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978-1-107-64455-7 - Essays on the Teaching of History

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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# Essays on the Teaching of History

*By F. W. MAITLAND,  
H. M. GWATKIN,  
R. L. POOLE,  
W. E. HEITLAND,  
W. CUNNINGHAM,  
F. R. TANNER,  
W. H. WOODWARD,  
C. H. K. MARTEN,  
W. F. ASHLEY.*

CAMBRIDGE, *at the University Press*, 1901.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## PREFATORY NOTE.

THE Syndics of the University Press confided the oversight of this collection of Essays to Lord Acton and myself. An Introduction by Lord Acton was to have been included but his unfortunate illness prevented this part of the arrangement from being carried out. Professor Maitland, under circumstances which make our obligation to him the greater, has kindly written the Introduction.

I may be permitted to thank the contributors for kindness which has made the mechanical part which I have performed such a pleasant one.

W. A. J. ARCHBOLD.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	ix-xx
By F. W. MAITLAND, LL.D., Downing Professor of the Laws of England in the University of Cambridge.	
THE TEACHING OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY . . . . .	I
By the Rev. H. M. GWATKIN, M.A., Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Cambridge.	
THE TEACHING OF PALAEOGRAPHY AND DIPLOMATIC . . . . .	II
By R. L. POOLE, M.A., Fellow of Magdalen College and Reader in Diplomatic in the University of Oxford.	
THE TEACHING OF ANCIENT HISTORY . . . . .	3I
By W. E. HEITLAND, M.A., Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge.	
THE TEACHING OF ECONOMIC HISTORY . . . . .	40
By the Rev. W. CUNNINGHAM, D.D., Fellow and Lecturer of Trinity College, Cambridge.	
THE TEACHING OF CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY . . . . .	5I
By J. R. TANNER, M.A., Fellow and Tutor of St John's College, Cambridge.	
THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN SCHOOLS—AIMS . . . . .	69
By W. H. WOODWARD, Christchurch, Oxford, Principal of the University Training College, Liverpool.	

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-64455-7 - Essays on the Teaching of History

F. W. Maitland, H. M. Gwatkin, R. L. Poole, W. E. Heitland, W. Cunningham,

F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

*Contents.*

	PAGE
THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN SCHOOLS—PRACTICE . . . . .	79
By C. H. K. MARTEN, M.A., Balliol College, Oxford, Assistant Master at Eton College.	
THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN AMERICA . . . . .	92
By W. J. ASHLEY, M.A., Professor in the Faculty of Commerce in the University of Birmingham; late Professor of Economic History in Harvard University.	



Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## INTRODUCTION.

THE following essays were to have been ushered into the world by Lord Acton. That he is unable to perform for them this good office will be deeply regretted both by their writers and by their readers. Of what he would have written only this can be said with certainty, that it would have added greatly to the value of this book. Still it is not apparent that these essays, proceeding from men who have had much experience in the teaching of history, imperatively demand any introduction. A few words about a matter of which the essayists have not spoken nor been called upon to speak, namely, about the history of the teaching of history in the English universities, are all that seem necessary, and may be suffered to come from one who can look at schools of history from the outside.

The tale need not be long, and indeed could not be long unless it became minute. The attempt to teach history, if thereby be meant a serious endeavour to make historical study one of the main studies of the universities, is very new. We can admit that it has attained the manly estate of one-and-twenty years and a little more. But not much more. Some of those who watched its cradle are still among us, are still active and still hopeful.

The university of Oxford, it is true, came by a professorship or readership of ancient history in times that we may well call

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

ancient, especially if we remember that only in 1898 did the university of Cambridge permanently acquire a similar professorship. But those ancient times were in some respects nearer our own than are some times that have intervened. The professorship at Oxford was established by William Camden in 1622 at the end of a life devoted to history, and the founder numbered among his friends many eager and accomplished explorers of the past: Selden and Ussher, Spelman and Godwin, Savile and Cotton. Much had been done for history, and more especially for English history, in the age that was closing: an age that had opened when Matthew Parker set scholars to work on the history of the English church and was in correspondence with the Centuriators of Magdeburg. The political and ecclesiastical questions which had agitated mankind had been such as stimulated research in unworked fields. Learning had been in fashion, and much sound knowledge had been garnered.

