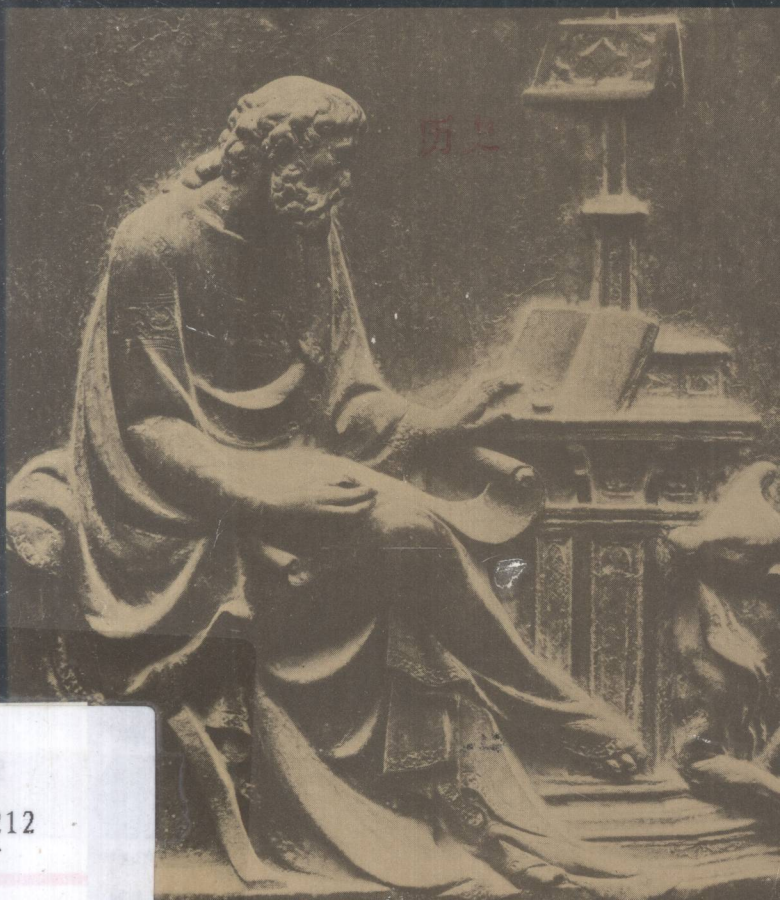
A PELICAN BOOK

The Use of History

A. L. ROWSE



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A. L. Rowse was born in Cornwall in 1903. Today a leading historian and man of letters, he went to Oxford as a Scholar in English, and won a Fellowship in history at All Souls. He has written a classic of its kind in *A Cornish Childhood*, with its sequel, *A Cornishman at Oxford*; two portraits of a society with his *Tudor Cornwall* and *The England of Elizabeth*, which also has a sequel in *The Expansion of Elizabethan England*; and a pendant, *The Elizabethans and America*. Two biographical studies, *Sir Richard Grenville* and *Ralegh and the Throckmortons*, complement each other, while *The Early Churchills* (published in Penguins) and *The Later Churchills* set a model for family history. His gift as a man of letters is displayed in the quartet consisting of his masterly biography, *William Shakespeare*, his edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, *Christopher Marlowe*, and *Shakespeare's Southampton*, with his volumes of essays, *Time*, *Persons*, *Places* and *The English Spirit*. As well as his *Cornish Stories*, he has published *A Cornish Anthology* (1968), and *The Cornish in America* (1969), and five volumes of poetry, *Poems of Cornwall and America* being the latest.

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A General Introduction to the 'Teach Yourself History' Series

This series has been undertaken in the conviction that there can be no subject of study more important than history. Great as have been the conquests of natural science in our time – such that many think of ours as a scientific age *par excellence* – it is even more urgent and necessary that advances should be made in the social sciences, if we are to gain control of the forces of nature loosed upon us. The bed out of which all the social sciences spring is history; there they find, in greater or lesser degree, subject-matter and material, verification or contradiction.

