

THE
ORIGINS
OF HISTORY

Herbert Butterfield

*Edited with an Introduction
by Adam Watson*

EYRE METHUEN · LONDON

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Historical Novel
The Peace-Tactics of Napoleon, 1806-8
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Introduction

by Adam Watson

This book contains Sir Herbert Butterfield's distilled conclusions about how history came to be written, which he reached after research and meditation on this subject during the last quarter-century of his life.

Butterfield approached this vast and largely uncharted subject in a characteristic way, with no preconceptions, not knowing in what direction his researches would lead him. He was always particularly interested in the general conclusions that could be drawn from a detailed historical narrative, what he called the story itself. The Whig interpretation of history bothered him, as he explained in his book under that title, as well as the popular Marxist interpretation, and such personal simplifications and diagrams of the historical process as Spengler's and Toynbee's. The trouble was that in all of them the theory or interpretation or diagram came first. They were *a priori* intuitions. Sometimes, as he once said to me, it was a grandiose and imaginative one, but derived only very partially from the facts and owing more to other beliefs and other purposes in this world. Once you had such a theory, the selection of facts to fit it and demonstrate it became all too easy; the more so as selectivity is usually unconscious, and the aspects of the story that you underline and emphasise are the ones that seem to you genuinely important because they bear out your view of the world. Butterfield was concerned to start with the facts, the representative facts seen in their context; and where the facts were inadequate or seemed unrepresentative the answer was more detailed research. Then you needed to brood over the facts, and see what generalisations distilled themselves from them. He developed an extraordinary flair for this kind of open-minded deduction.

This approach to the understanding of history Butterfield liked to com-

pare to the methods of Sherlock Holmes. After Lestrade had fitted many but not all of the facts into a plausible reconstruction of the events, Holmes would engage in minuter, more detailed microscopic research, and would then meditate over all the facts for long hours until a solution emerged from them which he recognised as right. This refusal to force the facts, to suspend judgement until they offered you their own answer, the ability not to pre-judge anything, Butterfield called elasticity of mind.

This openness of mind about historical evidence was made possible for him by his belief in a Christ whose Kingdom is not of this world. In this way could be avoided the seductive 'worship of abstract nouns' which he considered much more dangerous than any worship of graven images. Christianity as he saw it did not merely permit you to be absolutely neutral about mundane events, so that you were no more committed about current affairs than (as he liked to say) about 'the blues and greens in the hippodrome in Constantinople': it positively required this detachment. To render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's was an explicit command. The concluding sentences of Butterfield's *Christianity and History* express this concept with great feeling:

We can never meet the future with sufficient elasticity of mind, especially if we are locked in the contemporary systems of thought. We can do worse than remember a principle which both gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds; the principle Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.

In a note to me he once said, in his oblique and undogmatic way, that he was sometimes inclined to wonder whether any lesser degree of detachment from mundane causes (in the formative centuries of European civilisation) would have left the way clear for the development of the scientific and historical thinking that was a unique characteristic of the West. The same thought appears in several contexts in the present book.

If the history that really mattered to Butterfield was the generalisations that emerged from the facts, the most interesting questions of all concerned history itself. What was the relationship of men, at different times and in different civilisations, to their history, to their own past, to the past in general? Much of his earlier work points in this direction. *The Whig Interpretation* deals with the Whig and liberal Lestrades. *The Englishman and his History* traces what has changed and what is constant in our national attitudes to our past – for the Irish, the Scots and the Welsh have very different relationships with their very different histories. *Man on his Past* deals with Western historiography from the eighteenth century to the present. But that was only the end of the story. The great question of how it all began remained unanswered, and by most people almost unasked.

The fundamental questions of the origins of historiography came to

occupy a central place in Butterfield's thinking. How did men first begin to be aware of the past beyond living human memory, as something to take account of in their lives? By what stages, in which civilisations, did men's ideas about their past move towards history as a fully self-explanatory system of cause and effect? Why was this concept of the past, which excluded chance and divine intervention, something that has been finally achieved only in the West? And why, since it is so analagous to the western concept of 'science', did it not develop until some hundreds of years after the objective study of the natural sciences? The first questions were the hardest. The evidence available for the later stages of a panoramic view of historiography is abundant, and in places almost overwhelming; but in earlier periods, and especially the beginning, the clues have largely been lost, and it is difficult to detect what happened, difficult to recapture the spirit of such high and far off times.

What emerged in Butterfield's mind as the key question of all, the one which would do most to help our understanding of history if only we could answer it correctly, was the part attributed to God in the narration of human events. God in his many forms, including the local gods of each city, the rival gods of the pagan pantheons, Fate and Chance, El and Jahweh, the Holy Trinity, Allah and Providence, Progress and the Dialectic, and all the other supernatural forces whose hands men have seen in history. He puts the problem musingly towards the beginning of the last chapter of this book: 'After all,' (my dear Watson, he might have added) 'the thing that the outward eyes of men actually see is the succession of mundane events. Sometimes one might feel that the introduction of God, or the hand of God, or Providence, is the thing which is really the afterthought, the result of an attempt to find an explanation of what happened. The introduction of God into the story is then the thing that needs to be explained.' How did God get into history? And how, once in, was he finally got out again? This is what Butterfield felt it necessary to discover.

