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The Historian's Craft

by

Marc Bloch

Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of the Men Who Write It

VINTAGE BOOK A CARAVELLE EDITION

THE HISTORIAN'S CRAFT

by Marc Bloch

INTRODUCTION BY JOSEPH R. STRAYER

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY PETER PUTNAM

A Caravelle Edition

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TO
LUCIEN FEBVRE
BY WAY OF A DEDICATION

IF THIS BOOK should one day be published—if, begun as a simple antidote by which, amid sorrows and anxieties both personal and collective, I seek a little peace of mind, it should turn into a real book, intended to be read—you will find, my friend, another name than yours inscribed upon its dedication page. You can surmise the name this place requires; it is the one permissible allusion to a tenderness too deep and sacred to be spoken. Yet how can I resign myself to seeing you appear in no more than a few chance references? Long have we worked together for a wider and more human history. Today our common task is threatened. Not by our fault. We are vanquished, for a moment, by an unjust destiny. But the time will come, I feel sure, when our collaboration can again be public, and again be free. Meanwhile, it is in these pages filled with your presence that, for my part, our joint work goes on. It will keep what was always its rhythm of fundamental agreement, enlivened, on the surface, by the profitable interplay of our affectionate discussions. Certainly, more than one of the ideas which I propose to uphold I have taken straight from you. With many

of the others, I cannot, in honesty, decide whether they are yours, mine, or both of ours. I flatter myself that you will often approve. And you will sometimes rebuke me. In either case, there will be another bond between us.

Fougères,
Creuse,
May 10, 1941

INTRODUCTION

WESTERN MAN has always been historically minded, and this trait has been accentuated during the last two centuries. Laymen are more aware than ever before that they are living and making history—witness the care with which great business organizations are preserving their archives, and the determination of our military authorities to have the history of their commands written "while it is hot." Certainly the number of historians, both professional and amateur, has greatly increased in recent years, as has the quantity of historical writing—quality is another matter. We have histories of games and histories of mail-order houses, histories of diseases and histories of delusions, histories of transportation and histories of highways, as well as the old standard mixtures of political, economic, and social history.

Yet the more history we write the more we worry about the value and nature of history. The increase in the number of books on historiography and historical methodology is proportionally far greater than the increase in the number of historians. Such books have been especially numerous in the last ten or fifteen years, for obvious reasons. We are all asking, as the author of this book asks in his first sentence: "What

is the use of history?" What is the use of history, when the values of the past are being ruthlessly discarded? What is the use of history, when we repeat our old errors over and over again? And even if we are sure that history has its uses, are we able to write the kind of history that can be used?

These are the questions that troubled Marc Bloch, as they have troubled so many of his fellow workers. They must have pressed on him with almost unbearable weight in the dark days of 1941, when he began this book. A veteran of the First War, called back to the colors at the age of fifty-three in 1939, he had seen the collapse of France and of everything in which he believed. His Jewish ancestry made it impossible for him to return to his professorship at the Sorbonne; he took refuge first with the exiled University of Strasbourg at Clermont-Ferrand, then with the University of Montpellier. He could have fled to the United States, but he refused to leave France, even the France of Vichy. As he said in his testament, he was so thoroughly French, so impregnated with the spirit and tradition of France, that he did not think he could breathe freely in another country. And if the book was begun under evil auspices it was continued under worse. When the Germans crossed the line of demarcation, after the landings in North Africa, Bloch was driven from academic life. He became a member of the Resistance, a leader of the group centering in Lyons. There he was captured by the Germans in the spring of 1944, imprisoned, and cruelly mistreated. On

June 16, as the Nazi hold on France began to weaken, he was taken from his cell and shot in an open field near Lyons with twenty-six other patriots.

The book was never finished. But, in the large fragment which was completed, we find no bitterness, no discouragement. Bloch kept his serenity, his faith in France, and his belief in the value of history. He used a few of his war experiences, as he used other episodes in his life, to illustrate attitudes and beliefs which he felt were common to many men. But this book is not a product of the war; it is the fruit of the long years of peaceful study and reflection which made him a master of his trade.