There is no end to what we can learn from history, if only we will, for it is conterminous with life. Its special field is the life of man in society, and at every point we can learn vicariously from the experience of others before us in history.

To take one point only – the understanding of politics – how can we hope to understand the world of affairs around us if we do not know how it came to be what it is? How to understand Germany, or Soviet Russia, or the United States – or ourselves – without knowing something of their history?

There is no subject that is more useful than history, which is indeed indispensable.

Some evidence of the growing awareness of this may be seen in the immense increase in the interest of the reading public in history, and the much larger place the subject has come to take in education in our time.

This series has been planned to meet the needs and demands of a very wide public and of education – they are indeed the same. I am convinced that the most congenial, as well as the most concrete and practical, approach to history is the bio-

graphical, through the lives of the great men whose actions have been so much part of history, and whose careers in turn have been so moulded and formed by events.

The key idea of this series, and what distinguishes it from any other that has appeared, is the intention by way of a biography of a great man to open up a significant historical theme; for example, Cromwell and the Puritan revolution, or Lenin and the Russian revolution.

My hope is that as the series fills out and completes itself, a sufficient number of biographies will be produced to cover whole periods and subjects in this way. To give you the history of the United States, for example, or the British Empire or France, via a number of biographies of their leading historical figures.

That should be something new, as well as convenient and practical, in education.

I need hardly say that I am a strong believer in people with good academic standards writing once more for the general reading public, and of the public being given the best that the universities can provide. From this point of view this series is intended to bring the university into the homes of the people.

A. L. Rowse
All Souls College, Oxford

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Preface

The whole intention of this book is practical and didactic. It is designed as a statement of the case for the study of history, a discussion of its uses and pleasures, and as a manual of instruction on how to approach the subject.

But though my object has been practical at every point, a historian cannot write a book saying what he really thinks about his subject without developing some general reflections and going into some abstract questions. These are mainly concentrated in Chapter 5. If the reader finds that chapter too uncongenial on a first reading, he should skip it, go on to the end, and then return to it at his leisure. It contains the essence of what I have to contribute on a difficult and important subject.

Short as this book is, it incorporates the experience of many years' teaching and lecturing, thinking and writing about the subject. Nearly twenty years after writing the book I have revised it heavily, rewriting here and there, with the idea of bringing it more up to date and in line with the joint interests of American as well as British readers.

A. L. Rowse

New York, R.M.S. Queen Mary, *April 1962*

1 What is the Use of History?

When I was a boy at school a question that was frequently asked was: *What is the use of history?* And nobody seemed to have any answer. (If the school had been somewhat better, the answer would have been forthcoming all right; for, as I hope to show you, there is a completely satisfactory answer to the question, an overwhelming case for the study of history.)

Nobody had any doubt about the use of science: its utility was stamped upon the face of the subject. You could become a chemist or a physicist or an engineer. But could you become a historian? Even if you could, what did it lead to?

These were no doubt very inadequate modes of thinking; we were only boys at a remote provincial secondary school. But some such modes of thought are current much more widely, if not generally, in the modern world. And what we meant by 'use' was, mainly if not wholly, what use is studying history as a preparation for a career? What kind of job does it lead to? There is a good deal more in the question than that, of course. But even to take it at its most practical and utilitarian, the advantages are by no means so wholly on the side of science as we thought in those days.

Privately, and for myself alone, I very much doubted the use of the weary hours I spent in the physics and chemistry laboratories; what was the use, I thought, of making those horrid smells, of weighing those refractorily ponderable substances, of memorizing those innumerable formulae? For other boys there was some use, and even pleasure, in it. And yet, years afterwards, in a progressive and sympathetic little book on the teaching of science, I find the authors questioning whether there is much educational value in teaching chemistry in schools.