Butterfield spoke to me several times during the early 'sixties about his growing interest in man's earliest perceptions of his past. When I was about to return to England in 1966 from the comparative isolation of being ambassador to Cuba, I wrote to ask him how this interest was shaping in his mind. He answered me on 25 May 1966 from the Villa Serbelloni on Lake Como (which is maintained by the Rockefeller Foundation for the benefit of scholars who need to write free from distractions, and of which he was a member of the advisory council) as follows:

After feverish attempts to do some writing amid the turmoils and distractions of a Master's Lodge in Cambridge, I have secured a three months' leave of absence (dating from the middle of March) and have

thoroughly buried myself in the writing of what I hope will be fit to be a considerable book. . . .

I am engaged in what I regard as something very interesting in any case, though I am not sure that it is not the most impracticable adventure of my life. About ten or a dozen years ago an incidental assignment compelled me to turn my attention to the question why in one region after another men originally became interested in history, and how (with practically no ground to stand on at first) they came to have any concept of the past and came to give this past a certain amount of shape. It seemed to me that the people who had the material for answering these questions had failed to put the questions and didn't know what the 'history of historiography' requires. Also I found that the character of the historical writing that was produced here and there bore a peculiar relationship to the way in which the thing had been initiated in one region and another – a traceable relationship with large-scale historical experiences. When asked to give the Gifford Lectures recently I found this to be the only thing left in the bag that could be adapted to such a purpose and, taking a terrible gamble, I said I would try to work the thing up. Now I am busy working up one set of the lectures for publication and preparing another set for delivery. I wish I could be sure that the excitement they give me had any relationship with the interest that they might arouse in other people.

Butterfield only explored the theme of the origins of history in his celebrated Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow. But he decided against publication at that stage, because it became clear to him that this vast and largely uncharted subject required a much fuller and more rounded treatment, based on further research and reflection. He continued to work on it for the next twelve years.

More than once during the 'seventies he said that the book which he was developing on this theme was the most important task remaining to him. On one occasion, on the banks of Lake Maggiore, he described to me the plan of the work, explaining that it was necessary to deal with the different cultures separately – there was no straight line. But he became increasingly concerned that he did not concentrate systematically enough on this book, but let himself be distracted by other writing. Towards the end, his health also made long periods of concentrated work almost impossible. In January 1979 he told me in Cambridge that the first half of the book was substantially written, but there was still a good deal to do on the last chapters. I had arranged with the Rockefeller Foundation to provide a dictaphone or a shorthand typist to transcribe what he still wanted to record; but he assented dubiously, and said that 'someone like you would probably have to take a look at it'. He also mentioned his unfinished work on Charles James Fox

and on the history of diplomacy. In the event I left for Virginia a few days later, and when I returned to Europe he was too ill for serious discussion.

After his death, Pamela, his widow and literary executrix, turned over to me his manuscripts and notes on the history of historiography and the history of diplomacy, to edit and publish as best I could, since on these two subjects I had probably had more contact and discussion with him than others had done. I found indeed that the first five chapters or sections of the book on historiography, which dealt with the origins of historical consciousness, the pre-classical Middle East, the Old Testament, the Greeks and the Chinese, were substantially rewritten and required only minor editing. The last three chapters, following the plan he outlined to me in Italy, deal first with the emergence of a Christian attitude to history, which, as I have indicated, Butterfield considered the climax of the matter; secondly with historical criticism – a subject so broad that he thought of dealing with it in a separate book; and finally with the great secularisation of modern times. These sections consisted largely of heavily hand-corrected typescript, extensive manuscript amplification, and notes, sometimes in French, German or Italian. These I have pieced together to form what I hope is a coherent statement. The writing is all his. The bibliography is compiled from his card indexes. The original papers have been deposited with his other documents in the Cambridge University Library, where the Librarian has kindly agreed to make them available for consultation.

There are some deficiencies. Had Butterfield had more time, he would certainly have written more fully about the sense of history under Islam. There were many books on this subject in his library. He discussed it with several Islamic scholars at various times. He seized on what I said in my book, *The War of the Goldsmith's Daughter*, about the nature of the Islamic written records of the conquest of southern India and the lack of a corresponding historiography on the Hindu side. He had the idea of a separate chapter, like that on Chinese history. But what little I found in his manuscripts was intended, according to his indication, to be included in the account of the secularisation process, where it now stands.

Butterfield did not carry the rewriting of the subject matter of his Gifford Lectures beyond his account of the great secularisation, which therefore forms the last chapter of this book. More recent developments were already covered in *Man on his Past*, published in 1955, and he only touches on them in order to complete the earlier story.

I should like to thank some of those who have helped me with the preparation of this manuscript, by advice, financial assistance, and work on the papers. In the first instance Pamela Butterfield, who was familiar with the manuscript and who has made herself available for consultation throughout. Hedley Bull set me an example by his own work on the unpublished papers of our mutual friend Martin Wight, and encouraged me to do the same for

Herbert Butterfield. Desmond Williams, who has known Butterfield and me for a long time, has been particularly insistent about my making this book available to the public. Michael Carroll, a teaching assistant at the University of Virginia, did much preliminary work on the manuscript and compiled the bibliography. My daughter Polly typed out the most illegible passages and made many helpful suggestions about ordering them. The British Academy made an exceptional grant towards the costs of preparing the manuscript for publication. I am also very grateful to the Center for Advanced Studies of the University of Virginia, who readily agreed to my working on the Butterfield manuscripts and provided secretarial assistance for doing so.

*Center for Advanced Studies
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Adam Watson

Preface

We are often reminded that the civilisation of the West is scientific in character; and we do not always remember that it is equally remarkable for being so historically-minded. In both respects the only known parallel to it is to be found in the China of comparatively early days, which, besides its amazing feats of science and technology, produced an historical literature of almost incredible vastness. Even in China, however, there did not develop those modern techniques which, in our section of the globe, led to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the somewhat parallel historiographical revolution in the nineteenth. In both fields the development that took place in Europe was unique; and in both fields the Chinese themselves have had to become the pupils of the West.

