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## The Outlook for History

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Many careful students of modern life assert that they discern in society a widespread discontent with the results of historical study as pursued today.

After reading a score of recent books and magazine articles on the subject the sentence quoted above naturally comes to mind. One can scarcely believe it is thirty years old, yet it is the first sentence in the first article of the first number of the *American Historical Review*, October, 1895. A critic thirty years later says:

It is not unfair, then, to designate the current political historiography as an incomplete melodramatic exposition of a superficial and distorted view of human society and social evolution.

Dr. Harry Barnes, author of the statement just quoted, might be said to speak from experience, having written a considerable amount of "current political historiography."

Fifteen years ago Dr. Edward Channing said:

In looking about for writers of history in this country at the present moment the seeker is met with greater discouragement than would befall him in almost any other path of original research.

In 1920 the American Historical Association appointed a committee to inquire into the condition of historiography in

the United States. John Spencer Bassett writing the preface to the committee report in 1926 says :

About one fact in this connection we can hardly have two opinions: fifty years ago historians like Bancroft and Prescott stood side by side with the great poets at the top of the world of letters. \* \* \* Today the historian's influence has waned.

James Harvey Robinson after a lifetime of service at Columbia rather suddenly discovered that his methods were wrong. C. W. Alvord seemed to realize near the close of his life that his work had been largely in vain. Nearly every one of the thirty volumes of the *American Historical Review* has a paper in similar vein, most of them written by the presidents of the American Historical Association.

The laymen reading this literature would feel that the historical profession was on the point of bankruptcy and the younger members might almost despair. There is no intention here to analyze this literature of revolt or despair but a few suggestions can scarcely be avoided.

In the first place the Association is on an extraordinarily high plane of scholarship. Few real scholars, students, are ever satisfied with the results of their work. Newton, Darwin, Descartes were very modest concerning the magnitude of their discoveries. History is perhaps the amplest field of human investigation and no single individual can rightly hope to accomplish much.

Secondly, the critical is the proper professional attitude. There is no active profession able to meet all its promises. Not only in results but in methods is constant change necessary. Isaac Blackford was doubtless the best lawyer in Indiana a century ago but if living today would scarcely be able to practice, due to changes both in methods of practice and in the nature of litigated questions. It is notorious that written histories are soon out of date for similar reasons.

Thirdly, society has been led to expect from historians, especially from the teaching members, services which no historian can ever hope to render.

Lastly, there is a seemingly hopeless variance among members of the profession concerning the purpose or purposes of history. Originally history was a form of literature whose

chief purpose was entertainment. As such the early historians were rivals of the epic bards in the art of story-telling. During the ecclesiastical period of the middle ages history was the servant of theology, devoted to morals. During the period of Rationalism history was supposed to contribute to philosophy, especially in the field of cosmogony. During the eighteenth and far into the nineteenth century history was political. With the rise of nationality history became patriotic. Naturally those who allowed themselves to be obsessed with these restricted views were disappointed.

The chief interest of historians is in the past. They are particularly susceptible to historical influences; Gibbon would have preferred to live in the time of the great Roman emperors. They are peculiarly liable to become separated from the present and lose faith in the future. Jeremiah in his lamentations had nothing on a group of elderly historians discussing either the future or the past. For these and other reasons we need not be surprised at this persistent note of protest or even revolt by professional historians.

It will be generally accepted without argument that history is limited strictly by available evidence. Although accepted tacitly by historians and readers, theoretically, it is ignored in practice by many writers and perhaps a large majority of readers. One can scarcely believe that many readers ever make an effort to satisfy themselves on this point. Nevertheless, since the time of Gibbon, Niebuhr and Ranke evidence has been a condition precedent of history. This reaction followed or perhaps was in response to the failure of the attempt to write a satisfactory cosmic philosophy from the standpoint of history.

