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The Building of the Human City

A documentary record of
WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Edited by Thomas P. Neill

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The Building of the Human City

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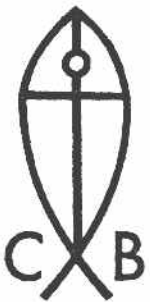
of Western civilization

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Introduction

Following a spontaneous burst of applause during one of his lectures, the French historian Fustel de Coulanges is said to have remarked to his students, "Gentlemen, do not applaud. It is not I who speak, but history that speaks through me." These words are frequently used to illustrate the objectivity that must characterize the historian's approach to the work of discovering and recounting the story of mankind's life on earth. Yet considered from this point of view, the remark becomes an extreme simplification of a very real dilemma that all historians must face. Certainly for the historian as researcher, as discoverer of historical fact there is no major problem inherent in the notion of objectivity. But as narrator, when he is involved in explanation, in historical thought and the employment of such crucial terms as "because", "therefore", "inevitable", "possible", "unexpected", "central", and "accidental", the historian generally finds that he has brought something of himself into the picture. The element of subjectivity is present in the historian in many forms: his particular starting point, which may be nationalistic, political, or religious, for example; or his choice of historical facts from the infinite number at his disposal. Perhaps some understanding of the complexity of this problem can be obtained by considering subjectivity in history from a particular point of view as outlined in a celebrated controversy which has continued down to the present day. The debate centers around the role of the historian as moralist.

Since the time of Cicero, moral instruction has given to the study of history an important place in liberal education. But by the nineteenth century this aspect of history gradually gave way before a preoccupation with the wealth of facts made available by technical advances in historical research. In 1895 Lord Acton attempted a restatement of the moral role that he believed to be appropriate to history. In his Inaugural Address as Regius Professor of History at Cambridge he urged his audience

“never to debase the moral currency or lower the standard of rectitude, but to try others by the final maxim that governs your own lives, and to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong.”¹ This is a constant theme in Acton’s work. Earlier, his celebrated correspondence with Mandell Creighton had revealed a Catholic Acton attacking, and a future Anglican Bishop of London defending, the renaissance papacy. Appealing to a morality which he described as “non-denominational . . . universally current and familiar . . . the common, even the vulgar, code,” Acton charged Creighton with excessive moral leniency in the latter’s *History of the Papacy during the Reformation*. Creighton replied that the principal figures in his history were men like himself, tempted by the possession of power and involved in the responsibilities of a representative position. “I find myself regarding them with pity—who am I that I should condemn them.”²

In more recent times, the historian Herbert Butterfield felt compelled to reject moral judgment in history on the grounds that the historian can never know enough to exonerate or condemn, “can never quite carry his enquiry to that innermost region where the final play of motive and the point of responsibility can be decided.”³ The “technical historian”, for Butterfield, is one who can perform “an act of emptying out” a complete suppression of self in order to achieve the objectivity necessary for his work. But this concept too has not gone unquestioned. Etienne Gilson, noted for his work both as a historian and a philosopher, has cautioned his colleagues that “to approach human affairs with the same coldly detached state

¹ Lord Acton, “Inaugural Address on the Study of History” in *Essays on Freedom and Power*, edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), p. 48.

² *Ibid.*, p. 344.

³ Herbert Butterfield, “Moral Judgments in History” in Hans Meyerhoff (ed.), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p. 239.

of mind which befits scientific inquiry is to betray the very nature of the facts under consideration."⁴

Commenting on his famous predecessor's position, David Knowles, Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, added still another interpretation to the historian's role. In Knowles' words, the historian is not a judge. "He is not trying the men and women of the past; he is contemplating them; he has to see them as they truly were and to present them as such to others, and a man, as man, cannot be truly seen unless his moral worth, his loveliness, is seen."⁵ Yet whether it is, in fact, possible to contemplate human worth without being attracted or repelled by what is seen, without being ourselves required to enter actively into the course of past human events, is another question. An understanding of a particular human situation would seem to require that the historian ask himself how he, personally, would behave under similar circumstances. A judgment is made, not by a judge but by a man, a historian faced with a vital human situation which his own humanity will not permit him to view in cold detachment. Gilson has summarized this position in the following words; "How could we understand men without judging them? And how could we judge them without taking sides? Histories are about needs and wants, desires, loves and angers, efforts of all sorts striving to achieve all sorts of results and to reach all sorts of ends, more or less complete successes, but also downright failures attended by near despair or, on the contrary, by sometimes startling comebacks that necessarily call for our personal sympathy. All this, which common language so aptly calls human interest, is the very stuff of which historical reality is made. Subjectivity is its very essence."⁶

* * * * *

Some understanding of this factor of subjectivity is necessary for a realistic picture of what the historian is trying

⁴ *The Place of History in Catholic Education* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), p. 15.

⁵ David Knowles, O.S.B., *The Historian and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 20.

