

The Century Historical Series

AIDS TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH

BY

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PREFACE

These pages are offered as a brief review of certain branches of learning which are of first importance in the conduct of historical research in the social sciences. They are primarily intended for the use of beginners in such work. Long experience with graduate students has shown conclusively that an early perspective of the sciences auxiliary to such investigation will lead to a quicker perception of the risks encountered and to sounder habits of research. Experts in these sciences have carried some of them to a high degree of refinement, and it is not expected that every historian will be an expert, but it is his duty to understand the reasoning employed in proof.

The subjects presented are chiefly employed in "external criticism" where the authenticity of a document or its time, place, or source is determined, but some of them are highly important factors in the interpretation of history, and all of them contribute matters of social, economic, or intellectual significance. This work attempts a fresh consideration in the light of later attainments and modern usage.

The many sources from which the text has been gathered are plainly evident, and to those who have given me personal assistance I extend my hearty gratitude.

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AIDS TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH

I

DEFINITION OF HISTORY

In this age of extensive historical studies a definition of the term *history* may seem to be superfluous. Not only in the traditional fields of national and political development but also in every branch of learning from anthropology to zoölogy an industrious body of students is searching out the origins and progress of sciences as well as peoples. At the same time a clarification of the objects and the relative importance of such investigations is highly important, for the selection of materials and the form of presentation depend upon a proper definition of history.

Without going back to the primitive ages of oral anecdote and minstrelsy, but starting with the first written histories, there has been a slow but positive change in the conception of this art. The Greek word *historia* means "a searching to find out" and would apply just as well to any doctor's thesis of to-day as to history itself; but the contents of the word, the notion of what we are to find out, has experienced a wide extension. Only in one respect has the conception of history remained steadfast: it has to do with

mankind. Even the histories of sciences are concerned with the men who discovered and developed them, but when it comes to what we ought to know or write about peoples or nations the answer is far different from what it was in the days of Herodotus, or Thucydides, or Froissart, or even David Hume.

To the first writers of history the object was to preserve the memory of the heroic deeds of men, and these were for the most part performed in battle. Hence the stories of wars to the glorification of nations as well as heroes, from which we gain incidental glimpses of the growth or eclipse of political units. In the fighting era of the middle ages history-writing declined, but the chronicles continued the same course until the art once more emerged in the stories of the crusades and the military-athletic reports of Froissart. Even when more mature accounts of national history appear and statecraft and diplomacy emerge as subjects of interest, war and conflict still occupy great proportions of attention. Not only in warlike ages but in eras of comparative peace down almost to our own day this emphasis on the details of conflict has been prominent in historical writing. Likewise the traditional history contained much about the personal traits and actions of kings and courtiers, the intrigues of nobles and officials, and even the scandals of upper society, this kind of thing no doubt merely satisfying a certain human craving for biographic anecdote.

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Out of this welter of war and court description there emerge two matters in justification of the writers. First, nations were either solidified or destroyed by wars, and here, with perhaps too much detail, is the story of the process. The growth of modern nations is a most important part of history and the long story of their division or consolidation is in this way in part explained. Second, in the days of absolute sovereigns the fate of peoples was determined by the ambitions, or the whims, or perhaps the indigestions of their rulers; hence the personal character of kings or princes in such cases is a matter for inquiry and explanation. These factors, however, are only two among a multitude of elements which have guided the development of nations or determined the condition of a people at a given moment. Economic, geographic, and other causes were at work and were long overlooked by the writers of history. The prominence of wars and conflicts was due to the worship of the heroic; for ages the profession of arms was regarded as the noblest career of the layman, while honors, rewards, and renown were found on the field of battle.

The changes which have taken place in the conception of history during the twenty-four centuries since Herodotus wrote have been momentous, but slow in coming. During the greater part of this period the military and political story held first place. From time to time writers appeared with a more critical

attitude toward their sources, but the theme remained about the same. Although some of the ancients noticed that heat and cold affected peoples, two thousand years passed by before it was seriously asserted that climate and geography influence the life and political conditions of nations, and lines of argument were then used which are no longer acceptable. Political history had one advantage in furnishing a continuous thread upon which the story might be hung, and economic conditions received no extended attention until the eighteenth century. The middle ages regarded the laboring classes as beneath their notice, and only writers on formal law gave any clue to social conditions. Commerce and industry expanded over the known world, but under the sharp criticism of theologians and with no one to connect them with national history.