A fascinating delusion of history has always been that by looking down the trail by which we have arrived at the present we will be enabled to prognosticate the future. This we have termed the philosophy of history. A century ago it was a promising fallacy as the Hegelians and Montesquieux testify. But the spirit of prophecy refused to settle on the historians. The failure of the conclusion, as usual, suggested a critical examination of the premises. Herodotus and his family were haled into court, cross-examined and convicted both of acci-

dental and intentional error. Von Ranke, the herald of the old "new history," then announced that the purpose of history would thenceforth be to ascertain what are the facts of the past—Was ist die Wahrheit?

Once the task was undertaken no craftsmen ever plied their trade with greater zeal. We rolled the stones away that the graves might give up their secrets, we unearthed the ruins of ancient cities, we reconstructed the dead languages, we sent among the savage tribes and studied their kindergarten institutions, we pushed back the frontiers of the prehistoric world in every direction and gathered the spoils into our museums. All the literary monuments were gathered together, authenticated, restored, transliterated and translated. Written documents, letters, papers, official and private, were collected, registered, calendered, indexed, edited and published.

A marvelous critical technic was developed. The workers were divided into historians, economists, archaeologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philologists, political scientists and of late psychologists, each with minor court rules for sifting evidence and the witnesses have been cross-questioned and every error properly marked with a black flag.

In our back-yard we keep a vast number of novitiates learning to use our tools by gathering, interpreting and comparing evidence on small and insignificant episodes which may be ready for use by the masters in the preparation of their numerous histories.

More and more as the century passed attention was fixed on criticism. From the Ecole des Chartes of Paris down to the small college seminary students were trained in research, in the mysteries of heuristic, internal and external criticism, in the conventions of editing, in bibliography, note-taking and foot-noting. Nothing more natural than that many instructors would stray from the main path and devote their efforts to these minor operations. Often instructors gave their time to culling information from popular magazines and called it research. We are acquainted with the dissertation overloaded with bibliography, with the one overwhelmed with foot notes, with the one filched from some secondary source

and the one patched up from the periodicals. Even though these shortcomings are admitted, they are hardly sufficient excuse for giving up the field. Other professions such as the law, the ministry, medicine, geology and the rest have similar difficulties, some of them much more serious. History has made great progress in the century. Historical scholarship is certainly higher than it was a century ago. From a modest handmaid in the department of the Classics history has become one of the larger departments in the universities with as large and noisy a faculty as any except Literature.

Two presidents of the American Historical Association, Roosevelt and Wilson, have served as presidents of the United States. While neither rose to the highest level of statesmanship each acquitted himself honorably.

With some successes to its credit the historians still have some serious immediate problems. The world is always impatient for results. We are confronted with a demand for a history of civilization along the lines of behavioristic psychology; not merely the record of the past but an answer to the question "Why do folks behave as they do." This is referred to by its proponents as the New History. This "new type of historian" "holds that the purpose of history is to give the present generation such a complete and reliable picture of the past that it will be able to arrive at an intelligent comprehension of how and why the present state of civilization came about." They "maintain that history must take into account the sum total of human achievement." They admit and therefore it need not be charged, that they have given it "a broader, sounder and more human content."

A careful analysis of the above proposal reduces it to a bit of self advertising. For at least a century what we are pleased to call scientific history has been engaged in preparing a history of civilization. Slowly and even painfully error and prejudice have been sifted from the materials. From time to time the sifted materials have been organized, or, as the New Historians prefer, synthesized.

The "How" and the "Why" in history lead us into much more difficult grounds. In the ordinary meaning of the word, How refers to the means used in accomplishing an end and so

comes in the field of historical investigation. Why is usually understood to refer to the motives in men's minds and these can only be approximated on the basis that men intend to do the things their actions would naturally lead to. This is historical interpretation and never can be settled absolutely by any methods now known to historians.

If a theological determination is implied in the How and Why, that is, How or Why life first began on this planet, we are led into a field where the documents fail us utterly. Mr. H. G. Wells in his *Outlines* has traversed this field with apparent confidence but so far as history is concerned it is only another illustration of the proverb of the fools and angels. The problem is clearly within the fields of Biology and Geology and it will scarcely make it history to print it under such a title. Of course polliwogs have a history but it is doubtful if it will throw much light on human conduct.