For a moment it seemed probable that Cambridge would not long be outstripped by Oxford. One of her sons, Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, who was murdered in 1628, founded or endeavoured to found a readership of history, which would have balanced Camden's foundation. He sought to obtain Vossius from Leyden, and obtained from Leyden Dorislaus as an occupant for the chair. After two or three lectures the lecturer was in trouble. His theme was Roman history and he said somewhat of the expulsion of kings: a matter of which it is not always safe to talk at large. That he would take part in trying an English king for treason he did not foresee, nor the vengeance that followed, nor the public funeral in Westminster Abbey, nor the exhumation of bones that polluted a royal sanctuary. What at the present moment concerns us more is the loss of an annuity that Lord Brooke meant, so it seems, to be permanent. Apparently our historians have as yet found

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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

xi

no more concrete cause to which they may assign this disaster than 'the iniquity of the times.' So Oxford had a professor of ancient history and Cambridge had none. Cambridge, however, had for a while 'a reader of the Saxon language and of the history of our ancient British churches': two branches of learning which since Parker's day had been united. The reader was Abraham Wheelock: he also professed Arabic but edited ancient English laws. As reader of Saxon he was paid by Henry Spelman, upon whose death in troublous days (1641) the endowment lapsed. Opportunities had been lost. The age of fresh and vigorous research went by. Cambridge should have had an historical professorship recalling the name of Parker. A line of professors that began with G. J. Vossius would have begun famously.

A decline of interest, or at least of academic interest, in history may be traced by anyone who with a list of the Camden professors before him seeks for their names in that Dictionary of National Biography which is among the best historical products of our own time. During the seventeenth century the Camden professors were men who in some way or another left a mark behind them. Degory Wheare, for example, the first of them, wrote a book on *The Method and Order of Reading Histories*: a book that can still be read and such a book as a professor should sometimes write. Lewis Dumoulin was a remarkable member of a remarkable family. 'Dodwell's learning was immense,' said Gibbon. Then, however, there was a fall. Thomas Hearne, the under librarian at Oxford, who was a truly zealous student, might, so he said, have filled the chair if he would have bowed the knee to an usurping dynasty. Apparently learning and loyalty were not to be found in combination. Late in the eighteenth century occurs the name of William Scott, who as Lord Stowell was to expound law for the nations. His lectures were well attended

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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

(so we are told) and were praised by those whose praise was worth having. His name is followed by that of Thomas Warton, who had already been professor of poetry. His title to the one chair and to the other is not to be disputed, at all events if history is to include the history of literature; and the versatile man wrote a history of the parish of Kiddington as 'a specimen of a history of Oxfordshire.' But we need trace no further the fortunes of ancient history. It might be considered as a branch of 'the classics' or of 'humane letters,' and the study of it, though flagging, was likely to revive.

We must turn to speak of a royal benefactor. George I, the king, whose title to the crown of Great Britain the learned Hearne would not acknowledge, had 'observed that no encouragement or provision had been made in either of the universities for the study of modern history or modern languages.' Also he had 'seriously weighed the prejudice that had accrued to the said universities from this defect, persons of foreign nations being often employed in the education and tuition of youth both at home and in their travels.' It may well have struck His Majesty that, if it was a defect on his part to speak no English, it was a defect on the part of his ministers to speak no German. Also it may have struck him that a knowledge 'rerum Brunsvicensium,' and, to speak more generally, a knowledge of the Germanic Body and its none too simple history was not so common in England as it might reasonably be expected to be in all parts of His Majesty's dominions. Also it is not impossible that a prince of that house which had Leibnitz for its historiographer may have thought that such historiographers as England could shew hardly reached a creditable standard. So he founded professorships of modern history at Oxford and Cambridge (1724). Out of the stipends that were assigned to them the professors were to provide teachers of the modern languages.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

xiii

The university of Cambridge, if it wanted learning was not deficient in loyalty, and effusively thanked the occupier of the throne for his 'noble design,' his 'princely intentions.' The masters and scholars 'ventured...to join in the complaint that foreign tutors had so large a share in the education of our youth of quality both at home and in their travels.' They even dared to foresee a glad day when 'there should be a sufficient number of academical persons well versed in the knowledge of foreign courts and well instructed in their respective languages; when a familiarity with the living tongues should be superadded to that of the dead ones; when the solid learning of antiquity should be adorned and set off with a skilful habit of conversing in the languages that now flourish and both be accompanied with English probity; when our nobility and gentry would be under no temptation of sending for persons from foreign countries to be entrusted with the education of their children; and when the appearance of an English gentleman in the courts of Europe with a governor of his own nation would not be so rare and uncommon as it theretofore had been.'

