

History Teachers' Forum

DOES HISTORY HAVE MEANING?

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The answer to the above question will depend on what is understood by the word *meaning*. Few thoughtful students of the subject would care to defend the thesis that history has meaning in the sense that the cause of events has been determined by an all-wise creator with the idea of achieving a definite purpose such as the perfection of Christianity, the development of democracy, or the supremacy of the German nation.

In another sense of the word, history does have meaning, or perhaps it would be better to say that history *is* meaning. From this point of view, history might be defined as a racial experience, and, in the fullest sense of the word, it would include all that man has ever thought or done together with those things which have influenced his thought and his action.

The correctness of this view once admitted, no one could entertain any doubt as to the value of history. Since the wisdom of an individual depends in large measure on the volume of the experience which he has acquired, the study of history will be regarded as a means *par excellence* of obtaining wisdom. This will be true because, in addition to his own personal experience, the student of history will have a great reservoir of racial experience.

An excellent example of the value of history is seen in connection with the Federal Convention. James Madison was not the most brilliant member of that very able body. In this respect, he was easily surpassed by Hamilton. In personal experience he was excelled by Franklin, Washington and others. It was his insight into history that enabled the young Virginian to contribute enough to the making of the constitution to merit the appellation "Father of the Constitution."

The practical value of history once thoroughly realized, the problem of the historian will be the development of means and methods for the extraction of its meaning. To be the least successful in this undertaking, he must renounce the tendency to see in history little but old wives' tales and enter

resolutely upon a quest for the truth. This will be done not with the idea of debunking history, but in the spirit of the natural scientist, who, when he once came to understand that natural phenomena take place in obedience to law, abandoned myths as an explanation of the natural world and undertook the discovery of those laws.

In entering upon this course, the historian will not be on wholly uncharted seas. He will have the examples of not a few historians, notable among whom was Frederick Jackson Turner whose study of the influence of the frontier has been so serviceable in interpreting American history. Despite many examples to the contrary, however, the searchlight of the past has been but feebly turned on the problems of the present and the suspicion lurks that many who have spent years in the study of history know little more concerning the causes of present world chaos than those who have made no extended study of the past.

Failure to derive meaning from history may be due to a variety of causes. Students may have a false conception of the subject. Too often it is approached as a collection of "events" which have "happened." It is not seen that it is the totality of past experience and, therefore, like the experience of an individual, possesses continuity and unity; that to break it up into fragments, convenient as it may be for purposes of study, does violence to its nature as vivisection does violence to the nature of an animal.

Again failure to obtain an insight into the subject may be due to improper methods of study. The student doesn't always see that, in the study of history as in the study of mathematics, the mind must be used primarily as a workshop and only secondarily as a storehouse, that to put his principal reliance on memory is to encumber rather than to facilitate his endeavor. He may pass his examination more easily, but he will know less history, on each succeeding day thereafter.

Finally, failure to realize the possibilities of history may be due to a lack of proper mental equipment. To penetrate its secrets, the student should have a working knowledge of biology, psychology, sociology, economics, geology and geography. To see the truth of this statement one need only reflect on the extent of the historical influence of oil deposits,

a mountain range, the racial characteristics of the American Indian, or the mind of Napoleon.

Thus oriented and equipped, let the student place himself in the current of history at some place and time, as for example in Europe in the sixteenth century and study the effect of some well-known event, such as the discovery of America, in much the same way as a chemist studies a chemical reaction, the geologist the formation of the earth, or as a Turner studies the influence of the frontier. Would he not see strange forces—strange to the people of the period—breaking up long established customs and modes of life and tearing and rending at institutions? Would not a study of these forces throw a flood of light on such historical phenomena as the decay of feudalism, the Protestant revolt, the growth of the national state, or the development of constitutional government? The influence of the rise of the general price level, alone, due to the turning loose in the channels of trade of vast quantities of gold and silver found in America was surely tremendous. Need we be surprised if many a man, affected by this force and yet not understanding it, became fighting mad and willing to go to war on the pretext that seemed most plausible at the moment?

“Not different from what we are accustomed to,” some may say. Others will dismiss the matter as fantastic and vain imagining. However that may be, it seems to the present writer that no one has so good an opportunity to be of service to a bewildered world as the historian. One gropes about in the darkness of a room, but moves with ease and dispatch when the light is turned on. Certainly conditions are such that we need all the light we can get, and never was there less chance of finding a solution to prevailing problems by fumbling around in the darkness. Are our eyes so accustomed to shadows that they cannot endure the light of history?