Some civilisations, like that of ancient India, remained curiously un-historical – failing to develop their writing or their scholarship in this field in the way that China and the West developed theirs. In fact, it seems that men can have basic views of life which deny the significance of history – their outlook formed by religions and philosophies which operate to discourage any great interest in the facts of history as such, or the sequence of events in time. Hinduism, Buddhism and Neoplatonism have tended to induce men to deny the significance of that network of chance and change in which human souls seem to be caught for an earthly lifetime. Yet between a culture that is soaked in historical memories and one for which the events of the past are no more than the froth and foam of last winter's ocean there must develop great differences in general mentality and in intellectual habits – differences calculated to affect very radically, for example, the degree of control that can be acquired over the course of events. And the differences

must extend to deeper things that must alter in still more subtle ways the very nature of the human consciousness. In any case, the interest that we Westerners take in the past – our very sense for the past – (like our prowess in the natural sciences) is a thing which requires to be explained.

The case that we today might make for the study of history would have no meaning for those earlier generations of mankind that gave the start to the whole endeavour. We of the twentieth century might say that a society is going to be very constricted in its development unless it looks behind itself, organises its memory, reflects on its larger and longer experiences, learns to measure the direction in which it is moving, and gets some notion of long-term tendencies that have been observed. But this kind of diagnosis – this way of seeing where we stand in the processes of time – is a thing that comes only late in the day, when civilisation and scholarship itself have progressed very far. Nobody could have known in advance that by the study of the past we should be able to examine the processes of things in time. Indeed, until the world was fairly mature, nobody could have guessed that there existed such things as historical processes which might call for analysis. In general we have perhaps too little idea of the hurdles which the human mind had to surmount before it could arrive at any conception of the possibility of history or secure any serious notion of the past, any effective grip on bygone things.

What concerns us, therefore, is not just 'the History of Historiography', the mere story of the development of a branch of literature, but the unfolding of a whole great aspect of human experience. We need to know how man came to acquire a concept of 'the past', and gradually to clarify that concept and endow it with a structure. We have to ask ourselves how it occurred to some men – but apparently not to others – to keep records of the things that happened in the world, and to meditate upon the possible connections between events. How was it that the knowledge of what had happened in the limbo of former times ever became a matter of concern to a later generation? What factors induced human beings to feel that, apart from any mere desire to learn what had happened, they were in any sense committed to a past which somehow or other had a sort of claim upon them? It might be true to say that, for the carrying on of life itself, men had to make terms with history as they understood it. They had to have views about the way in which things happen, notions about the causes of disasters, ideas about the character of human destiny, theories about the ups-and-downs of states. The story of the development of man's consciousness of history involves a large-scale aspect of the whole evolution of his experience. It is a major part of his attempt to adjust himself to the world in which his life is set.

In the early stages of this development, and indeed for thousands of years, thought on these matters had not become specialised. Concepts were

dim; and great lengths of time would be needed to achieve any considerable degree of clarification. But nature seems to have been prodigal in faiths and superstitions, and the real progress would take place, not in the realm of historical ideas as such, but over the whole area of man's undifferentiated beliefs. Human beings would be aware of the cycle of the seasons, but also of the way in which the years accumulated, the way they themselves grew older and palaces or temples would fall into ruins. They would be sensible of time's terrible insecurities, of the cataclysm that so often lurked at every fresh turn of the road. They would know the inexorability of death. Their dim reflections on all these things would show themselves, not in specifically historical ideas at first – not in any realm of specialised or technical thought – but in the beliefs and practices of their religion. The emergence of a feeling for history and a sense of the past could come only as part of the development of the whole human outlook. We who today attempt to compare our civilisation with another and try in a sense to get behind the history of civilisations, are continually learning the degree to which it was religion that shaped the mentality of our distant ancestors, deciding the 'set' of their minds and governing the way in which they conceived the world of human happenings. Their way of formulating to themselves their whole notion of the human drama that takes place under their sun is the clue to their historical ideas, but it emerges as the product of their religious outlook as a whole. If we today trace early science back to an undifferentiated endeavour which included what we should describe as magic, we must trace early history – early notions of human vicissitude and of temporal succession, for example – to the religious outlook in its entirety. For thousands of years, indeed until a remarkably recent period, it remained true that the influence of religion on man's general outlook was supremely important in the formative stages of societies and cultures. It would be important to learn how far man's ideas of history and his picture of the course of ages has been now governed by established religious beliefs, now affected by the development of what might be called a healthy worldly-mindedness.

Both our science and our historiography are to be traced for the most part to the lands lying near and beyond the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is perhaps Mesopotamia that we ought to regard as the cradle of our civilisation; and in a sense it is also the cradle of our religion, for it provided the essential context out of which the religion of Israel emerged. One of the remarkable features of this whole region throughout such antiquity as has left its memory amongst us was the peculiarly intimate character of the relationships that existed between history and religion. This also remained (at least until a very recent period) a remarkable feature of the culture of Europe. The concern with both the history and the religion was

connected with the tremendous anxiety which our primitive forefathers appear to have had about the problem of their destiny. It is interesting to see that the rise of history as well as the development of religion reflects this concern of man.