The isolated instances where economic facts are noted do not relieve the general lack of appreciation of the importance of such data and the consequent unbalanced expositions of national life. At the present day the conception of history is distinctly modern, and the fields of inquiry now considered necessary to its proper understanding have had a rapid expansion during the past two centuries, much accelerated during the past two generations and apparently still increasing.

Mere curiosity, or the desire to entertain, may have led early writers to include in their narratives some

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description of the social life of the people, but the increase of interest in such details has been steadily parallel to the expansion of democracy. Whatever judgment may be passed on the mutual influence of the two tendencies, it is clear that as fast as ordinary citizens obtained political rights and self-government there followed greater desire to learn about the manners and customs of their predecessors and a consciousness of their part in history.

Historians in the early nineteenth century included some description of the social conditions of their periods, but usually in separate chapters which served as illustrative pictures rather than constructive parts of the narrative. It was scarcely a hundred years ago that Macaulay said, in rebellion against exclusive political and dynastic history, that the true historian "considers no anecdote, no peculiarity of manner, no familiar saying, as too insignificant for his notice, which is not too insignificant to illustrate the operation of laws, of religion and of education, and to mark the progress of the human mind." Even he used his social data too much as literary ornament, but he was headed in a direction which later generations followed with increasing intensity. We have now reached a point where capital and labor are regarded as partners in business, an idea which the middle ages could not have conceived, while we study not only peculiar national habits but the conditions of natural sciences at the time and call in the humani-

ties and all branches of modern learning to assist in clarifying our pictures of past conditions.

This does not mean that political history is out of date, for that branch of inquiry must continue to be followed as one phase of human society. It means rather that politics and government cease to cover the story and that other things in the life and experiences of a people are not only essential in themselves but must be employed to explain political movements.

Reasons for writing history have likewise had an evolution of their own and one which is interwoven with the question as to what the contents should be. The primitive object of entertainment was followed by a long period in which instruction and guidance was the purpose, in addition to recording the memorable deeds of the ancestors. This was the motive of Thucydides, and the Roman Dionysius said that history was philosophy teaching by examples, while Machiavelli declared that, since men have always been animated by the same passions, they must look to history for guidance and might even foretell the future by the experiences of their predecessors. The late Professor J. R. Seeley was of the opinion that history should have a practical object, aiming not only to gratify curiosity about the past, but to "modify his views of the present and his forecast of the future."

This was still more the attitude of the earlier

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writers who made history a series of moral lessons for the guidance of present and future generations, thus entering the domain of prophecy. Quite true, there are moral lessons in the experiences of men and in the conduct of nations, while the consequences of sin and injustice are obvious; but in view of constantly changing conditions there should be caution in forecasting the future. The lives of successful men are full of inspiration which the teacher and the preacher should employ, but they would do well to avoid specific prophecy. The historian may be content to relate what happened.

The same may be said about the histories which were written to show the designs of God in the destinies of peoples. To the authors of these works the plans of Providence were clear and unmistakable, so that a definite design might be traced in the rise and fall of nations. There are still people who see the hand of an angry God in the misfortunes of their neighbors, but this assumes a confidential relationship to the Creator which oversteps the bounds of modesty. With the greatest good-will and reverence one may hesitate to announce or predict the course of Providence.

When history attempts avowedly to teach a lesson, whether moral, political, or theological, there is danger that the facts will in some degree be warped unconsciously to suit the theme, even with the most honorable intentions. Such troubles occur in argu-

ments over historic points when no lesson is involved. What is needed is the exact truth, a matter which was clarified for all time by Lord Bacon when he said, "It is the true office of history to represent the events themselves together with the counsels, and to leave the observations and conclusions thereupon to the liberty and faculty of every man's judgment."

Another definition of history, or rather another object of historical research, is that advocated by the extreme school of sociologists who say that the usual historical narrative is filled with the accidentals of life, while the real aim should be to find the typical elements in human society, regardless of individuals, and eventually determine the "laws of history." Following more or less the methods of biology, they ask the historian to investigate the conditions under which social and political events took place. Taking a given period a certain number of births and deaths will be recorded and at intervals famines and business failures will occur. In seasons of prosperity numerous other kinds of phenomena will be observed, hence it is assumed to be possible to determine the social conditions which *inevitably* precede an agrarian revolt, a religious revival, a burst of excellence in art, or other important movement. In the presentation of such results the individual man, be he king or hero, would either disappear or be used in determining the types of mankind then prevailing.