Such were the phrases with which these representatives of English learning welcomed the royal gift. This we know; for if the university of Cambridge was slow to produce a school of history, the borough of Cambridge once had for its town clerk a compiler of admirable annals. The foreigner, we observe, was to be driven from the educational market, and the English gentleman was to appear in foreign courts with a 'governor' of his own nation: in other words the professor of modern history was to be the trainer of bear-leaders: the English leaders of English bears. This being the ideal, it is not perhaps surprising that the man who at that time was doing the best work that was being done in England as a systematic narrator of very modern history was the Frenchman Abel Boyer, or that

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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

*Introduction.*

he should have belonged to the hateful race of foreign tutors. The remoter history of England might be read in the pages of M. de Rapin, or, if 'familiarity with the living tongues' would not extend so far, then in the translation which Mr Tindal was about to publish. In academic eyes modern history was to be an ornamental fringe around 'the solid learning of antiquity.' As to the wretched middle ages, they, it was well understood, had been turned over to 'men of a low, unpolite genius fit only for the rough and barbarick part of learning.' One of these mere antiquaries had lately written a History of the Exchequer which has worn better than most books of its time. Also he had written this sentence: 'In truth, writing of history is in some sort a religious act.' But the spirit which animated Thomas Madox was not at home in academic circles.

It may be that some of the regius professors ably performed the useful task with which they were entrusted. Statistics which should exhibit the nationality of the tutors who made the grand tour with young persons of quality would be hard to obtain, and no unfavourable inference should be drawn from the bare fact that the professor's mastery of history was seldom attested by any book that bore his name. Of one we may read that he is the anonymous author of 'The Country Parson's Advice to his Parishioners of the Younger Sort'; of another that 'he was killed by a fall from his horse when returning...from a dinner with Lord Sandwich at Hinchinbroke.' Macaulay has said that the author of the Elegy in a Country Churchyard was in many respects better qualified for the professorship than any man living. That may be so; but 'the habits of the time made lecturing unnecessary' (so Mr Leslie Stephen has told us), and as a teacher of modern history Thomas Gray must be for us a mute, inglorious potentiality. Historical work was being done even at Cambridge. David Wilkins published the collection of English Concilia which still holds the field and

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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Introduction.*

xv

edited the Anglo-Saxon laws ; but he, like Wheelock, was professor of Arabic ; also he was a German and his name was not Wilkins. To find a square hole for the round man was apparently the fashion of the time. Conyers Middleton professed geology.

If Gibbon learnt much at Oxford he was ungrateful, and yet he was the only member of the historical 'triumvirate' in whom an English university could claim anything. Modern history was at length earning academic honour north of the Tweed when Robertson reigned at Edinburgh. Hume found that history was more profitable than philosophy and consumed less time. His rival in the historical field could in the interval between Peregrine Pickle and Humphrey Clinker turn out history at the rate of a century a month ; but he was another beggarly Scot. The demand for history was increasing ; the notion of history was extending its bounds. Burke began a history of the laws of England and should have written more than ten pages. Anderson, another Scot, had compiled a solid history of British commerce. Dr Coxe of the House of Austria showed that the travelling tutor might become an industrious and agreeable historian.

About the beginning of the nineteenth century it became usual to appoint to the chairs of modern history men who would take their duties seriously and who either had written or might be expected to write history of one sort or another. Thus Prof. William Smyth, of Cambridge, published lectures that were admired, and Prof. Nares, of Oxford, wrote about Lord Burleigh a book, which as Macaulay's readers will remember, weighed sixty pounds avoirdupois. Thomas Arnold's name occurs in the Oxford list, and, besides all else that he did, he introduced the teaching of modern history into a public school. Nevertheless if we look back at the books that were being produced during the first half of the century, we must

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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

confess that a remarkably large amount of historical literature was coming from men who had not been educated at Oxford or Cambridge. One and the same college might indeed boast of Macaulay, Hallam, Thirlwall and Kemble. On the other side stand such names as those of James Mill, Grote, Palgrave, Lingard, Carlyle, Buckle, Napier; and we must not forget Sir Archibald Alison and Sharon Turner; still less such archivists as Petrie and the two Hardys. We cannot say that any organized academic opinion demanded the work that was done by the Record Commission, by the Rolls Series, or by the Historical Manuscripts Commission, or that the universities cried aloud for the publication of State papers and the opening of the national archives. But some Niebuhr was translated and then some Ranke, and it became plain that the sphere of history was expanding in all directions.

Then the great change came, soon after the middle of the century. The professors at the two universities were among the first men that would have been mentioned by anyone who was asked to give the names of our living historians. An opportunity of teaching, and of teaching seriously was being provided for them. Gradually the study of history became the avenue to an 'honours degree.' It was not among the first of 'the new studies' that obtained recognition at Cambridge. The moral sciences and the natural sciences took precedence of it. For a while the moral sciences included a little history (1851). Then (1858), a small place was found for it in the Law Tripos. Then for a few years there was a Law and History Tripos (1870) in which, however, law was the predominant partner. The dissolution of partnership took effect in 1875. History was emancipated. A similar change had been made at Oxford some few years earlier (1872). At Oxford the class list of the school of Modern History has now become nearly if not quite the longest of the class lists. In



