

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## HISTORY AND THE READER



**A**FTER the high standard set by our President's beautiful address last year, I fear that you will find my remarks this evening somewhat pedestrian. But at any rate the subject I have chosen, "History and the Reader," raises a real question, or rather a number of real questions, on which opposite opinions have been held by people of wide and deep learning and high cultivation.

The fundamental question is whether history has any important relation to the reading public at all, or whether it is "a science, no more and no less," as was said in 1903 by Professor Bury, my predecessor in the Chair of History at Cambridge.

Bury was a scholar of very high distinction, and anything he said deserved most respectful consideration. But in 1903, as a rash young man, I ventured to controvert his definition of history as being a science and no more. I argued that it was both a science and an art: that the discovery of historical facts should be scientific in method, but that the exposition of them for the reader partook of the nature of art, the art of written words commonly called literature. More than forty years have passed since I entered upon that controversy, and I hold the same opinion still, as to the dual nature of history.

To-day it is no longer necessary to talk on this subject in a controversial tone, for historians are more eclectic and tolerant of diversities in historical methods than some of their predecessors of forty years ago. There are many living historians, finer and more truly scientific scholars than I can claim to be, who have been most generous in their attitude towards my own historical endeavours. And

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

there are a number of historical scholars who throw the results of their research into a literary form, and thereby secure the attention of a very wide public. History is no longer, as it was at the opening of this century, in the trammels of a theory that tended to make it dull. It is once more a part of the current literature of the day, often eagerly sought for by the public, though of course some historical works appeal more to the specialists, and others more to the general reader. But there is no hard and fast line between these two kinds of history.

Please, therefore, do not regard this address as part of a controversy, but only as an attempt at definition, and an enquiry into the value, or rather the values, of history to the reader.

Before approaching the question of the value of history to the general reader, I will make a few remarks on the history of history. For us Europeans, the Greek and Roman historians stand as the great originals. Herodotus and Thucydides regarded history both as a science and an art, although they may not have used that phraseology. They took great pains in collecting facts, though travel and conversation were their sources, rather than documents of which there were not many in those days. They then threw the results of what they had collected into the form of literature. Speaking under correction from classical scholars, I should imagine that we do not know how far Herodotus and Thucydides were able to arrive at all the true facts, or how far their deductions were correct. But we feel, I think, that they both sincerely sought the truth. Professor Cornford indeed argued that even Thucydides allowed his conclusions to be to some extent affected by his artistic or dramatic instincts, but this is denied by others. With Tacitus, I suppose, we feel less sure as to the impartiality of his statements, though he was pre-eminent among Roman historians in literary power. Be

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

that as it may, the tradition which Greece and Rome bequeathed to the Europe of the Renaissance was the tradition of history both as a science of facts, and as an art appealing to the general reader.

In the Middle Ages there had been some good historical work done by English monks like Matthew Paris, chiefly chronicles of contemporary events. With the Renaissance, the study of the ancient historians made modern historians more ambitious. In early Stuart times Sir Walter Raleigh solaced his captivity in the Tower by writing his monumental *History of the World*. To our generation it is unreadable, in spite of some magnificent and famous passages, but in its own day it was very widely read and exercised a great influence on the public. After that, Clarendon and Burnet carried the art of writing contemporary history to a high point. In the same era, that is in the later seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, a school of English antiquarians of great ability and zeal laid the foundation of the scientific study of the documents of the Middle Ages, in publications like those of Dugdale, Hearne, Rymer, Wake and Anthony Wood. In their work we have early examples of the scientific study of the documents of the past, which is the principal method of modern historical research.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, history in England fully developed its modern form, which has since been little changed. Three men stand out as the creators of the norm of modern historiography: Hume, Robertson and Gibbon. Gibbon is the greatest, but Hume and Robertson were his predecessors, and those two Scots have a very great place in the history of history in these islands. They made the history-reading public in Britain, which Gibbon inherited from them. In Gibbon the perfection both of the science and of the art of history were reached, and has never since been surpassed.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

During the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, History was regarded in England as a specialized branch of literature; history books were extensively bought and read by the large educated public of that day. Macaulay and Carlyle thought of their work as a part of the literature of their country, and their books sold as well, I believe, as those of any novelist except Dickens. But Carlyle and Macaulay were not superficial, any more than Gibbon had been superficial; they had great faults but they had not the fault of want of learning. They set a fine example by their zeal in the collection of evidence from original sources. In his *Cromwell* and his *Frederic*, Carlyle was his own Dryasdust. Macaulay's reading was stupendous. But the interpretation they put on the evidence they collected was often faulty. No doubt they lacked something of the scientific spirit in the method of collating of evidence on which so great stress was laid in the academic reaction that took place in the closing years of the century.