As such, it is worth careful study. Not that Bloch was the greatest French historian of his generation, though he would certainly rank high in any list. Not even that he was the most widely read—others excelled in that art of combining exact knowledge with readability which has distinguished French scholarship for many years. His real eminence lay in the fact that he actually put into practice those recommendations for a new kind of history which the profession has been endorsing—and ignoring—for the last fifty years. Others have talked about the narrowness of purely political history, the evils of excessive specialization, and the unreality of the conventional periodization of history —without ever leaving their own limited fields. Bloch not only said that history was a whole, that no period and no topic could be understood except in relation to other periods and topics, but he constantly taught

and wrote in accordance with this belief. Though his most important work was in medieval history he gave a course, in his last years of teaching, on the economic development of the United States. Though the Sorbonne listed him as professor of economic history he never made the mistake of assuming that economic factors explain all human behavior. He knew that man is not entirely rational, that society is held together as much by beliefs and customs as by economic interests. He worked constantly for a "wider, more human history," for a history which described how and why people live and work together. He saw life as a whole, as a complicated interplay of ideals and realities, of conscious innovation and unconscious conservation. When he discussed institutions, they were not the petrified fictions of the lawyer, but the changing patterns which emerge from human life. When he discussed ideas, they were not the bloodless, literary abstractions of doctoral dissertations, but the hidden forces which determine behavior and the structure of society. He was capable of infinite attention to detail, but he never forgot that the details had meaning only in the larger framework of the history of human society. All this is illustrated in his fine work on *La société féodale*, a book which is far more than a description of feudal institutions. Throughout the two volumes he sought, above everything else, to understand and explain the state of mind and the habits of life which could produce and support feudal organization.

He was a great practitioner of the new approach to

history in another way, in his ability to discover and use new types of source material. Here again, historians have been preaching for many years that written records are not enough, that we must learn to follow other traces of man's activity in the past, but few historians have taken the trouble to learn how to use these difficult materials. Bloch, in what was probably his greatest book, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*, gave a perfect demonstration of how the job should be done. Old maps, place-names, ancient tools, aerial surveys, folklore—all contributed to his brilliant description of French society during the long centuries when agriculture was the predominant occupation.

These qualities were manifested not only in his books, but in the review *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, which he and Lucien Febvre founded in 1929. During the years before the war no other historical periodical had as much influence on the rising generation of scholars. In long review-articles Marc Bloch showed his consuming interest in all aspects of history, his complete freedom from all provinciality, and his generosity in recognizing or even overpraising the contributions of others. In addition, he poured forth an almost inexhaustible store of suggestions for further investigation. If all the books and articles which he called for had been written we should be closer to that history of humanity of which he dreamed.

This book is his testament as a historian—a thoughtful, honest statement by a great craftsman about the principles of his trade. Here he expressed his aims,

which were those of most historians of his own and younger generations. Here he set forth his conviction of the unity of all history and of the living connection between present and past which makes history something more than a game for dilettantes. It is unfortunate that he could not finish and polish his work—his style, never easy, is especially difficult in this work and must have given his translator some bad half-hours. But, even incomplete, Bloch has given us a noble statement of the historian's creed, a guide to his fellow workers, and an explanation of the meaning of their work to laymen.

JOSEPH R. STRAYER

A NOTE ON THE MANUSCRIPTS OF THE PRESENT BOOK

by Lucien Febvre

It is a delicate task, to be undertaken with many scruples, to prepare an unfinished manuscript for publication, especially when even those parts that had been given to the typist would certainly have received a last polishing from the author before going to the printer. But such scruples are outweighed by the satisfaction of making public, even in mutilated form, a notable book.

Marc Bloch long dreamed, as I have done, of putting down his ideas on history in an organized way. I often think, with bitter regret, that while there was yet time we should have collaborated to give our younger generation a kind of new Langlois and Seignobos,[1] to be the manifesto of another generation and the embodiment of an entirely different spirit. It is too late. At any rate, Marc Bloch, when events had deflected him from his path, attempted on his own to realize a plan which we had often discussed together.

I have elsewhere related how, serving as a staff officer in Alsace, and restless under the idleness of the

[1] [*Translator's note: This refers to the famous* Introduction aux Études Historiques, *long used in courses in methodology both in France and in the United States.*]

"phony war," he one day went to a storekeeper at Molsheim and bought a schoolboy's notebook, no doubt just such a one as that in which Henri Pirenne, interned in another village in the heart of Germany in the First War, wrote his history of Europe. On the first page, Bloch wrote a title:

HISTORY OF FRENCH SOCIETY
IN THE STRUCTURE OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION.

