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G. N. Clark

Excerpt

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## HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND HISTORICAL THOUGHT

THE SHARE which historians contribute to the common stock of ideas and beliefs varies greatly from time to time and from place to place. Although it can never be estimated exactly, we may safely say that in this country for many generations past it has never been a negligible proportion. Of late it has grown more important, most of all during the present war. In any disturbed and violent time men wish to know how things have come to be as they are; and in our time there is a further reason for historical curiosity. All of us, whether in the services, or in civilian war work, in the universities, or in our homes, have come into contact with foreigners, allies or refugees, from many countries; we have learnt how they are inspired by historical memories and how their mental habits are derived from their national histories. As the distant continents have closed in upon our island, so the centuries too have closed in. We discuss the present and the future with new friends whose national experience diverged from our own perhaps in the eighteenth century, or at the Reformation or in the Middle Ages, or even with some who have no part in the inheritance of Greece and Rome. In trying to understand their problems and their points of view we have discovered afresh how much of the

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past is still alive in their minds and ours. There is no longer any need for historians to attract attention by their once familiar devices of making some distant age appear astonishingly like our own or, alternatively, of making the recent past, say the Victorian age, seem quaintly different and remote. Perhaps there has never been a time when so many people seriously tried to understand the world around them, or when so many tried to understand it in the light of history.

Not only does the reading and talking public enquire into many historical questions: the state also sets many people to work at history. The practice, to be sure, is not entirely new. More than two hundred and fifty years ago Thomas Rymer of Sidney Sussex College was appointed, mainly at the instance of Charles Montagu of Trinity, to edit the great folio volumes of his *Foedera* which we still use. On these there have followed series upon series of official publications of documents, far too expensive for any authority other than the state to finance, providing the chief materials for the study of our history. Some of them have dealt with very recent transactions, like the *British Diplomatic Documents* in which two eminent Cambridge scholars, Dr Gooch and the late Master of Peterhouse, set a memorable example of 'objectivity' and method; but taken together they cover every period from the very earliest. Nor has the state been content only to publish materials and the subsidiary apparatus of catalogues, calendars and indexes. It has employed historians to write accounts of events and institutions of many kinds,

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and if, in this country, the only examples of such work on a large scale are the official histories of recent wars, it is nevertheless true that an extensive and varied historical library may be extracted from the blue books of the last hundred years.

During the present war the demand both for historical materials and for applied history has become greater than ever before. The publication of recent diplomatic documents is to continue. A numerous and well-organized staff is already preparing narratives of the work of the civil departments during the war. Official history, composed from a limited class of materials and necessarily to some degree subject to censorship, seems to be intermediate between historical writing in the full sense and the editing of historical materials. As to its usefulness even for current purposes of the war there seems to be general agreement, and it is also clear that it is work for which a regular historical training is a good preparation. Several of our most distinguished historians, again, are employed in other kinds of research work for government departments. Indeed, when we think of all the invitations which are addressed to historians by official and by semi-official bodies, we may well grumble '*Et spes et ratio studiorum in Caesare tantum*'. But, in this matter, as in its relations with the universities, the state in this country knows how to respect the independence of enquiry. It does not ask the historians to depart from their academic standards. For its own information it requires the truth uncoloured by any preference for one policy over another. Even when

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historians are engaged not in informing government departments but in propaganda, their training enables them to maintain the high traditions of that honest advocacy which a good cause deserves. Indeed, the greatest service which the historical faculties of the universities have rendered to the nation during the war is not that of the historians but that of the many hundreds of men and women who are able to serve the better in many spheres and at every level by virtue of their liberal education in historical studies.

Some of the qualities which we try to impart can no doubt be acquired equally well in other subjects. There is a prosaic intellectual efficiency which any good university training ought to improve: it consists in such obviously desirable qualities as accuracy, lucidity, a sense of relevance, the power of telling a good argument from a bad one, the power, so constantly needed in the age of the telephone and the shorthand-typist, of extracting the essentials from a mass of information. Liberal education is much more than that; but for the moment, as we are thinking of our effort in the war, it is enough to remember this, its utilitarian side. On this humdrum basis we build the education of the free man, that is, education for responsibility and especially for positions of intellectual responsibility, in which we have to make up our own minds and influence those of other people. There is a sufficient reason why history has become in modern times one of the subjects through which such a training is most commonly given. In a world like ours, which carries so much of the complex past along

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with it, many kinds of administration, both in public affairs and in ordinary private business, require some knowledge of political or social or economic history. We give to undergraduates a three years' training—perhaps it is too short—not only in the ascertained results of historical research, but also in historical criticism. They learn how these results are arrived at; they learn that the primary moral virtue of truthfulness needs to be combined with skill in ascertaining what is true. When we look at the work which those whom we have trained are doing in the war, we become aware of some defects in our curricula and our examinations; we discuss among ourselves proposals for improving them in one way or another; but I believe we should all agree on the main point, that our history schools can regard the results of their work with satisfaction, and even with sober pride.

Is it not somewhat disquieting, then, that almost all the higher organization of historical studies is out of action or at best continues on a 'care and maintenance' footing? The publications of the Public Record Office and the Historical Manuscripts Commission are suspended; university research is almost at a standstill; undergraduates in our faculties are few in numbers; little provision is made for the future need of teachers of our subject in universities and schools. We grudge nothing to the service of the state, and we do not doubt that the state has needed all that it has taken; but, in the interests of the state itself, we are entitled to ask whether historical studies are at the present moment sufficiently valued. Already the supply of trained his-

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torians is inadequate to the official demand; the same is true of men and women who have received a general education in our historical schools. We cannot complain if a unique emergency restricts our academic life; but the emergency has lasted long: in the two wars some of our mature historians have spent nine years away from their special studies. When we plan for the return of peace in the future we must boldly ask for the approval we have earned and for the large sums of money which will be needed to bring our whole machinery back into full working trim.