That reaction against "literary history," as it was scornfully called, was rampant fifty years ago, when I commenced historian. It began in the Universities and was meekly accepted by the general public as a pronouncement made *ex cathedra*. History, it was agreed, was no longer to be written for the general reader and his likes; history books were henceforth to contain only the learned talk of historians with one another. If the public sometimes overheard that talk, so much the better, but that was a matter of secondary importance. History was to have nothing to do with literature. It was a science, no less and no more. Two of my predecessors in the Chair at Cambridge loudly proclaimed this doctrine, but the two greatest Cambridge historians, Acton and Maitland, never went these doctrinal lengths, and both of them were most friendly to me and to my young hopes of writing literary history. To-day professional historians are tolerant of the diversities of

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

historical aim in their brotherhood, and not a few of them successfully practise the art of writing literary history. And the public appears to welcome their efforts.

But the anti-literary or scientific reaction among the historians of fifty years ago, though it has now spent its force, or at least lost its intolerance, had at the time its uses and its *raison d'être*. I think it did both good and harm. I should like to summarize its principal causes.

First of all, history was at that time—half a century ago—becoming a very important subject of teaching and examination at the Universities, to some extent rivalling or even displacing Classics as the most popular “Arts” subject of general education. Now if history is to be learned and taught at the Universities, it cannot be taught as a “soft option,” a branch of literature. Something rigorous like Stubbs’ *Constitutional History*, and some study of the laws of historical evidence is desirable. This aspect (the scientific aspect if you like to call it so) of history was necessarily, and on the whole rightly stressed, in University teaching and study. I think Macaulay and Carlyle themselves would have been even better historians than they were, if they had been through an academic course of history such as they could have got if they had lived at the end of the nineteenth century instead of at the beginning. What was wrong with the historical reaction at the end of Victoria’s reign, was not the positive stress it laid on the need for scientific method in weighing evidence, but its negative repudiation of the literary art, which was declared to have nothing whatever to do with the historian’s task.

A second, and less respectable cause of the reaction, was the influence of Germany. In the last years of Victoria, Bismarck’s Germany was the admired of all admirers, not least in academic circles. The American Universities, then rapidly rising in size and importance, modelled themselves not on the English but on the German example.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

And, even in British Universities, Germany was for a while regarded as the fount whence dons and men should draw *lucem et pocula sacra*. We are always throwing over our national traditions, in every thing except politics. We have seen that happen again and again in art and in music. And so in History, fifty years ago, the English tradition of history written for the general reader, was thrown aside for the crabbed German ideal of the learned man who has nothing to do with literature.

A third cause of the "scientific" reaction in history was the predominance, prestige and success which had been attained by the physical sciences in the later years of the nineteenth century. Science had transmuted the economic and social life of mankind, and had revolutionized the religious and cosmological outlook of the educated world. These astonishing achievements of physical science led many historians, fifty years ago, to suppose that the importance and the value of history would be greatly enhanced if history was called a science, and if it adopted scientific methods and ideals and none others. I believe that this analogy was inexact. For the study of mankind does not resemble the study of the physical properties of atoms, or the life-history of animals. If you find out about one atom you have found out about all atoms, and what is true of the habits of one robin is roughly true of the habits of all robins. But the life history of one man, or even of many individual men, will not tell you the life history of other men. Moreover you cannot make a full scientific analysis of the life history of any one man. Men are too complicated, too spiritual, too various, for scientific analysis; and the life history of millions cannot be inferred from the history of single men. History, in fact, is a matter of rough guessing from all the available facts. And it deals with intellectual and spiritual forces which cannot be subjected to any analysis that can properly be called scientific.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

As Carlyle wrote long ago (*Fr. Rev.* ii. 1), “Every reunion of men, is it not, a reunion of incalculable influences; every unit of it a microcosm of influences; of which how shall science calculate or prophecy?”

Moreover the value and object of history is to a very large extent—I should say mainly—to educate the public mind. But physical science has its own uses and applications quite apart from the popularizing of its results. No doubt it is desirable to popularize its results as Eddington and Jeans and more than one Huxley have done; but the main end of science is the accumulation of specialized knowledge by specialists, which can be applied to the material needs of the world.

But the chief value of history is educative, its effect on the mind of the historical student, and on the mind of the public, and therefore the business of conveying the best work and the best thought of historians to the general reader is of prime importance. That can only be done by the art of writing, so that literary skill is a part of the equipment desirable at least in some historians, though not in all. There are diversities of gifts and diversities of tasks in Clio’s temple.

This brings me to the heart of my subject this evening, the question what is the value of history to the ordinary reader who is not a professional historian. Why should historians consider it a part of their business to convey their old and their new knowledge, their traditions and their discoveries, to the man in the street?