CHAPTER ONE

The Origins of Historical Writing

1 STORY TELLING

It is comparatively easy for an individual to keep some remembrance of his own personal past; but the difficulties are great if the human race or the body politic wants to achieve and organise and refine its collective memory. So far as mankind in general is concerned, the difficulties are *real* if even for a moment there is question of recovering the memory of anything that has once been lost. Some hurdles in fact need to be surmounted before one can acquire the notion that the past is something to be recovered at all. In the civilisation of ancient Mesopotamia the arts had reached a remarkable level and technology had wonderful achievements to its credit before there existed any serious historical writing or anything more than the dimmest notion of the existence of past times. Until a very recent period the past was simply a world to which one could not return. Bygone events were like the pattern of last year's wind on the surface of a lake — not things which one could feel were really capable of recapture. Even in the modern centuries the development of historical scholarship has proceeded at a slower pace than that of the natural sciences. The intellectual revolution which established the modern fertile techniques of discovery occurred amongst the scientists in the seventeenth century, but amongst the historians only in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when the archives of the European capitals were being opened, one saw a tremendous development in the technique of using them. As a result, great stimulus was then given to the whole subject. Men felt that now, at last, they could really get down to the study of history. Clearly there had existed for thousands of years serious hurdles obstructing not merely the

recovery of the past but the very notion that the story was in any authentic sense recoverable. And the project of reconstructing the past for oneself – putting it together by means of detective work exercised on primary materials – is for the most part a much more recent undertaking than most students of the subject will have imagined. Those who set out to examine the physical universe were free of the most serious of the hurdles, free of the obstructions most calculated to kill hope at the very start. The hills, the ocean, the flowers, the plants, the sun and the stars were at any rate patently there before their eyes, inviting speculation and enquiry day after day, year after year, century after century. But where was the past before men had discovered it or had recaptured forgotten events – how could one even think of the questions that were to be asked about it? We must picture our predecessors at first in the position of not even knowing what there was to look for.

It is necessary, therefore, that at the first stages of the story we should use our imagination not for the purpose of diagnosing what existed but for the purpose of realising the tremendous difficulties under which men laboured when they lacked so many of the clues that we possess. Some things may safely be regarded as universal – we can be sure of their existence even in those areas of the globe which took no part in the development of an historical interest in the past. Men are always likely to remember something of their own former years, of friends of theirs who have died, and of events that have impinged on their own experience. Also the young would always have sat at the feet of their elders – until the twentieth century at any rate (and in the time of Thomas Hardy in particular) some of the most vivid of the things that they knew about the past would have come to them through the tales of a grandfather. There is ample reason for saying that some things would linger in the memory, at any rate for a time, for the simple reason that the world so loves a good story. Something of the recent past of at any rate one's own locality would pass at least from one generation to another in what one might describe as just broken glimpses of narrative. But though from a certain point of view this might be the source of everything else that was to come, it was never in itself a sufficient basis for the development of a more sophisticated interest in the past. It hardly provided the ground on which a course of serious enquiry could develop; for the mere love of telling tales is too much its own end, too much its own source of satisfaction. It never seems to have been sufficient in itself to drive the mind to serious research or scholarly endeavour or a passionate quest for truth. Legends are still born every day amongst us; doubtful scandal will be blithely repeated at Oxford high tables; even journalists today will transmit stories that they have taken no great trouble to check. *The raconteur* knows too well that, if he investigates the truth of the matter, he is only too likely to lose his good story. Even in the temper of the modern world one has to

become quite sophisticated before it occurs to one to check the tales of a grandfather. We might wonder what would happen in the remoter childhood of the world if a story were so remarkable that it endured beyond the times of the grandchildren and spread over a wider area than a merely local one. What happens when a story is handed down in an age of oral transmission, but under conditions that make it impossible to go back to the past to check its authenticity? In the case of a famous old king in Mesopotamia called Sargon, and in the case of Solon of Athens, scholars have expressed surprise at the speed with which the story of a hero would acquire legendary accretions.

It looks as though the first histories ever concocted may have been the stories about the gods, and these achieved literary elaboration earlier than anything else, acquiring considerable form and elaboration while still in the state of oral transmission. They seem to have built themselves up into a world of myth which provided an explanation of everything and accompanied the ritual ceremonies of the people as a whole. Here was something which men recognised as the past – though perhaps not their own past – at any rate a past so dim that one wonders what they could have done about it except believe and carefully preserve the stories handed down to them. But there was something of a past also which came nearer home; for the arts had flourished greatly and magnificent buildings had been erected before anybody had learned to write. Some concrete evidence of more ancient times would lie around men in their cities; and, once writing had developed, there would be monuments that preserved the name of a monarch, dedicatory inscriptions referring to recent events. In the various cities of Mesopotamia lists of the local kings would gradually be accumulated, and would be available to somebody. It has been noted that in the very earliest kinds of literary production there are liable to be just slight references to one and another of the famous dynasties of the past, showing that at least a vague memory of them had been handed down. Possibly the nearest thing to history would be the traditions handed down in courts and governing circles, at any rate in royal and noble families.

For any history that has connection and meaning, however, one has to turn to the epic which seems to make its appearance in the earliest literature of the region to which it belongs. It is itself the most elaborate of the results of the process of oral tradition, and can be used to mark the stage at which the oral tradition is transformed into a written one. It appears amongst many peoples in widely differing sections of the globe; and it appears at a fairly identifiable stage in the development of these peoples, though a stage which is reached by different nations at widely differing times. Sometimes it seems to contain a high proportion of what we should call mythological matter, but there are occasions when it comes much closer to a human narrative, the story being placed in something like the work-a-day world.

Whatever we may think about the producers of the epic there can be no doubt that those who heard it recited or read the text regarded it as an account of the history that lay behind them. One might almost say that for most of them, it would be the only history they knew.