Indeed, we ought to increase the range of our studies to cover still more countries and subjects. Here in Cambridge the munificence of the University Press has already made provision for American history, and there are other regions, such as the Slavonic lands, the Far East and Latin America, which we shall evidently need to study in the future more closely than hitherto. We shall also need more specialized guidance in various aspects of history nearer home, such as the fine arts; and these needs will continue to expand. Music, for instance, has become of late so significant a part of English life, that it may soon claim a place in our historical studies. If I look forward to such an increase in the number of our historical specialists, I have, let me hasten to add, no desire that the work of undergraduates should be more intensely specialized than it is already. On the contrary, if I may speak for myself, I should like to see undergraduates, and not only undergraduates but my own contemporaries as well, less exclusively absorbed in the

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study of monographs and periodicals than some of them appear to be, and more at leisure to read the great classics of historical and other writing, which have more durable merits than that of being up-to-date. Yet historical knowledge, like our knowledge of the natural sciences, is built up by specialists, who perpetually revise and correct the details of accepted conclusions. We must initiate the undergraduate into their methods, and we must not allow him to suppose that important results can be obtained by airy generalization or uncritical dogmatism.

Partly for this reason the historical schools in our universities have never paid much attention to a kind of history which is one of the most popular with the general reading public, the books of outlines or philosophical history which trace the fortunes of civilizations through hundreds or even thousands of years. The one standing joke against the historian is that if you ask him a question he says 'That is not in my period', and it seems reasonable to think poorly of him if his knowledge of his period is not set in a framework of universal history. We ought, however, first to be sure that we are not asking him to do more than can be fairly expected.

Some historians, and far more people who are not historians, believe that there is a general process of history which explains all its parts. This belief takes many forms. One form is the belief in progress, the belief that in spite of complications and set-backs, Man throughout his existence has been moving from bad to better and will finally attain to some good or best. The idea of progress, in all

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its variations from the eighteenth-century faith in human perfectibility onwards, has been most popular when the final happy outcome appeared tolerably near at hand: it arose among men who felt that their own age was exceptional and had put the past behind it. The cruel turn of events in our generation has thrown many people back on an earlier type of belief in a general process of history, that which rejects progress and traces cycles of growth and decay. Much learning and much ingenuity have been devoted lately to explaining the mechanism of these cycles or to explaining that they work not by any mechanism but by a living principle. All these doctrines, whether of progress, of cycles, and yet others which profess only to reveal the laws of change, have this in common: they maintain that history taken as a whole has a plot. They imply that once you grasp the plot, you will be able to find the point of everything that happens to the world. The historical world, they tell us, is a planned world; the historical process (which nowadays usually includes the evolution of non-human nature) explains itself. There is nothing outside it that we need to apprehend in order to explain it.

There are many good reasons why working academic historians should distrust these ready-made keys to all historical problems. In their daily work of research they have to assume that each present moment, instead of being predetermined by everything that has already happened, is genuinely new. If the future is undetermined, history is not a whole; it is perpetually unfinished and there is no



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coherent whole consisting of past, present and future. For my own part I do not believe that any future consummation could make sense of all the irrationalities of the preceding ages. If it could not explain, still less could it justify. The crimes and sufferings of countless millions of human beings for a quarter of a million—or is it half a million?—years were facts as real as anything that can occur in the future in the same historical process. The future cannot undo them, and any one of them by itself frustrates the search for rationality in the world of time. To me, therefore, it seems that no historical investigation can provide either a philosophy, or a religion, or a substitute for religion, or even an adequate excuse for doing without a religion.

If in this I express only a personal opinion, I think I should have a general consensus of the working historians with me if I confined myself to the simpler conclusion that we work with limited aims. We try to find the truth about this or that, not about things in general. Our work is not to see life steadily and see it whole, but to see one particular portion of life right side up and in true perspective. The portion may be very large or very small. It may be confined to the history of one village; it may extend to the history of one country, perhaps to the history of one civilization. To the historian these differences of size do not look the same as they do to most people, because for him, as the French say, every thing has something of everything in it: he writes about the village as part of a county and of a diocese, as influenced by what goes on in distant

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continents; he writes about one century as following after, and in a sense conditioned by, all the others. But he would be a very bad historian if he tried to cram the history of the whole world, or even of the next village, into his village history. He has a subject, definite in time and place, even if, like many subjects in the history of thought and even of action, it seems to reach out to all the confines of knowledge. The historian's aims are limited by the succession of times and by positions in space.

In practice, of course, we always have to decide as we go along how to define our subjects and on what scale to treat them so as to avoid superficiality on the one hand and narrowness on the other. From the technical and from the literary point of view the historian's success or failure depends on innumerable decisions to include this and exclude that, which taken together constitute his selection of what he is to say. Even for the quickest and most confident worker it is often extremely difficult to decide whether to include or reject a particular fact. We have devices for evading the difficulty, for instance footnotes and appendices, to which we can relegate information which we wish to keep but cannot entirely assimilate into the body of our work. These expedients, however, never do away with the difficulty altogether even in small matters; and it sometimes meets us in very large matters when we have to decide whether to follow up some line of enquiry or to leave it to other workers. Now here we ought as far as possible to decide not by some mechanical rule of thumb, but by a really constructive judgment. Sometimes we