Yet we do not need to question the general use of science and its study for a moment. We are only too well aware of its necessity in an industrial civilization. And beyond the mere question of its utility, in a more profound sense, so far from being anti-science, I am all on the side of the scientific movement of thought which, from the Renaissance onwards, has come to characterize and dominate the intellect of the modern world. History is not in conflict with it; in the course of the nineteenth century it became part of it. The emergence of the concept of evolution into a central position in thought equally affected science and history, and provided a ground of junction between the two. It is sufficiently realized that the methods of evolutionary science affected the study of history; what is not so well grasped is that with the theory of evolution history may be said to have permeated the whole conception of science. This interaction, which had such a fertilizing influence upon nineteenth-century thought, has a still more fruitful career before it, if only we can do our duty by the intellectual needs of our time with some fresh thinking.

We are all familiar with the popular slogan that this is a scientific age, but people are not so well aware that it is no less a historically minded age.

These are important themes and they will have their place later on in this book. I cannot expound them now; I only wish to point out that, in spite of the importance of history for the intellectual outlook of our time, we are in general much less conscious of the need and use of history ordinarily than we are of that of science. Then I wish to return to the practical, indeed utilitarian, approach to the subject.

History has its uses from the point of view of a career, getting a job – apart from anything else it may offer – no less than science; and these uses may throw some further light on the value of the subject in and for itself.

Let us start with education, with that decisive stage in its progress the transition from school to university, from adolescent to adult life. (We shall deal with history in schools later.) A large number of history scholarships to the university are awarded; they help to form a major element among arts stu-

dents in all universities, young or old. So history gives you an open door to the university and an academic career. Afterwards there are the openings for properly equipped teachers of the subject in colleges and schools of all kinds. Around the teaching profession there are certain cultural posts, librarians, archivists, curators of museums, secretaries of institutions, social service workers – now definitely on the increase with the social trends of our time. A more important profession is journalism, with which we may include broadcasting. For political journalists, foreign and military correspondents, it is a great advantage to have had an historical education: so many of the affairs they have to deal with need just that background in order to understand them and make them clear. It is not without significance that some of the most powerful journalists of our time, men who have a large part in forming intelligent opinion on public affairs – such men as Walter Lippman and Henry Steele Commager in America, Professor D. W. Brogan and Sir Arthur Bryant in Britain – all have a background of historical study. Their comments would be of less weight if they had not.

Even more important, there is the Civil Service, of increasing importance in all countries today with the growth of the welfare state. History is one of the recognized roads into its higher ranks; quite rightly, for history gives you the right background for most of the affairs with which you will have to deal in the administrative Civil Service. The work of the Civil Service is for the most part concerned with nothing so pure and abstract as mathematics, but with the administration of human affairs, with the social sciences if you like – for which the appropriate background and training are provided by history.

If history is the appropriate training on the whole for civil servants, it follows that it is indispensable for members of the foreign service, for diplomats and consuls abroad. In all the pitiable revelation of a third-rate mind in a front-rank post that is afforded by a reading of Sir Nevile Henderson's *Failure of a Mission* – he was in a key position as British Ambassador in Berlin from 1937 to 1939 – nothing is more deplorable than the ignorance of the man as to the character of the developments in Germany. Only a little orderly reading of modern

German history would have given him the clue to them. But he seems to have thought a reading of *Mein Kampf* on board ship from South America home was sufficient. No wonder he was both fogged and foxed by the direction of events in Germany and seems never to have grasped it until too late. Nor was he the only one to whom some knowledge of German history would have brought a world of enlightenment. How can one properly understand the career of Hitler and the resurgence of German militarism, its appeal for the German people, if one knows nothing of Bismarck and Frederick the Great, of the whole cult of militarism, the tradition of German aggression? Sir Eyre Crowe at the head of the Foreign Office before the last war understood these things very well; and that is why his formulation of the exigencies of British policy was far more cogent and foreseeing than any subsequent statement of British policy between the two wars. A clearer and more informed view of the situation and its developments might have prevented a second war.