The older I get and the more I observe the tendencies and conditions of our latter day, the more certain I become that history must be the basis of humane (that is non-scientific) education in the future. Without some knowledge of history other doors will remain closed, or at best ajar. For example, the reading of poetry and prose litera-

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

ture, other than current books, must rest on some knowledge of the times past when the older books were written. Some understanding of the social and political scene of Chaucer's, Shakespeare's, Milton's, Swift's world, of the world of Boswell, of Wordsworth and Shelley and Byron, of Dickens and of Trollope, of Carlyle and Ruskin is necessary in order fully to appreciate the works in question, or even in some cases to understand what they are about. Music needs no such historical introduction to be fully appreciated, for it is not allusive, or only slightly. But literature is allusive; each book is rooted in the soil of the time when it was written. Unless our great English literature is to become a sealed book to the English people (as indeed I fear it is to many), our countrymen must know something of times past.

Literature and history are twin sisters, inseparable. In the days of our own grandfathers, and for many generations before them, the basis of education was the Greek and Roman classics for the educated, and the Bible for all. In the classical authors and in the Bible, history and literature were closely interwoven, and it is that circumstance which made the old form of education so stimulating to the thought and imagination of our ancestors. To read the classical authors and to read the Bible was to read at once the history and the literature of the three greatest races of the ancient world. No doubt the Classics and the Bible were read in a manner we now consider uncritical, but they were read according to the best lights of the time and formed a great humanistic education. I fear that to-day the study both of the Classics and of the Bible has dwindled to small proportions. What has taken their place? To some extent the place has been filled by a wider and more correct knowledge of history and a wider range of literature. But I fear that a great part of the lacuna has been filled up by rubbish.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

Similarly, and only in a lesser degree than in the case of literature, the enjoyment and understanding of architecture and of painting and of all the domestic arts, are enhanced by knowledge of history. The man who knows no history can travel through Italy thinking it very pretty and picturesque and queer, but understanding very little of what he sees. Foreign travel is enjoyable and instructive largely in proportion to the amount of historical knowledge which we take with us across the Channel. But I am glad to observe that the power of enjoying old buildings by means of historical knowledge and imagination is very widely spread to-day. That is something to build on, educationally and culturally. In the years before the outbreak of the war, as many as 15,000 people every year visited Housesteads, to see Borcovicus Fort on the Roman Wall, a property of the National Trust. That is to say, 15,000 people a year, speeding along the Carlisle-Newcastle road, got out of their motor-cars or buses, or got off their bicycles, and walked half a mile uphill to inspect the ruins of some old Roman buildings on that wild moor. There is no beauty in the ruins which are little more than foundations, but the historical imagination of the visitors was touched. Some knew, more went away desiring to know, something of the history of the Romans in Britain.

The visitors to ruined abbeys and castles, to country houses and parish churches, enjoy themselves in proportion as they are equipped with historical knowledge, and with the historical imagination and curiosity that leads them to desire such knowledge. Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the life blood of real civilization.

The Anglo-Saxons, though more important than the Romans in the History of England, have left fewer monuments, for the Saxons' buildings were of wood, not of stone, except only their churches, and most of their

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61175-3 - History and the Reader  
G. M. Trevelyan  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

churches were replaced by lordlier structures after the Norman Conquest. So there is a tendency for the Anglo-Saxons to drop out of the popular picture of our island history. Out of sight, out of mind. Yet, even so, there is a considerable curiosity about our Saxon forefathers, a desire to know the results of the very fine work, by which the Anglo-Saxon scholars and archaeologists of the last thirty years have done so much to reveal the truth about that long and vital period in the making of England. Mr. R. H. Hodgkin's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* is an admirable example of the way in which the results of the latest scholarship, difficult and abstruse in their nature, can be made understandable and attractive to the general reader. Professor Stenton's great work on *Anglo-Saxon History*, recently published in the Oxford History of England, will appeal, perhaps, to fewer readers, but those who will apply themselves to read it will have the fascinating privilege of seeing the very pulse of the machine of scientific historical discovery at work. Mr. Hodgkin's and Professor Stenton's Anglo-Saxon histories are excellent examples of two different kinds of scholarly history, somewhat differently related to the needs of the reading public.

But the interest and value of history is very much more than the key it affords to the literature, art and monuments of the past. In itself history raises and attempts to answer two great questions—(1) what was the life of men and women in past ages? and (2) how did the present state of things evolve out of the past? The reader can be interested in the past for its own sake, for the value or instruction he finds in former states of society and former habits of thought which have passed away and left little or nothing behind. Or else the reader may be interested chiefly in the explanation which history alone can afford of the origin of the institutions, beliefs, habits and prejudices of the various peoples of the world at the present day. In other