Somewhat later, he composed the dedication:

To *the memory of Henri Pirenne who, at the time his country was fighting beside mine for justice and civilization, wrote in captivity, a history of Europe.*

After which, according to his custom, he drafted an introduction: *Reflections for a Reader Interested in Method.* This is followed by a certain number of pages, still in manuscript, constituting a first chapter, entitled: *Birth of France and of Europe.*

The events which Bloch has himself narrated in *The Strange Defeat* put an end to this work. And when, returning to France after the tragic circuit from Dunkerque to London to Brittany, Bloch again set to work, it was to compose the present book. Exactly when did he begin? I cannot say precisely. There is one early date: at the bottom of the moving page which Bloch composed in my honor, we read: "Fougères, Creuse, May 10, 1941." And on a loose sheet, inserted in one of his files, one may also read:

STATE OF WORK: MARCH 11, 1942.

1. Write, in order to finish IV, generalities, civilizations, and read over.
2. Go on to V (change, experience).

After this latter date Bloch did in fact find the time to finish Chapter IV and to begin Chapter V, to which he gave no final title. That was all.

How would Bloch have finished his book? In the papers which have been turned over to me, I have found no orderly plan for the projected work. Or, rather, I have found one but it is anterior to the actual writing, and differs considerably from the plan which he ultimately followed. He there anticipated seven chapters. He entitled them, respectively:

I. Historical Knowledge: Past and Present
II. Historical Observation.
III. Historical Analysis.
IV. Time and History.
V. Historical Experience.
VI. Explanation in History.
VII. The Problem of Prevision.

For a conclusion, Bloch intended to write a study on *The Role of History in Citizenship and Education.* And he expected to devote an appendix to the *Teaching of History.*

The differences between this plan and the work as executed need not be emphasized. If, in general, the

substance foreseen for the first five chapters is to be found in the first four chapters of the present book, Bloch would still have had to treat of the problem of chance, of the problem of the individual, of the problem of "determinant" acts or facts; finally, of that problem of prevision to which he would have had to devote an entire chapter. From these indications we can see that we possess over two thirds of the work that he conceived. It may be useful to transcribe here the latter part of the unfinished plan:

VI. EXPLANATION IN HISTORY.

By way of introduction: *the generation of skeptics* (and scientists).

1. *The idea of cause.* The destruction of cause and of motive (the unconscious). Romanticism and spontaneity.
2. *The idea of chance.*
3. The problem of the individual and his differential value. Supplementarily, the epochs, documentarily without individuals. Is history only a science of men in society? Mass history and the elite.
4. *The problem of "determinant" acts or facts.*

VII. THE PROBLEM OF PREVISION.

1. *Prevision, a mental necessity.*
2. *The ordinary errors of prevision.* Economic fluctuations, military history.
3. *The paradox of prevision* in human affairs: prevision which is destroyed by prevision; role of conscious awareness.
4. *Short-term prevision.*
5. *Regularities.*
6. *Hopes and uncertainties.*

The absence of any more precise and detailed notes by Bloch on these last parts of his book is profoundly to be regretted. They would have been reckoned among the most original. Although I well know his ideas—which are mine—on the questions raised by Chapter VII, I believe that we never actually discussed this problem of prevision, which Bloch promised to treat with so much judgment and originality at the end of the work—and which, perhaps, would have been the most strictly original of the whole.

To establish the text of the present book, I have had before me three large files, each a more or less complete copy of the text to be published. These copies are in large part made up of typewritten sheets, amongst which are interspersed manuscript sheets in Marc Bloch's hand, most frequently written upon the back of a first draft which he had crossed out. Essentially, my work as editor has consisted in composing, from these three, one basic copy, complete in all its pages and taking into account all the manuscript corrections which Bloch himself made in the typewritten copy. No addition, no correction, even of mere form, has been supplied to Bloch's text; it is this text, pure and entire, which is to be found printed in this book.

The work was to include references. We have discovered only a few notes, written out in his hand. We have felt no obligation to fill in this gap. A tremendous and not very profitable task, it would have posed insoluble problems at every step.

Let me add that the three copies I mentioned all end in the same way and with the same words: In history, as elsewhere, the causes cannot be assumed. They are to be looked for. . . ."

Finally, and because it is a matter both of dedication and of solemn memory, I cannot but say this:

There was a person to whom Marc Bloch, before departing, would have dedicated one of the great works that we still expected from him. Those of us who knew and loved Marc Bloch were aware of the single-hearted tenderness with which she enveloped him and his children—and of that abnegation with which she had served him as secretary and helped in his labors. I feel it as an obligation which nothing can prevent me from meeting—not even that sense of sentimental reserve which was so strong with Marc Bloch—I feel it as a duty to set down here the name of Madame Marc Bloch, who died in the same cause as her husband and in the same French faith.