It ought not to have been difficult to forecast, on quite a moderate acquaintance with the German people and their recent history, that they would make a second bid for world-power. The worst thing that their history reveals, worse than the brutality, the stupidity and insensibility, the sycophancy and self-pity, is their lack of any sense of responsibility for what they do – for that is what leads to all the rest. When I lived in Germany for a winter after the war of 1914–18, in a 'good' middle-class household, that of a Lutheran pastor – at a time when revisionists in Britain and America were fatally undermining the peace-settlement – I never heard one word of regret for the war the Germans had precipitated upon the world, with its untold losses in men's lives. All that they regretted was that they had lost it. Even after the second war they loosed upon the world there is little sign that they recognize any responsibility for the disaster they brought upon the world.

That absence of a sense of responsibility, the necessary foundation of any civic sense, runs right through German life from top to bottom and reflects their history. It is the source of most of their misdeeds and misfortunes, for it means a people with

great powers of organization and endurance and of brutal strength, but with no moral courage; they are therefore always at the service of any masters who are prepared to drive them forward along the road of aggression to power. Power is the inducement; power is what they worship: little notion that there is anything else that exists in the world of politics. And aggression is the method. After all, aggression is what has usually paid in German history. Frederick the Great's career was one long record of successful aggression. So was Bismarck's. The total upshot of Bismarck's irruption upon the scene was to put back the clock a hundred years in Europe. But the Germans have no sense of that; he did well for Germany, so they thought – and still think, according to Karl Barth, in spite of the immense castastrophe that was the ultimate consequence of his life's work. Yet Frederick and Bismarck have been the two great heroes of politics to the German mind. Politicians might have learned much about modern Germany from the best biographies of Bismarck, by C. Grant Robertson and Eric Eyck.

It was not to be supposed that when the culmination of decades of successful aggression came with their bid for world-power in 1914–18, which so nearly came off and was only scotched in the end, they would not make a second try. All the elements in Germany that stood to gain by war were behind it: the old Junker militarist classes, the landowners, the armaments manufacturers, the big industrialists, large elements of the middle classes, above all the lower-middle class, and the *déclassés* of all types and sections. We received ample warning of what would happen: it was in the books. Anyone who studied them should have known quite well what to expect. There is an ample literature on the history of modern Germany; there is really no excuse for not knowing. But what was so sickening in the years before the war was that none of them seemed to have been read by people in high places, responsible for the conduct of our affairs.* It was indispensable that they should know something of the history of modern Europe.

* I have shown something of the fatal consequences for British policy in my book *Appeasement: a Study in Political Decline.*

Britain paid a terrible price for the ignorance of her leaders before the war of the facts and trends of European history. Nor were the isolationists in America any better: America's withdrawal from her proper place in the world-system in 1920 led ultimately to the aggressions of Japan and Germany and the second world war. Now that the United States has the burden and responsibility of leadership of the Western world, the knowledge and understanding of history are more than ever important for her to play her part properly. This means an increasing historical-mindedness on the part of the American people, greater awareness of history among the public, a bigger place for history – for world-history, not merely American history – in education. For political maturity necessitates historical understanding; the latter is a prime component of the former.

Ignorance in high places, and in particular the absence of any historical understanding of the political developments in Europe, led Britain as near as anything to disaster. It is all very well for the circles mainly responsible to blame it now upon the people at large. The people were no doubt ignorant; they always are. But that is no reason why they should continue to be so. I agree with one of the first and noblest of Englishmen, King Alfred, that there is nothing more dangerous than ignorance; as he wrote at the end of his life more than a thousand years ago: 'I know nothing worse of a man than that he should not know.' How right he was! The trouble with human beings has always been not that they ate of the Tree of Knowledge but that they did not eat enough of it.

After two disastrous decades in which the dominant figures in English politics were two Midlands industrialists, what a relief it was to have an historian as Prime Minister. And in spite of what all the mediocrities thought, how much safer! For, as a historian, Sir Winston Churchill knew the underlying long-term exigencies of British policy, the interests of ourselves and the Empire without which we cannot exist. He had them in his bones; they are indeed, one might almost say, in his heredity; for did not Churchill perform for us in our time precisely what his great ancestor, Marlborough, achieved in his?