Again, if, under the questions How and Why, a theory of creation is implied, History or the historical method can furnish little or no evidence. We may have our individual preferences between the biological and theological theories but it is sheer vanity to attempt to discuss the question historically.

Again, it seems some of the new historians are bewildered by the mass of materials modern history has placed at public disposal and the very quantity does offer some difficulty. Some teachers, for instance, seem to think it necessary that students acquire this mass of material as information. Some writers, likewise, seem to think it necessary that no detail be left out of the written history. A more sensible solution would be to let the superabundant material lie in the libraries and museums until there is some legitimate demand. The geologist or zoologist does not feel constrained to use all his available material. There seems no immediate danger of preserving or accumulating too much.

As any one might suspect and as most historians know, the chief difficulty lies in the field of interpretation, often confused with internal or the higher criticism. The problem is difficult. Not only is it impossible to penetrate to the mind of the actor but nothing is more often disguised than our real intentions. Tact, discretion, strategy all consist essentially

in disguising intention and these are all honorable qualities. Add to these all the meaner traits, deception, lying, intrigue, chicanery and we have a formidable barrier. Nor is this all. From age to age the ruling motive in society has changed. At one time the world is religious, at another, mercenary, at another, political, while individuals may be governed by ambition, pride, sympathy, scientific or selfish interest and so on through the whole category.

For centuries we have halted on the question of the freedom of the will and just now it is the fashion of the New History to abolish the will altogether and assume that men's actions are determined by a long train of events the effects of which linger in the subconscious mind. This is certainly a partial truth but in a deeper sense it is the old game of passing the buck, since some one, sometime, must have originated the train of action. Accepted at its face the theory is not satisfactory. With such as the chief motive, history sinks almost to the level of a natural science and what is called character or personality in history disappears. There is no longer a distinction between Baalam and Baalam's Ass. However it has at least two arguments in its favor: it certainly is the proper interpretation of much of our routine conduct and it furnishes a comparatively easy escape from a very difficult situation. In a very real sense it is a return in disguise to the old doctrine of foreordination.

A similarly simple motive is the providential. Nothing is simpler than to attribute to a convenient deity the determination of moral conduct. The origin of this interpretation is apparent. It is not long since all kings seemed to consider themselves agents of the Most High and we still hear presidents of the United States prate somewhat similarly. Nor is the habit entirely passed with respectable historians, though it is used by indirection or innuendo. The thought is humiliating to reverent minds yet respectable readers and audiences tolerate it often with satisfaction. The *Deus ex Machina* formerly used by classical dramatists is now generally reduced to the servitude of politicians of doubtful virtue. In the text books it is especially vicious since nothing is more capable of evil than an honest ignorant person possessed with the idea

that providence is operating through him for the accomplishment of some purpose. Such assumed partnerships are more reprehensible because they include many ignorant or unwilling third parties. In the field of personal delusions there is perhaps none which so readily insinuates itself into the mind nor one that lingers more persistently in public opinion. One is much amused at the simple-minded Homer introducing his gods so freely in the affairs of men and yet the idea pervades modern historical literature. So far as conduct is concerned it serves only as a sedative to conscience and an abrogation of morality.

Natural Science has suggested the interpretation by environment. No question is made of its partial validity in the consideration of long periods. Both physical and mental adjustments have been necessary to meet the demands for food and shelter. It is a commonplace that the insular situation of England has had an influence on the English people, but the judgment belongs in the domain of geography. There is no documentary evidence back of it as there is back of the historical fact that Victoria was crowned in 1837. One would scarcely maintain that the conduct of George Third or Washington could be satisfactorily explained by geographical conditions. As a thoroughgoing ground of historical interpretation it is scarcely sufficient.