We ought to be able to understand what happened, for our own generation has had its flying saucers and its Loch Ness monster; and possibly a saga of Winston Churchill has been developing before our eyes. The technique of oral transmission had clearly become a specialised affair, developed here for a count and there for a noble family – elsewhere perhaps for the community as a whole. The narrative came to be handed down through travelling minstrels and professional reciters; and there are certain regions, in the Balkans for example, where the tradition has continued as a living thing down to very recent times. And the study of what has been happening in these cases comparatively near at hand has helped to confirm one's impression of the kind of thing that tended to take place in more ancient days. In the case of the epics that come closest to being straight human stories, the heroes often turn out to have been authentic people – a point that can sometimes be confirmed by independent evidence. Some of the stories will also be the product of an authentic tradition; for, though the narrators would be capable of altering their narratives in one way and another, they would be limited by factors that tended to the preservation of the tradition. The audience would be the chief arbiter, the ultimate guardian of the tradition; and it would not easily tolerate the loss or the alteration of a story about one of its favourite heroes. The audience might be happy enough, however, if an extemporising minstrel transferred to a famous personage some deed or prowess originally associated with a minor character. If the slaying of Goliath was originally attributed to somebody who was otherwise unknown, and was then transferred to the young man David, everybody might well be happy – the story fitted beautifully into its new context. Many of the stories might well be true, therefore, but not necessarily true of the people to whose names they had become connected.

The separate stories, therefore, are to be regarded as the essential units of the tradition, and any single one of them would possibly possess some original core of historical truth. Whether we deal with the oldest narratives in the Old Testament or the epic of Homer or the sagas of Scandinavia, we resolve the written narrative into its tiny units – these are the things that are handed down from the past. Sometimes the separate units still remain almost unattached stories, and some of the oldest bits of history that have been handed down to us are simply thrilling battle-songs or anecdotes of individual prowess. But the minstrels and reciters would assemble such units into groups, producing for example a cycle of narratives clustered around the name of a single hero. Then the organisation would be carried still higher; the stories would be fused into a more or less continuous epic;

they would be brought within the framework of a comprehensive theme. But the very thing which gave the epic its continuity would be the matter that was added later; it would be the product of the author's artistry; the coherence would be just the thing that was the product of invention. The total result would be a mixture of history and fiction which even the modern scholar cannot disentangle except in a few cases where there happens to exist some independent evidence.

This, for the people or the nation concerned, would be its history: it would be history *par excellence*. It was the story that was handed down and there would be no means of checking it – there would be nothing to suggest that here were assertions which ought to be submitted to some sort of control. The general historical background of the whole poem might well have reference to something which had really existed, something that remained vivid in the folk-memory. There was a hero-king of Akkad called Sargon; very probably there was a siege of Troy; it is likely that there was something corresponding to an 'exodus' from Egypt; and certainly an expedition under Charlemagne lies behind the medieval *Chanson de Roland*. Yet the main narrative of the epic itself might have only a remote and tenuous connection with the larger background theme that gives it its historical identity. The main narrative of the actual epic might be just the thing that resulted from the inventiveness or the combinatory and constructive endeavours of the actual narrator. Alternatively, the poet might seize upon what was really a minor episode – a thing quite peripheral and even unconnected with the actual history – and might work this up as though it were the main line of story. An episode that was purely local might be taken into the epic, and might be brought from the periphery to the centre purely because it received this advertisement. Owing to the literary success of the epic, a purely local episode might be turned into the main story, the presiding tradition of the nation as a whole. In general the epic was often calculated to awaken a kind of romantic interest in the past; and its popularity, its widespread occurrence, suggest that there was some nostalgia for ancient times – a nostalgia that had to be catered for somehow. Sometimes the epic would become important to a people because it inspired a feeling of national pride or a martial spirit or a sense of honour. But, precisely because of the emotional satisfaction that it gave, it might operate to postpone the need or the desire for anything more authentic. We can see that people were capable of being stirred by ancient, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago. But the epic still leaves the world without any powerful reason for developing something that could be more authentically described as history.

For this reason, the rôle of the epic in the general development of historiography might well give rise to discussion and controversy. Even the vaguest survey of the whole scene brings to light some glaringly anomalous features of the case. The epic in ancient Mesopotamia does seem to have

encouraged an interest in the past and assisted the development of history as a literary genre. But in ancient Egypt no epic has survived and the rich annalistic literature of the Pharaohs seems to have developed without its help. At a comparatively late date we find Egyptian battles submitted to what we might call epic treatment, but the effect of these experiments on the actual writing of history would seem to have been unfortunate. In the case of India something in the nature of the epic existed but it neither produced an interest in the past as such nor assisted the rise of a genuinely historical literature. China, on the other hand, seems to have had no epic, yet developed one of the richest of historiographical traditions. So far as the Greeks are concerned, one would like to be sure that the possession of Homer was not too satisfying for the mind – in some ways an obstruction to the quest for anything better.