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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

xvii

Cambridge the competition of the natural sciences has been severer, but the Historical Tripos attracts a number of candidates that is no longer small, and increases. Some new professorships have been founded. Oxford has two chairs of modern, one of ancient, one of ecclesiastical history, besides readerships and lectureships. Cambridge has had a professor of ecclesiastical history since 1884, a professor of ancient history since 1898. Whewell, the historian of inductive science, provided ample encouragement for the study of international law, which is closely related to modern history. Scholarships in 'history, and more especially ecclesiastical history,' were endowed by Lightfoot, the historian of early Christianity. The establishment of prizes for historical essays began at Oxford in the middle of the century when the name of Thomas Arnold was thus commemorated. Other prizes came from Lord Stanhope, who in various ways deserved well of history, and from Lord Lothian. At this point also Cambridge was somewhat behindhand; but the names of the Prince Consort, Thirlwall, and Seeley are now connected with prizes. A list of successful essays shows that in not a few cases the offer of an honourable reward has turned a young man's thoughts to a field in which he has afterwards done excellent work. It is a cause for rejoicing that among the teachers of history at the universities there have been men so justly famous, each in his own way, as Stubbs, Freeman, Froude, Creighton, Hatch, and Seeley—for we will name none but the departed—but when all men get their due a large share of credit will be given to those whose patient and self-denying labours as tutors and lecturers have left them little time for the acquisition of such fame as may be won by great books.

It is, then, of a modern movement and of young schools that these essays speak to us: of a movement which is yet in progress: of schools that have hardly outlived that tentative

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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

*Introduction.*

and experimental stage through which all institutions ought to pass. We may wish for these schools not only the vigour but also the adaptability of youth. And, if it be true, as will be said by others, that there are many reasons why history should be taught, let it not be forgotten that, whether we like it or no, history will be written. The number of men in England who at the present time are writing history of some sort or another must indeed be very large. Very small may be the number of those who take the universe or universal mankind for their theme. Few will be those who aspire so high as the whole life of some one nation. But many a man is writing the history of his county, his parish, his college, his regiment, is endeavouring to tell the tale of some religious doctrine, some form of art or literature, some economic relationship, or some rule of law. Or, again, he is writing a life, or he is editing letters. Nor must we forget the journalists and the history, good, bad, and indifferent that finds a place in their articles; nor the reviewers of historical books, who assume to judge and therefore ought to know.

All this is important work. It has to be done, and will be done, and it ought to be done well, conscientiously, circumspectly, methodically. Now it may be that no school of history can be sure of producing great historians; and it may be that when the great historian appears he will perchance come out of a school of classics or mathematics, or will have given some years to metaphysics or to physiology. But even for his sake we should wish that all the departmental work, if such we may call it, should be thoroughly well performed. His time should not be wasted over bad texts, ill-arranged material, or assertions for which no warrantor is vouched. To help and at any rate not to hinder him should be the hope of many humble labourers.

That is not all. The huge mass of historical stuff that is

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

xix

now-a-days flowing from the press goes to make the minds of its writers and of its readers, and indeed to make the mind of the nation. It is of some moment that mankind should believe what is true, and disbelieve what is false.

To make Gibbons or Macaulays may be impossible: but it cannot be beyond the power of able teachers to set in the right path many of those who, say what we will, are going to write history well or are going to write it ill. Unquestionably of late years an improvement has taken place in England; but still it is not altogether pleasant to compare English books of what we will again call departmental or sectional history with the parallel books that come to us from abroad. When the *English Historical Review* was started in 1886—at J. R. Green's suggestion, so Creighton has told us—England in one important respect stood behind some small and some backward countries. 'English historians had not yet...associated themselves in the establishment of any academy or other organisation, nor founded any journal to promote their common object.' Even of late Dr Gross has been sending us our bibliographies from the other side of the Atlantic. More co-operation, more organisation, more and better criticism, more advice for beginners are needed. And the need if not met will increase. History is lengthening and widening and deepening. It is lengthening at both ends, for while modern states in many parts of the globe are making new history at a bewilderingly rapid rate, what used to be called ancient history is no longer by any means the ancientest: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and even primeval man are upon our hands. And history is widening. Could we neglect India, China and Japan, there would still be America, Australia, Africa, as well as Europe, demanding that their stories should be told and finding men to tell them well or to tell them badly. And history is deepening. We could not if we would be satisfied with the battles and the protocols,

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F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

xx

*Introduction.*

the alliances and the intrigues. Literature and art, religion and law, rents and prices, creeds and superstitions have burst the political barrier and are no longer to be expelled. The study of interactions and interdependences is but just beginning, and no one can foresee the end. There is much to be done by schools of history ; there will be more to be done every year.