Quite recently has come a suggestion from the physiologists and pathologists that conduct is determined by the physical condition of the human organism. One may easily conclude that Charles V of Spain was influenced even decisively by a loathsome and deadly disease. General Grant on the contrary preserved his equanimity and continued his usual work up to the day of his death with full knowledge that his months were numbered by an equally slow and fatal disease. It is common knowledge that men act very differently under apparently similar pathological conditions. The idea appeals strongly to us at present but historians remember that astrology once had a similar appeal. Here again, as in the previous paragraph, the connection between conduct and pathological condition is inferential and not documentary and so not historical. However the question has great interest and promise to historians as well as to criminal courts and alienists.



During the last half century morality express or implied has been the determining factor in historical interpretation. It has never been wholly satisfactory, since there is no general agreement on ethical validity. Without entering into any discussion one may point out the wide differences between absolute and relative ethics. Whether one regards human sacrifice, polygamy, persecution, witchcraft and theft worthy of historical condemnation depends on his system of ethics. Historians as a rule profess to believe in relative ethics but usually manage to insinuate a judgment based on the absolute. They recognize the justice of trying a man by the standards of his time but they are usually overzealous to express their opinions concerning the standards.

It seems a confusion of thought to speak of the social or economic motive. These are merely the fields where morality functions in conduct. Outside these fields one rarely characterizes conduct as moral or immoral.

Here then is a real difficulty for the profession. The Biologists in the theory of evolution, operating through natural or other selection, have a working hypothesis. They assume with some confidence it has been thus from the beginning and will continue so. The physicist and chemist have almost absolute faith in the behavior of material and the validity of its laws. The historian having no universally accepted ground of explanation of the present is unable to satisfy himself as to how or whence we came or whither we are bound. Until the laws of humanity are as well understood as the laws of nature this difficulty will remain.

The question of motive is most prominent in biography. The difficulty has given rise to at least three forms of biographical writing. The simplest is epic in its nature. The biographer supplies the motive throughout and we have the simple personal, usually heroic, record. In the second form the biographer gives a history of the times, leaving to the reader to determine the part played by the subject. The third is documentary and usually is not very attractive. The first is used almost exclusively by the hero worshippers. It is to be found especially in the books intended for school children, where an attempt by the children to imitate the conduct of these hand-made heroes ultimately leads a large number of

them into crime. The second form of biography finds its readers among the more intelligent class while discriminating scholars demand the third.

In the first form the biographer allows his subject to hitch his wagon to a star and drive resistlessly over all surroundings and circumstances. This philosophy makes this form of biography the more pernicious in the hands of children. Whatever influence psychoanalysis, Freudianism, psychiatry, psychology and other forms of determinism will have on biography, it is certainly safe to predict that human biography will not soon be reduced to a mathematical formula by any one of these processes. Perhaps there will be a compromise and instead of our conventional hero swimming majestically up current or drifting helplessly down he will lay a three-quarter course down stream and cross as sensible swimmers have always done.

There seems a tendency at present to close the main historical office and devote our whole attention to by-products. We hear of applied history. The phrase is doubtless borrowed from science. Just what it means is not apparent in that sense. A scientist may devote his whole time to experiment and study. As such he is called a pure scientist. If he use his discoveries for practical or commercial purposes he is an applied scientist. Carrying out the comparison it is presumed a pure historian is one who devotes his whole time to the pursuit of historical truth or criticism and an applied historian makes a practical application or synthesizes. However valuable the distinction in science it doesn't seem to be of great worth to history. He would, I think, be a very poor engineer who was unable to demonstrate every principle he put into practice. In other words, if he has his laboratory clothes on he is a scientist; if he wears his overalls he is an engineer. Likewise if a historian devotes himself to research he is only a historian. If he writes up his finds in the economic field he is an economist, if in the field of politics, a political scientist; if in the field of society, a sociologist, etc. In every case he must perforce be a historian first. There is certainly no jealousy or envy from the historian's standpoint in the statement. In the sense that sociology claims social con-

ditions as its special bailiwick, history has none. No man, so far, has been discovered just making history. He has always been found rather in politics, business, or what not. There are two possibilities of mischief in useless division of work. There is no logical limit to the number, and some persons may even suspect virtue in mere division. For instance a political scientist may be looked upon as a distinct species of homo from a mere economist or anthropologist. The perennial New Historians are restless at the slow pace and would call off all the workers from the slow processes of research and throw them into the more spectacular fields of synthesis, forgetting that synthesis has ever tended to run ahead of analysis or research. One of the reasons why errors inhere so long in our school texts is the fact that texts are usually written by professional or hack writers rather than investigators.