2 LISTS AND RECORDS

It seems clear that, even with the help of their mythologies and their epics, men in ancient civilisations must have seen the past as a vague, undifferentiated thing, which struggled vainly perhaps to achieve some shape in their minds. Apart from what they remembered of their own early life, and what they learned from their immediate predecessors, they would have only a vague notion of 'long age', with still no real impression of the length of time involved, but rather perhaps a feeling that the days when the gods walked in the world were not very far behind them. If one of the experts has not been loose in his translation and wrong in his appended comment, the words 'once upon a time' were familiar in the most ancient civilisation of Mesopotamia. Perhaps each of us has passed in this respect through something of the whole experience of the whole human race, so that we ourselves can half-remember the time when 'the past' was almost a no-man's-land – almost an ocean without direction, without landmarks, without light. If we take the measure of things at the time when writing began, there would only be certain ways in which the past had any shape at all or was more than a rag-bag of old stories. There would already be a consciousness of the distinction between ante-diluvian and post-diluvian; for the Flood had appeared in the epic, and the archaeologists have shown that, since something of the sort undoubtedly occurred in Mesopotamia, it might well have imprinted itself on the folk-memory of that region. There existed also, probably even then, the belief that the ante-diluvian world had differed in character from that of later times, with men living to fabulous ages, for example. It almost seems as if the Flood was the pivotal thing, on which the notion of time itself depended. Here at any rate there was a recognisable landmark and the limbo of bygone things acquired a contour.

All this will enable us to realise the tremendous progress that was made

when the mind learned to project itself into the remoter past with some sense of the distances involved, something more precise than 'long ago'. It was a case of turning time into something like a long tape-measure, with markings that roughly indicated either succession or duration or degrees of remoteness. This was a thing not so easy to achieve as we may often have assumed, for we cannot really imagine the hurdle that required to be surmounted by men who had not learned to serialise the years, or to particularise amongst them, by the very simple device of numbering them in the way that we are accustomed to doing. Fortunately, however, our distant ancestors seem soon to have acquired what can only be described as a mania for making lists. The Chadwicks in their study of the Heroic Age have noticed how this craze would appear at a certain stage in the development of society in widely differing parts of the globe. The phenomenon is apparent in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia at what in some respects was the equivalent point in the story. When the lists are concerned with objects in the natural world we regard them as in a sense the beginning of natural science, because they seem to represent the earliest gropings towards a classification of data. When they concern the succession of things in time they can be taken as representing in a certain sense the beginning of historical science. Mere lists might seem dull things to discuss, and very casual, very trifling documents to stand as a turning-point in man's evolution. It would be a mistake to overlook the real interest which they have for the student of the history of historiography.

Perhaps the earliest surviving list that possesses an imposing character is the one which is embodied partly in the famous Palermo Stone and partly in other fragments that were once attached to it. It belongs to the period some centuries before the year 2000 B.C.; and it is a long string of dynasties and kings which, when it was complete, would appear to have gone back to something like a thousand years before its own compilation – back perhaps to a time when actual gods were supposed to have reigned in Egypt. It also records events, and though these occur only rarely at first, they become more numerous as time proceeds, until, as the list approaches the time of its own production, there will be eight or even fifteen events for a given year. One might expect it therefore to provide almost a complete conspectus of Egyptian history, if it were not for the fact that the events recorded are generally of a curious nature – they would seem to justify our describing the whole document as a list rather than a set of annals.

It does not seem that the real object was to record the unique event, and a great many of the facts enumerated would seem to be things that could have occurred every year. From a remarkably early date, the monument provides for each year a certain measurement – so many cubits, palms and fingers – which seems to record the height of the annual inundation of the Nile. From a date almost equally early, it reports at times the numbering of

the population or the cattle or the lands – a kind of census, taken presumably for taxation purposes. When it reaches more recent times, so that the items become thicker, the list of events for each year is largely concerned with religious festivals, the building of temples and the delivery of ceremonial offerings. Very rarely there is something more like what we today would regard as an historical event – a laconic reference to 'the hacking of the negro' for example. But equally often the event recorded is of a miscellaneous character that is calculated to puzzle the historian – in a reference, for example, to 'the shooting of the hippopotamus'.

For one of the years of King Snefru of the Third Dynasty, therefore, we read:

Building of 100-cubit dervatowe-ships of mera wood and of 60 sixteen barges.

Hacking the land of the negro.

Bringing of 7,000 living prisoners and 200,000 large and small cattle.

Building of the wall of the southland and the northland [called] 'Houses of Snefru'.

Bringing of 40 ships filled [with] cedar wood 2 cubits 2 fingers.

For one of the years of King Userkaf of the Third Dynasty we read:

The Spirits of Heliopolis: 20 offerings of bread and beer at every [–] and every [–] feast; 36 stat of land [– –] in the domain of Userkaf.

The gods of the sun-temple [called] Sepre.

State of land in the domain of Userkaf.

2 oxen 2 geese every day.

Re: 44 stat of land in the nomes of the Northland.

Hathor: 44 stat of land in the nomes of the Northland.

The gods of the House of [–] of Horis: 54 stats of land; erection of the shrine of his temple [in] Bute of the nome of Xoïs;

Sepa: 2 stat of land; building of his temple.

Nekhhet in the sanctuary of the South: 10 offerings of bread and beer every day.

Bute in Pernu: 10 offerings of bread and beer every day.

The gods of the sanctuary of the South: 48 offerings of bread and beer every day.

Year of the third occurrence of the numbering of large cattle. 4 cubits 2½ fingers.