⁶ E. Gilson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

to do. In reconstructing all or part of the story of man's past, the historian has as his primary goal, one from which no deviation is possible, the discovery of truth. Unlike the conclusions in such fields of knowledge as biology or chemistry, those of the historian are capable neither of mathematical formulation nor of experimental verification. Man, as a creature possessing freedom of choice, defies all attempts to predict his behavior from "scientific" laws. Human history has at its roots an almost infinite number of facts characterized by their sheer contingency; it does not rest on the constants and repeatable facts that form the basis of methodology in chemistry or biology. In short, human history cannot be reduced to a physical science.

What method, then, must the historian use in his search for the truth of what has actually happened in the past? He is required to approach his study with an understanding and respect for the human person and with a subjective quality that is not a characteristic of the method of the natural sciences: a subjective quality, however, that is above all arbitrariness in its respect for truth. For the discovery of the truth of what has happened ("to say what has been, has been, and what has not been, has not been"⁷) is always the historian's task. To accomplish it the historian must put himself in contact with the words, thoughts and actions of the men of the past. His success as a historian will be determined by his ability to enter into their world with all its human complexities, emotions and aspirations. He must appreciate the reality of the human person in history, the spectacle of the human mind and will in opposition and in agreement, and the tensions between human principles and actions. This the historian can do because he himself is a man. It is here that his knowledge of human nature and his controlled historical imagination come into play. To understand man in history he must project himself into the position of the person under consideration, asking himself what he would have done in the same situation. If it is true that an artist

⁷ E. Gilson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

is one who knows where to sit, the historian is one who knows how to be what he writes. Only thus does the historian succeed in seeing both man and his history with sympathy, with charity and justice, and with a willingness to recognize that there are mysteries in human freedom that escape his historical tools and even his understanding.

* * * * *

Documents are the principal materials used by the historian in this study of the past. To the historian they *are* the past as it exists now, real and capable of being examined. It would not be inaccurate, bearing in mind what has already been said, to compare documents to the elements and compounds studied by the chemist or the living matter studied by the biologist.

The study of documents begins with a consideration of the questions of authenticity, integrity and reliability. A document is authentic if it is what it claims to be. A proclamation attributed to the Emperor Constantine, for example, can be subjected to tests to determine whether it was, in fact, written on fourth century material, and in the handwriting and the language of the period. Even a forgery, however, remains a historical document and may fit into some later aspect of history. A document is said to possess integrity if, after a comparison with existing versions, there is no indication that the document has been tampered with, added to or subtracted from. Modern research techniques can provide scientific answers to these first two questions. Reliability, however, involving as it does the question of a document's objectivity requires the historian to use his knowledge of the period and of human nature to determine whether the author of a document can be relied upon to give an unbiased account of what happened. A member of Parliament in the seventeenth century will not give the same picture of Charles I as will one of the Royalists. If a bias exists, it must be taken into consideration. At the same time, unreliable or biased documents are of service to history, as, for example, a pagan's opinion of early Christianity, which tells not what early Christianity was but what a pagan thought it to be.

It is important to bear constantly in mind that documents are the realities from which recorded history is written, the evidence that gives the historian the ground of certainty. Where few records have survived, as in the case of ancient times, the historian must tell the story in general terms and often tentatively. Both scarcity and overabundance of documents can present a problem for the historian. By the nineteenth century available documents became so plentiful that the question for the historian was, not to find them, but to select and use the important ones from the overwhelming number available. Official records in Great Britain since the beginning of World War II, for example, occupy more cubic feet of space than those concerned with *all* previous British history.

* * * * *

In *The City of God*, St. Augustine speaks of two classes into which the human race is divided, "the one of those who live according to their own rule and the other of those who live under God. We also name these two classes of men the two cities . . ." ⁸ History itself, because it is the story of all mankind, has been conceived in the Christian West as the Human City, emerging out of the struggle of the two cities and growing toward the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God. Created a little less than the angels, called by St. Bernard of Clairvaux a noble creature with a majestic destiny, Western man has shaped the meaning of history to reflect what is most intimate and personal within him—his freedom, his vision of eternity as both the light and the leaven of his life in the world of time, his use of his mind and his hands to build the pilgrimage that is the human center of his civilization.

The following collection of documents is a description of certain events in the history of Western man that have been decisive moments in the establishment of the Human City. The documents, among the most revealing that historians have used in recounting man's past, follow the growth of Western civilization from its beginnings in the

⁸ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XV, chapter 1 (see below, p. 83).

Near East through the cultures of Greece and Rome, Medieval and Renaissance Europe, up to the present. They have been selected out of thousands of available records for their description of a particular chapter in man's discovery of himself and the growth of Western civilization. For every aspect of modern life has in some way been structured or modified by the events set forth in the documents on the following pages.

In form and subject these selections are as varied as the aims and achievements of the men who wrote them. Taken singly, they present a picture of men as builders of society and political theorists, as lawgivers and framers of human institutions, men as leaders and soldiers, rebels and peacemakers, men as saints and religious thinkers, men as searchers and discoverers of truth. Taken together, these documents reveal the complexity of man's nature, the human needs and aspirations that have gone into the building of the West, the Human City, from ancient times up to the present day.

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