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VARIETIE

from

*Voltaire
to the
Present*

OF

HISTORY

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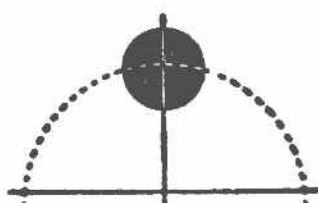
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Early in 1955, Fritz Stern, assistant professor of history at Columbia University, undertook to prepare an outline of the material to be included in *The Varieties of History*. The contract was signed in June of that year and translation of the many selections previously unavailable in the English language was commenced. The manuscript was delivered in May, 1956, and the first edition of this original Meridian Book was published in October, 1956.

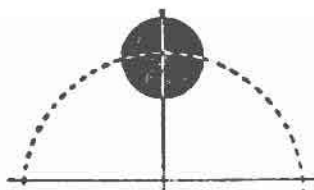
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*The Varieties of History
From Voltaire to the Present*

THE
VARIETIES
OF
HISTORY

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~~Edited~~, *Selected*, and *Introduced*
by FRITZ STERN



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Fritz Stern

Born in 1926, Fritz Stern was educated at Columbia University, where he received his doctorate in 1953. He has taught at Cornell University and at the Free University of Berlin. Since 1953 he has been assistant professor of history at Columbia. In addition to the present work and numerous contributions to general and scholarly periodicals, he is the author of a forthcoming work on German conservative ideology.

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F. S.

Rochester, Vermont

June 28, 1956

INTRODUCTION

“An orthodox history seems to me a contradiction in terms.”—

F. W. MAITLAND

This is a book by historians about history, personal reflections on an ancient but ever varying discipline. In writing about their task, which is to reconstruct a past that they have never known, and that they can neither deduce from first principles nor create by an act of the imagination, they reveal their diverse presuppositions, concerns, and ambitions. And they also reveal that their work is difficult yet pleasurable, constantly changing yet in some respects uniform, sometimes drudgery and sometimes inspiration. It is, in short, a human task, akin in its pleasures and conflicts to all other human activity.

As the present work will show, modern historians have written in a variety of genres, but the multiplicity of style cannot obscure the two basic tendencies which have affected all modern historians. First, the transformation of history into an academic discipline—indeed, according to some into a science—with all the arduous consequences this entailed. Second, society's growing demand for history, the indisputable fact that in the short time since the American and French Revolutions the Western world has become intensely historical-minded. These two developments are both manifestations of the cultural revolution which has shaped modern times: the

secularization of thought, the growth of science and the questioning of all systems embodying eternal truths.

Related in origin though they may be, the two tendencies are nevertheless at odds with one another. The scientific historian, or simply the contemporary professional historian, has become a specialist, ill-equipped to meet the heightened demands of society. The historian may know that Western man has come to think that the knowledge of the past may help reveal the meaning of human experience and that the recollection of the past may harden our resolution and inform our vision in the struggles of the present. He may even sense the truth of Wilhelm Dilthey's contention that man can know himself only in history and not through introspection alone. But the practicing historian, as a rule, is wary of assuming such creative burdens. In short, just as the historian was getting ready to become an academic monk, shut up in his study with his sources, the world about him sought him as a preacher. And often the historian, whether he succumbed to or resisted the outside pressure, felt that he was in danger of betraying his responsibilities.

Nothing is more characteristic of the history of the last two hundred years than the demand from within the profession that history must once again become broader, more inclusive, more concerned with the deeper aspects of human experience. There are abundant signs at the end of this post-war decade that we are on the threshold of another period of reconsidering the purposes and methods of history.

Whatever the outcome of this next stage of historical self-criticism, it is unlikely that the historian's role in society will diminish, even though some historians may find their contemporary status uncomfortable and would, I suspect, cheerfully trade their present role and renown for the sheltered life of their predecessors. But as long as society seeks knowledge of the past, the historian must accept his responsibility to society, without violating his responsibility to the past.

How does the historian fulfill his task? Some of the characteristic answers will be found in this book, and it will be seen that no general agreement prevails among historians, that no single doctrine has ever captured *Clio* completely. One reason for this continuing variety, as Mommsen noted in his Rectorial Address, is that history is too difficult; it cannot be learned. The techniques of historical scholarship can be acquired, like the techniques of any other craft. But the art