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Being Letters VI–VIII of the Study and Use of History

With an Introduction by G. M. Trevelyan

Excerpt

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ON THE STUDY AND USE OF HISTORY

LETTER VI

From what period modern history is peculiarly useful to the service of our country, viz. From the end of the fifteenth century to the present. The division of this into three particular periods: in order to a sketch of the history and state of Europe from that time.

Since then you are, my lord, by your birth, by the nature of our government, and by the talents God has given you, attached for life to the service of your country; since genius alone cannot enable you to go through this service with honour to yourself, and advantage to your country; whether you support, or whether you oppose the administrations that arise; since a great stock of knowledge acquired betimes and continually improved, is necessary to this end; and since one part of this stock must be collected from the study of history, as the other part is to be gained by observation and experience; I come now to speak to your lordship of such history as has an immediate relation to the great duty and business of your life, and of the method to be observed in this study. The notes I have by me, which were of some little use thus far, serve me no farther, and I have no books to consult. No matter, I shall be able to explain my thoughts without their assistance, and less liable to be tedious. I hope to be as full and as exact on memory alone, as the manner in which I shall treat the subject, requires me to be.

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I say then, that however closely affairs are linked together in the progression of governments, and how much soever events that follow, are dependent on those that precede, the whole connection diminishes to sight as the chain lengthens; till at last it seems to be broken, and the links that are continued from that point, bear no proportion nor any similitude to the former. I would not be understood to speak only of those great changes, that are wrought by a concurrence of extraordinary events; for instance the expulsion of one nation, the destruction of one government, and the establishment of another: but even of those that are wrought in the same governments and among the same people, slowly and almost imperceptibly, by the necessary effects of time, and flux condition of human affairs. When such changes as these happen in several states about the same time, and consequently affect other states by their vicinity, and by many different relations which they frequently bear to one another; this is one of those periods formed, at which the chain spoken of is so broken as to have little or no real or visible connection with that which we see continue. A new situation different from the former, begets new interests in the same proportion of difference; not in this or that particular state alone, but in all those that are concerned by vicinity or other relations, as I said just now, in one general system of policy. New interests beget new maxims of government, and new methods of conduct. These, in their turns, beget new manners, new habits, new customs. The longer this new constitution of affairs continues, the more will this difference increase: and although some analogy may remain long between what preceded and what succeeded such a period, yet will this analogy soon become an object of mere curiosity, not of profitable enquiry. Such

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a period therefore is, in the true sense of the words, an epocha or an æra, a point of time at which you stop, or from which you reckon forward. I say forward; because we are not to study in the present case, as chronologers compute backward. Should we persist to carry our researches much higher, and to push them even to some other period of the same kind, we should misemploy our time; the causes then laid having spent themselves, the series of effects derived from them being over, and our concern in both consequently at an end. But a new system of causes and effects, that subsists in our time, and whereof our conduct is to be a part, arising at the last period, and all that passes in our time being dependent on what has passed since that period, or being immediately relative to it, we are extremely concerned to be well informed about all those passages. To be entirely ignorant about the ages that precede this æra would be shameful. Nay some indulgence may be had to a temperate curiosity in the review of them. But to be learned about them is a ridiculous affectation in any man who means to be useful to the present age. Down to this æra let us read history; from this æra, and down to our own time, let us study it.

The end of the fifteenth century seems to be just such a period as I have been describing, for those who live in the eighteenth, and who inhabit the western parts of Europe. A little before, or a little after this point of time, all those events happened, and all those revolutions began, that have produced so vast a change in the manners, customs, and interests of particular nations, and in the whole policy, ecclesiastical and civil, of these parts of the world. I must descend here into some detail, not of histories, collections, or memorials; for all these are well enough known: and

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though the contents are in the heads of few, the books are in the hands of many. But instead of shewing your lordship where to look, I shall contribute more to your entertainment and instruction, by marking out, as well as my memory will serve me to do it, what you are to look for, and by furnishing a kind of clue to your studies. I shall give, according to custom, the first place to religion.