It stands to reason that the entire list which we associate with the Palermo Stone was compiled out of previously existing lists. Its importance lies in the fact that it strings the earlier ones together and so produces a comprehensive survey. In the later parts of the document the reference to the pre-existing sources is often quite explicit. The above details concerning a year

in the reign of King Userkaf, for example, are preceded by the note that the King had 'made this as his monument', in other words he had had these items placed on record for the year. Clearly these earlier lists (which were of a kind that had been produced annually before the time of King Userkaf) had not been historical in their intention at all. They were scribal records drawn up for some utilitarian purpose. They certified that the King had given so many lands, so many oxen, so many geese and so many offerings of bread and beer to one god and another. It is as though these things and 'the worship of Horus' and the temple-building were being ticked off as so many duties actually carried out. And in some years there would be other things that were royal functions or governmental chores – 'the circuit of the Wall', the worship of 'the gods who united the Two Lands of Upper and Lower Egypt', or the numbering of the people or the cattle. Always, in any case, there would be the measurement, presumably the record of the inundation of the Nile. When it occurs to somebody to string together a number of inventories of this kind, the result is a curious and anomalous beginning for what was to develop into historical writing. It has been argued that the object of the compiler was to serve some dynastic purpose; but the nature of the purpose and the way in which it would be effectuated are not clear. We must be careful about imputing to men of such ancient times a modern kind of political motivation. It has been said that the list, as finally assembled, was in any case only a selective one, those items being chosen which would suggest that the monarchy or the dynasty was pious and had taken care to secure the favour of the gods. But it is not clear why we should not accept the fact that the monarch, like everybody else, really did take his religion seriously – did seek to please the gods and show that he had carried out his duties to them. When we are dealing with these ancient times it may be wise to be prepared to believe that those who copied the records of the past chose superstitiously to put down everything they could find – however anomalous to the final result – because they could not bear the thought of losing anything that might have survived from the past. Men who were so interested in making lists might even need no special motive for producing one which was so imposing in itself – especially one which might give the impression of providing a conspectus of the whole of time.

There is a similar colossal list in the oldest civilisation of Mesopotamia: the almost equally famous Sumerian King-List, which, too, may go back well behind the year 2000 B.C. Once again it was formed by the assembly of a number of shorter lists enumerating the successive monarchs in the various city-states that existed in that region. In this case, the construction of the final comprehensive list went wrong; for the intention of the compiler had been to designate only those rulers who had enjoyed a kind of overlordship throughout the area. This overlordship would pass on occasion from one city to another, and the King-List would report the fact. One

reads, for example, 'Ur was smitten with weapons; its kingship was carried to Awan'. Then somewhat later one will read: 'Awan was smitten with weapons; its kingship was carried to Kish'. The compiler would list the kings first of Ur, then of Awan and then of Kish; and it is clear that, sometimes at least, he learned the names from lists already existing in the cities concerned. But he would not always know which city held the predominance; and sometimes he would produce in succession two dynasties which in fact had been contemporaneous, only one of them holding the real supremacy. For this reason the Sumerian King-List was calculated to create some problems for the modern student of chronology. It purports to go back in fact to a legendary period when some of the kings were gods and some bore the names of animals. It tells us how long each monarch reigned, and sometimes it describes his relationship with his predecessor. The names of some of the kings would seem to have been obtained from royal inscriptions and this would suggest that a certain historical interest lay behind it. But, in any case, men who had the passion for compiling lists might want their lists to be complete, especially if they nursed the hope of possibly covering the whole of time. At a later date a further set of names was prefixed to the main body – a score of ante-diluvian kings whose combined reigns were supposed to have lasted 400,000 years. This was taken from legendary material which is described as coming from Eridu in the extreme south. Once again, one has the impression that there is a desire to achieve completeness, to span the whole of time.

The curious feature of this list, however, is the fact that on rare occasions the compiler has identified a particular monarch by a short-hand note. When he reaches Gilgamesh he lets us know that this is the king who was the son of a *lillu* demon. When he mentions Sargon he reminds us that this is the king who was brought up by a gardener or date-grower. What is interesting is the fact that on all these occasions he is making reference to the epics or legends in which these rulers had become known to the world in general. He is virtually saying: 'This is the man about whom the well-known story is told'; 'Etana – he is the person everybody knows about, the shepherd who was carried to heaven – this is the place that he occupies in the series'. It is interesting to see that this epic-material is treated as the single outside source to which reference can be made. Perhaps this gives us an index to the kind of historical knowledge that was regarded as being 'in the air'.

A different kind of list is identified with the First Dynasty of Babylon, and though it is rather later in date it comes not many centuries after 2000 B.C. Its meaning will not easily be apparent unless we remember once again that men had not yet learned to number the years and to recognise them by their number; but they still needed to have a way of identifying them. I am reminded of the people of my own village who, when I was young, would locate an event by stating that it happened in 'the year of

Queen Victoria's Jubilee'. They would have been unable to give the number of the year, and it would not have occurred to them to imagine that the Jubilee was the thing which historians would regard as the most important event of the year. In ancient Babylon they would designate the year in a similar way, by reference to a particular event with which it came to be identified in their minds. Some time after the year had begun, its name would be officially announced, and until this had been ceremonially decreed, the year would be described as simply the one that came after the event used to designate its predecessor. In the case of Sumu-abu, the following Date-List shows the designation for each of the fourteen years of his reign.

1. [The year in which Sumu-abu became king . . .]
2. [The year in which . . .]
3. The year in which the wall of [. . .] was built.
4. The year in which the temple of Nin-sinna was built.
5. The year in which the great temple of Nannar was built.
6. The year after that in which the great temple of Nannar was built.
7. The second year after that in which the great temple of Nannar was built.
8. The year in which the great door of cedar was made for the temple of Nannar.
9. The year in which the wall of the city of Bilbat was built.
10. The year in which the crown of the god Ni of the city of Kis was made.
11. The year after that in which the crown of the god Ni of the city of Kis was made.
12. The year in which the plantation of the gods was made.
13. The year in which the city of Kasallu was laid waste.
14. The year after that in which the city of Kasallu was laid waste.