The criticism that history contains unessential de-

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tails is in many cases fully justified. Garrulity or lack of perspective will account for much excess baggage; but when this is cast off and we are asked to find a law of recurrence in human events, we are confronted with great stretches of time during which statistics of this kind are inadequate or entirely absent. The compilation of data by indirect means may give some help, but for thousands of years the results remain deficient and unsatisfactory. Types of society and laws must be based on complete information, and the conditions of periods compared must be identical. In the absence of anything like uniformity, laws of recurrence and prediction are at best precarious.

The theory that the history of man has been determined entirely by his environment, by his geographical, geological, and climatic situation, has much to give it support, but few or no writers go to such an extreme. The advocates of economic history usually rest with the view that environment is the most weighty factor in the development of peoples or communities, and they vary in their estimates of the amount of such influences. When stated in unqualified terms, the economic theory fails to take account of intellectual and moral factors which are indispensable to an understanding of human history. It is abundantly evident that human society has been guided by individuals, and at times by great moral and religious motives, and that its intellectual standards must be used as measures of its development. Economic historians

give weight to these spiritual elements in varying amounts.

The introduction of environment into historical study had enormous influence in pointing out new channels for investigation. Since this influence began to make itself felt European scholars have produced an increasing volume of works upon economic history, *Volkswirtschaft*, attempting both the development of theories and the description of actual agricultural or commercial practices. Studies of the life and habits of former times have grown also into a science of human geography, in which the mutual relations of mankind and the globe have been formulated. Productions of this kind have been added to the historical materials of every country in the civilized world, and it still remains for the investigator to determine the proportion and weight which these economic factors should have in his particular field of research.

When Macaulay said that no incident or anecdote was insignificant if it illustrated the life of the time, he entered a path that has led men into the great open spaces of research. It may be said that no discovery of science, no change in the methods of industry or agriculture, nor any alteration in the conditions of many things less conspicuous than these is without some weight in historical estimates. Commerce and transportation are no longer local but have become international, and the effects of the change are felt in the remotest hamlet. The story of

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the transition at any given point is of high importance, and with all these matters looming up the modern scholar is obliged to take account of a mass of factors which his early predecessors ignored.

Certain branches of knowledge relating particularly to humanity have been cultivated to a point where they approach the dignity of sciences. Anthropology, ethnology, and psychology have busied themselves with the primitive qualities, habits, and capacities of mankind with such illuminating results that they must be taken into consideration. The application of these factors in the interpretation of historical movements will be touched upon at various points in these pages.

The modern expansion of historical materials increases the labors of the investigator but does not render a solution of his problems impossible. If one should attempt to write a history of the world from original sources, one lifetime would be insufficient to accomplish the task, but no one does that any more. The few authors who cover such a field in a scholarly manner depend upon the researches of specialists for a large part of their recital, and even the history of one nation requires the help of many minds. Such expansive tasks, except for brief textbooks, are no longer undertaken single-handed. The many volumes of Lingard's *England* or Grote's *History of Greece* have been superseded by the coöperative work of many hands. The *Political History of England* ap-

pears in twelve volumes by as many authors; the *Cambridge Modern History* is in twelve large volumes of text in which each chapter has been written by a separate specialist; and in many countries in Europe and in America, when an extensive plan is contemplated, a general editor calls to his aid the men who have given intensive study to the various parts of the field. If a lone author desires to appear in many volumes, he must choose a short period the important events of which may give him an opportunity to cover his chosen field successfully. Gardiner devoted a lifetime of work and fourteen volumes to the half-century which included the Puritan Revolution, and other examples might be cited of limited subjects which have led to extended exposition.

For at least a century historical scholars have realized that the researches of one man must be confined to a limited field if they are to be effective in his lifetime, and this appears everywhere from the minute topics of the doctoral thesis to the seasoned labors of the veteran investigator. Consequently the search for a definition of history is not merely an attempt to put into a few words a theory of human progress or a philosophy of civilization, however important these may be, but a very practical task of establishing a norm by which the historian may measure his small part of the work and select the data which truly exhibit its relative development.

As already noted, the object of history is not pri-