A view of the ecclesiastical government of Europe from the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Observe then, my lord, that the demolition of the papal throne was not attempted with success till the beginning of the sixteenth century. If you are curious to cast your eyes back, you will find Berenger in the eleventh, who was soon silenced; Arnoldus in the same, who was soon hanged; Valdo in the twelfth, and our Wickliff in the fourteenth, as well as others perhaps whom I do not recollect. Sometimes the doctrines of the church were alone attacked; and sometimes the doctrine, the discipline and the usurpations of the pope. But little fires, kindled in corners of a dark world, were soon stifled by that great abettor of christian unity, the hangman. When they spread and blazed out, as in the case of the Albigeois and of the Hussites, armies were raised to extinguish them by torrents of blood; and such saints as Dominic, with the crucifix in their hands, instigated the troops to the utmost barbarity. Your lordship will find that the church of Rome was maintained by such charitable and salutary means among others, till the period spoken of: and you will be curious, I am sure, to enquire how this period came to be more fatal to her than any former conjuncture. A multitude of circumstances which you will easily trace in the histories of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to go

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PRELUDE TO THE REFORMATION

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no farther back, concurred to bring about this great event: and a multitude of others as easy to be traced, concurred to hinder the demolition from becoming total, and to prop the tottering fabric. Among these circumstances, there is one less complicated and more obvious than others, which was of principal and universal influence. The art of printing had been invented about forty or fifty years before the period we fix: from that time, the resurrection of letters hastened on apace; and at this period they had made great progress, and were cultivated with great application. Mahomet the second drove them out of the east into the west; and the popes proved worse politicians than the mufies in this respect. Nicholas the fifth encouraged learning, and learned men. Sixtus the fourth was, if I mistake not, a great collector of books at least: and Leo the tenth was the patron of every art and science. The magicians themselves broke the charm by which they had bound mankind for so many ages: and the adventure of that knight-errant, who, thinking himself happy in the arms of a celestial nymph, found that he was the miserable slave of an infernal hag, was in some sort renewed. As soon as the means of acquiring and spreading information grew common, it is no wonder that a system was unravelled, which could not have been woven with success in any ages, but those of gross ignorance, and credulous superstition. I might point out to your lordship many other immediate causes, some general like this that I have mentioned, and some particular. The great schism, for instance, that ended in the beginning of the fifteenth century, and in the Council of Constance, had occasioned prodigious scandal. Two or three vicars of Christ, two or three infallible heads of the church, roaming about the world at a time, furnished matter of ridicule as well as scandal: and

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whilst they appealed, for so they did in effect, to the laity, and reproached and excommunicated one another, they taught the world what to think of the institution, as well as exercise of the papal authority. The same lesson was taught by the Council of Pisa, that preceded, and by that of Basle, that followed the Council of Constance. The horrid crimes of Alexander the sixth, the saucy ambition of Julius the second, the immense profusion and scandalous exactions of Leo the tenth; all these events and characters, following in a continued series from the beginning of one century, prepared the way for the revolution that happened in the beginning of the next. The state of Germany, the state of England, and that of the North, were particular causes, in these several countries, of this revolution. Such were many remarkable events that happened about the same time, and a little before it, in these and in other nations; and such were likewise the characters of many of the princes of that age, some of whom favoured the reformation like the elector of Saxony, on a principle of conscience; and most of whom favoured it, just as others opposed it, on a principle of interest. This your lordship will discover manifestly to have been the case; and the sole difference you will find between Henry the eighth and Francis the first, one of whom separated from the pope, as the other adhered to him, is this: Henry the eighth divided, with the secular clergy and his people, the spoil of the pope, and his satellites, the monks; Francis the first divided, with the pope, the spoil of his clergy, secular and regular, and of his people. With the same impartial eye that your lordship surveys the abuses of religion, and the corruptions of the church as well as court of Rome, which brought on the reformation at this period; you will observe the characters and conduct of

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those who began, who propagated, and who favoured the reformation: and from your observation of these, as well as of the unsystematical manner in which it was carried on at the same time in various places, and of the want of concert, nay even of charity, among the reformers, you will learn what to think of the several religions that unite in their opposition to the Roman, and yet hate one another most heartily; what to think of the several sects that have sprouted, like suckers, from the same great roots; and what the true principles are of protestant ecclesiastical policy. This policy had no being till Luther made his establishment in Germany; till Zwinglius began another in Switzerland, which Calvin carried on, and, like Americus Vesputius who followed Christopher Columbus, robbed the first adventurer of his honour; and till the reformation in our country was perfected under Edward the sixth and Elizabeth. Even popish ecclesiastical policy is no longer the same since that æra. His holiness is no longer at the head of the whole western church: and to keep the part that adheres to him, he is obliged to loosen their chains, and to lighten his yoke. The spirit and pretensions of his court are the same, but not the power. He governs by expedient and management more, and by authority less. His decrees and his briefs are in danger of being refused, explained away, or evaded, unless he negotiates their acceptance before he gives them, governs in concert with his flock, and feeds his sheep according to their humour and interest. In short, his excommunications, that made the greatest emperors tremble, are despised by the lowest members of his own communion; and the remaining attachment to him has been, from this æra, rather a political expedient to preserve an appearance of unity, than a principle of conscience; whatever some

