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The Rede Lecture 1929  
John Buchan  
Excerpt  
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THE CAUSAL  
AND  
THE CASUAL IN HISTORY

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*Mr Vice-Chancellor,  
Ladies and Gentlemen*

A VISITOR TO CAMBRIDGE FROM THE sister University, especially a visitor on such an errand as mine, is not likely to be forgetful of the special genius of the place. He remembers that for some centuries Cambridge has been the chosen home of the natural sciences; that, while keeping a shrewd eye upon practical applications, she has not allowed the lure of immediate rewards to divert her from the quest of truth; and that one of her traditional toasts has been “God bless the higher mathematics and may they never be of the

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slightest use to anybody”. Here, if anywhere on the globe, he may expect to find a proper notion of what constitutes a science. He will also, if he have historical interests, remember that within recent years Cambridge has been fruitful in pronouncements on the meaning of history. In 1903 Professor Bury proclaimed: “History is a science—no less and no more”; while it has been the happy task of your present Regius Professor to emphasise the other side of the truth—that Clio is a Muse, the daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, and the mother of Orpheus.

I propose, with Cambridge’s scientific fame in my mind, and with these sayings of two of her most eminent historians to guide me, to make some further observations on the Muse of History. She is a lady of many parts. She has her laboratory, no doubt, and her record office; she has, beyond question, her lyre and her singing robes. But the character in which I would exhibit her this afternoon is homelier than

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these. I can picture Clio with knitted brows, striving to disentangle the why and the wherefore of things. I can picture her with rapt eyes, making epic and drama out of the past. But I can picture her most easily with the puzzled and curious face of a child, staring at the kaleidoscope of the centuries, and laughing—yes, laughing—at an inconsequence that defies logic, and whimsicalities too fantastic for art.

I

Let me begin by making concessions to every school. History is an art, and it is also a science; we may say that it is an art which is always trying to become more of a science. As a science it is concerned with causation. The past, if it is to satisfy intelligent minds, must be presented as a sequence of effects and causes. History is not content with an accumulation of facts; it seeks to establish relations between facts. Like every other science, it is a form of thought, and, like every other science, it

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aims at the attainment of truth. The past cannot be regarded as a mere pageant. Events do not follow each other only in succession of time. Even from the point of view of art, history must have its own inevitableness; and, from the point of view of science, it must aim at representing the whole complex of the past as a chain, each link riveted to the other by a causal necessity.

That is an ideal which we may well admire. It represents an instinct at which we dare not cavil—one of the oldest of human instincts, the instinct to rationalise. I learn from the newspapers that there is a hopeful movement on foot to-day towards what is called the “rationalising” of industry, and there is no reason why the modest labours of Clio’s domain should be exempt from the impulse. History must be more than a chronicle; it must be synoptic and interpretative.

In practice, rationalisation may take many forms. To begin with, there are the

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high philosophers, the professional metaphysicians. If Bolingbroke was right, and history is philosophy teaching by examples, it is clearly most important to get at the philosophy. Then there are those who fix their eyes upon scientific method, and, like Taine, believe that by means of a number of categories of determinable causes every historical event can be mathematically explained. Others are content to seek a formula, and there are many kinds of formulas. There is the formula derived from metaphysics—the Hegelian dialectic, for example, with its sequence of thesis and antithesis and synthesis; or, in a simpler form, Louis Blanc’s succession of authority, individualism and fraternity; or, simpler still, the mysticism which finds the key in a single aspect, like Karl Marx’s economic interpretation. Or you may have the unifying notion in the shape of a metaphor, a pictorial conception, such as the idea of the past as a cyclic or a spiral process. You may get a loose interpretative principle in

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something akin to biological evolution, or you may find it in an ethical or theological purpose. Lord Acton saw in history the working of the moral law, and Bishop Stubbs the revelation of the “Almighty Ruler of the world” busied with “leading the world on to the better, but never forcing, and out of the evil of man’s working bringing continually that which is good”.

There is no word to be said against the ambition of philosophers and scientists and even theologians to bring light and order into the dark places of the past. Every historian must have a thesis, some principle of illumination to guide him, and the value of his work will largely depend upon the sanity and profundity of that thesis. But I would suggest that, the subject-matter of history being what it is, we should be chary of becoming too dogmatic about any principle of interpretation which we put forward. For history works under conditions wholly unlike those of the natural sciences, and historic truth must be something very

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different from mathematical truth, or even from biological truth.

The philosophers need not trouble us. The awful gambols of a metaphysical doctrine are apt now and then to make nonsense of history, as when Hegel contemplated the stately process of the Absolute Will, and found its final expression in Germany before 1840—a view more flattering to Germany than to the Absolute Will. But if the metaphysician likes to explain everything by some such process, he is welcome to try, so long as he admits that he cannot expound its precise working.

The scientific historian is more dangerous. The older school, of the type of Buckle and Guizot, believed that they had established historical laws of universal validity, and provided a clockwork uniformity of effects and causes. It would appear that they misunderstood the kind of material with which they had to deal. M. Bergson has shown us that half the blunders of philosophy are due to the

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application of the methods and ideals of physical science to spheres of thought where they are strictly inapplicable. In the kaleidoscope of the past we cannot, as a rule, sort out effects and causes with any precision, nor can we weigh events in the meticulous scales which science demands. Even when causes are reasonably plain, their classification eludes us. We cannot tell which is the *causa causans*, which are proximate, or efficient, or final. We must be content with generalisations which are only generalisations and not laws, with broad effects and massed colours. The weakness of the scientific historian is that he under-rates the complexity of human nature. He would turn mankind into automata, motives into a few elementary emotions, and the infinitely varied web of life into a simple geometrical pattern. Order and simplicity are great things, but they must be natural to the subject and not due to the blindness of the historian. You remember Sainte-Beuve's comment on Guizot:



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I am one of those who doubt if it is given to man to embrace the causes and sources of his history with this completeness and certitude. It is as much as he can do to reach an imperfect understanding of the present....History seen from a distance undergoes a strange metamorphosis; it produces the illusion—most dangerous of all—that it is rational. The perversities, the follies, the ambitions, the thousand queer accidents which compose it, all these disappear. Every accident becomes a necessity....Such history is far too logical to be true.

On this point we are perhaps a little more modest to-day than our fathers were. But we are always apt to forget that history cannot give us the precise and continuous causal connections which we look for in the physical sciences. All that we get are a number of causal suggestions, with a good many gaps in them, and if we try to get more we shall do violence to historical truth. We shall be in danger of writing history in order to prove something, and thereby losing that “disinterested intellectual curiosity” which is the only avenue to truth. We shall try to make the

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accidental the inevitable, and to explain the inexplicable. We shall refuse to recognise the fundamental irrationality of a large part of Clio's domain.

An example of this fallacy is the attitude of the would-be scientific historian towards great men. The hero in history is a terrible nuisance to the lover of dapper generalities. He breaks the symmetry and spoils the syllogism. What is to be done with him? The scientific mind likes to deal with human nature in the lump, for it is aware that you can generalise with reasonable accuracy about the behaviour of masses of people, when you cannot dogmatise about any single one of them. But what about the daimonic figures who obstinately refuse to be merged in the mass? The embarrassed scientist is driven to one of two courses. Either he declares that the great people had but little influence on the course of events, that the real motive force was this or that intellectual movement or economic grouping. But in many cases this is simply