; he probably has some unconscious bent or bias that he cannot detect or measure; but the record before him suffers from the same defect. Questions of motive are very likely to arise. At first sight it may seem that they are trivial. What matters is the act, not the motive that prompted it. But the motive is itself often a kind of indirect record of antecedent acts, and helps the inquirer to appraise the importance of those acts. When this is the case, motive is not trivial, and may be historically important.

Nor should we forget that persons (and through them policies) are liable to be pushed on or diverted or held back by sheer accidents. For instance, the removal or reappearance of an agent may inhibit or modify or revive action. And such accidents have not seldom happened. Historians cannot ignore them: their readers are perhaps liable to forget them. They come into consideration more particularly when a moral judgment<sup>1</sup> is attempted. Hence some would prefer to decline the censorial office altogether and to remain as non-moral as Macchiavelli. But this pose is a vain abdication. Sooner or later praise or blame, if not spoken, will be implied; and History, confined to a 'bone-dry' utterance, will become the mere confession of an insincere and unproven fatalism. This conflicts with a deep-rooted conviction at the back of men's minds. Their experience shews them that different actions have different results. Hence, whatever their religious creed, they feel that somewhere and somehow there is a distinction between

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right and wrong. They discern it in the present: why not in the past? Therefore, if History is to discharge a political duty in maturing the judgment of present citizens, it cannot dispense with a stimulant both harmless and wholesome, well suited to the constitution of men as they are.

That retrospective judgments of past actions and the policy of the agents may be erroneous, is manifest. But error of this kind is most mischievous when it leads a writer to misconceive the influences working at a given time, the conditions under which a statesman had to choose the direction of his policy. Take Pitt's Union scheme. The causes that drove him to carry out only a part of it are pretty well known. But his conduct on that occasion has been variously judged according to the various estimates of the comparative value of the influences under which his decision had to be made.

Another great and subtle danger lurks in the use of analogies<sup>1</sup> and parallels. On the face of it they sound well, and are apt to carry conviction to superficial observers. They seem at times to offer a satisfactory solution of some present problem to men who would like to see their way, but who have not the knowledge or leisure or will to test the comparison of past and present situations. It is not the historian himself that should be misled by such apparent resemblances. He will know very well that situations never recur so exactly as to furnish material for strict argument. But it is not easy to impress on readers or hearers the limitations and

<sup>1</sup> To this subject I return below.