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bigotted princes may have thought, whatever ambitious prelates and hireling scribblers may have taught, and whatever a people, worked up to enthusiasm by fanatical preachers, may have acted. Proofs of this would be easy to draw, not only from the conduct of such princes, as Ferdinand the first, and Maximilian the second, who could scarce be esteemed papists, though they continued in the pope's communion: but even from that of princes who persecuted their protestant subjects with great violence. Enough has been said, I think, to shew your lordship how little need there is of going up higher than the beginning of the sixteenth century in the study of history, to acquire all the knowledge necessary at this time in ecclesiastical policy, or in civil policy as far as it is relative to this. Historical monuments of this sort are in every man's hand, the facts are sufficiently verified, and the entire scenes lie open to our observation: even that scene of solemn refined banter exhibited in the Council of Trent, imposes on no man who reads Paolo, as well as Pallavicini, and the letters of Vargas.

A view of the civil government of Europe in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

I. IN FRANCE

A very little higher need we go, to observe those great changes in the civil constitutions of the principal nations of Europe, in the partition of power among them, and by consequence in the whole system of European policy, which have operated so strongly for more than two centuries, and which operate still. I will not affront the memory of our Henry the seventh so much as to compare him to Lewis the eleventh: and yet I perceive some resemblance between

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them; which would perhaps appear greater if Philip of Commines had wrote the history of Henry as well as that of Lewis; or if my lord Bacon had wrote that of Lewis as well as that of Henry. This prince came to the crown of England a little before the close of the fifteenth century: and Lewis began his reign in France about twenty years sooner. These reigns make remarkable periods in the histories of both nations. To reduce the power, privileges, and possessions of the nobility, and to increase the wealth and authority of the crown, was the principal object of both. In this their success was so great, that the constitutions of the two governments have had, since that time, more resemblance, in name and in form, than in reality, to the constitutions that prevailed before. Lewis the eleventh was the first, say the French, “*qui mit les rois hors de page.*” The independency of the nobility had rendered the state of his predecessors very dependent, and their power precarious. They were the sovereigns of great vassals; but these vassals were so powerful, that one of them was sometimes able, and two or three of them always to give law to the sovereign. Before Lewis came to the crown, the English had been driven out of their possessions in France, by the poor character of Henry the sixth, the domestic troubles of his reign, and the defection of the house of Burgundy from his alliance, much more than by the ability of Charles the seventh, who seems to have been neither a greater hero nor a greater politician than Henry the sixth; and even then by the vigour and union of the French nobility in his service. After Lewis came to the crown, Edward the fourth made a shew of carrying the war again into France: but he soon returned home, and your lordship will not be at a loss to find much better reasons for his doing so, in the situation of his affairs

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and the characters of his allies, than those which Philip of Commines draws from the artifice of Lewis, from his good cheer, and his pensions. Now from this time our pretensions on France were in effect given up: and Charles the bold, the last prince of the house of Burgundy, being killed, Lewis had no vassal able to molest him. He re-united the duchy of Burgundy and Artois to his crown, he acquired Provence by gift, and his son Britany by marriage: and thus France grew, in the course of a few years, into that great and compact body which we behold at this time. The history of France before this period, is like that of Germany, a complicated history of several states and several interests; sometimes concurring like members of the same monarchy, and sometimes warring on one another. Since this period, the history of France is the history of one state under a more uniform and orderly government; the history of a monarchy wherein the prince is possessor of some, as well as lord of all the great fiefes: and the authority of many tyrants centering in one, though the people are not become more free, yet the whole system of domestic policy is entirely changed. Peace at home is better secured, and the nation grown fitter to carry war abroad. The governors of great provinces and of strong fortresses have opposed their king, and taken arms against his authority and commission since that time: but yet there is no more resemblance between the authority and pretensions of these governors, or the nature and occasions of these disputes, and the authority and pretensions of the vassals of the crown in former days, or the nature and occasions of their disputes with the prince and with one another, than there is between the ancient and the present peers of France. In a word, the constitution is so altered, that any knowledge we can acquire about it, in