It may indeed be time to send larger and larger numbers of trained historians into the field of active affairs. There is, I think, no doubt but that historical-mindedness and the historical attitude in all social affairs are worth while. A social question is half solved when its history is honestly written. There is no remedy for war half so potent as an honest history of wars. The danger again comes not from the plodder in laboratories but from the fakir in the field. For each Robinson doing constructive work there are ten Wells exploiting the field. For every trained historian, and no other can do dependable work, in a social, political or better business bureau there are five who have had the ordinary training of a Y. M. C. A. secretary. There seems little help for this until the general intelligence of the public is higher. Professional service cannot run far ahead of the intelligence of its own public.

For this condition of the public mind the historians must assume something more than their proportion of blame. Our own standards of professional criticism, especially in the popular magazines and newspapers, are low and subject in many instances to indirect mercenary influences. Personally I would much prefer to have the editor of the *American Historical Review*, or some person elected by the Association for that purpose, do all the critical writing.

Finally the matter of literary form must always give the profession trouble. Not all individuals who have historical inclinations and research ability have equal artistic skill. It is extremely difficult to train an artist. One may teach mathematics or history in the ordinary sense but artistic composition, even when the material will admit, requires training. A cursory reading of any of the recent histories will convince one that Professors Colby and Bassett were right when they charge present day historians with carelessness in their composition. In some of the best from last year's crop one can detect the jump from one reading note to another. Those of us who are lately from class room lectures remember the language of other alleged texts.

In this connection it may be pointed out that collegiate traditions and standards of scholarship are produced and preserved in the graduate schools. It has been tacitly agreed for centuries that the doctor's degree is the standard college teacher's requirement. Yet of the 1,579 teachers in the colleges of Indiana in 1925, 456 had only the bachelor's degrees, while 139 had no degrees at all. By combining these it is seen that forty per cent of the teaching was done by teachers with no preparation for collegiate teaching; forty per cent more held the master's degree, representing one year of advance study; while of the 389 doctors it is impossible to tell how many held merely honorary degrees, or how many gave all or part of their time to deanships or other executive work. Of the 389 doctors teaching in Indiana colleges, 200 are in Indiana University. In the History Department one-half our post graduates received their undergraduate training away from Indiana University.

Thus with eighty per cent of our college teaching done by teachers with merely high school qualifications we need not wonder that high school standards prevail in our colleges. In this connection it should be observed that merely making the work more difficult is no criterion of collegiate teaching. As nearly as can be expressed the difference lies in vision, viewpoint, or scholarship. Not having received these the under-graduate can scarcely be expected to impart them. History is a vastly different subject from the viewpoints of the bachelor and doctor.

Let me call attention in closing to yet another consideration. The modern college text book is a product largely of the recent tendency to synthesis. The latter word is misused but let it pass. I turn at random to the prize history of last year, "Mackenzie had crossed Canada to the coast." That I presume is a synthesis of Alexander Mackenzie's *Travels*. The reader has no possible clue to what Mackenzie it was, where, when, how or why he crossed. In fact the book is a series of unsupported judgments which the reader must memorize without understanding or verification. The volume in question has 500 pages of such unsupported judgments. So far as I know every college text now in use is open to the same observation. The student is left not in innocent ignorance but with a vast amount of alleged but defenseless information. No scientist would tolerate such a text or such teaching. Parkman synthesised the documents which he used and as a result almost every paragraph has all the details which an artist might need in illustrating it. The recent college texts and doctoral theses rarely, if ever, have enough concrete data to afford an illustration. This arid quality is largely responsible for such humiliations as the *Yale Chronicles* and Wells' *Outlines*.

After all is said we may wait in the full expectation that time will bring a remedy. The present, hectic, uncritical, period will pass as others have.