We can be fairly sure that this list is a correct one; business documents had to be dated somehow or other, and an official key would be necessary – a recognised way of describing the year. A German scholar has suggested that when the successive reigns had been enumerated year by year in this way, any person who ran his eye down the accumulated list would easily acquire the notion of a chronicle – here is the origin of the annalistic survey. For the time being the chronicle would be curious in character: for the events that were chosen to designate the year tended to be such things as religious ceremonies, the building of a temple or the digging of a canal.

It will be apparent that nothing can have been more conducive to the making of lists than the fact that the world had as yet developed no way of numbering the years. The Babylonian method was cumbersome and, at a later

date, possibly as a result of foreign influence, the practice of numbering the regnal years was adopted. In Assyria they identified the year by attaching to it the names of the holders of a given office – a system more familiar to us because it appears again in ancient Greece and Rome. It necessitated the production of official lists, the *Limmu*-lists, giving the names of the men who played the leading part in the important New Year celebrations in the Assyrian capital. It appears that these lists were sometimes expanded by the addition of notes, briefly recording the events of the year. Once again the assembly of a list seems to mark a stage in the development of something like a chronicle. With the passage of time, the Assyrian lists became very long; and it required a considerable effort to go through them in order to discover that a given temple had been constructed over 600 years previously or that a given king had reigned 800 odd years ago. The counting seems not always to have been correct; and as the later estimates of the lapse of time since some past event tended to become smaller than the earlier estimates, it has been suggested that the tablets might have got broken, the missing pieces being left out of the count.

It is not clear that any of the lists that have been mentioned were the products of a genuine interest in the past, though the accumulated Egyptian list and, still more, the Sumerian King-List may have shown a sort of desire to have a conspectus of the whole of time. The long lists, however, are of considerable significance to those who are interested in the very beginnings of history, for they showed people the immensity of the period that lay behind them, while at the same time they suggested a way of sub-dividing or measuring the period. The ancient Greeks had inadequate lists, and they were ready to believe that the time when the gods had walked and sported on the earth was not very far behind them. When some of them saw the length of the Egyptian lists – the lists not only of rulers, but also of priests, father succeeded by son for a very long period – they left evidence of the way in which this surprised them. Now, at last, they came to the realisation that history had already been going on for thousands of years. Herodotus is one of the writers who explains at length how important this knowledge was; but he describes also how a predecessor of his, Hecataeus, had similarly been taken by surprise. When Josephus came into controversy with the Greeks over the question of history in the first century A.D., he mentioned the lists that his own people – the Jewish people – had similarly preserved. The comprehensive lists that have been described provided an outer framework for the assembly of historical knowledge, but our remote predecessors, starting from such meagre beginnings, were not likely to find it easy to recover anything very authentic to fill the time-spaces that had now become so glaringly apparent. Fortunately, the problem of history was open to an entirely different method of attack.

3 DISPUTES AND WARS

Though it is difficult for society or the body politic to recover the happenings of the distant past when the memory of them has once been lost, a short-term memory is a more practicable thing and it is this which in the first place turns out to be the serious objective. It is not easy in fact to avoid thinking about the things that happened only the other day; and we ourselves, partly perhaps because we have become so historically minded, and partly because we are so aware of the continuity of historical processes, constantly see the problems of the present in terms of the recent past, and even need the past to help us to give them their proper formulation. Whether we are discussing Vietnam or the state of the shipbuilding industry, we slip into a kind of historical retrospect almost before we know what we are doing. Talk about the present, therefore, tends to slide almost insensibly into talk about the past. Moreover, something of the same tendency is visible, in Mesopotamia for example, thousands of years ago, before anything like historical study really existed and before past and present were quite separated in men's minds. We could not say that it was a case of interest in the past for the sake of the past, but it must always have operated as a stimulus to historiography, a help to the cultivation of at least a short-term memory. Even if all this were not the case, it is often necessary in the actual conduct of business – the direction of commerce, for example, or of affairs of state – that decisions should be recorded in a formal manner and transactions carefully minuted. Some of the earliest examples of historical recapitulation and of the narrative art would appear to have been the result of this practical need – not historical in their real intention or purport, but becoming historical for a later age, that is to say, by the lapse of time. And such documents carry us back almost to the year 2500 B.C. – behind even the famous King-List of ancient Sumer.

Our attention is still focused upon ancient Sumer, but it fixes itself now upon the great days of the city of Lagash. This city is of special interest to those who are looking for the beginnings of historical writing, for it has handed down to us a group of literary pieces which seem to take us to the root of the problem. Yet Lagash may not have been unique and the fame that it has acquired in this field may be fortuitous. It may be due to the chances of archaeological investigation and documents of a similar nature might well be discovered at any time elsewhere. Particularly important to us is a series of inscriptions which describe a long-standing conflict over the frontier between Lagash and the neighbouring city of Umma. And one of the texts is again associated with a famous monument, the so-called Vulture stele, a work of some significance to the historian of both art and religion, especially in view of its actual pictorial account of one of the battles. It

celebrated the victory of Lagash over Umma in a war that arose out of an infraction of a boundary settlement. Scholars have suggested that this may be the earliest historical document so far recovered in the Near or Middle East – the earliest surviving attempt to give an account of wars and battles. But later accounts of this territorial conflict have survived, since successive rulers of Lagash found themselves involved in successive phases of the conflict, and all would have the same motive for placing the facts on record. It seems to have been a natural thing that a boundary-stone, marking for the time being the settlement of this running controversy, should refer back to the dispositions that had been made at the very first, and then recapitulate the infraction of the original decree thereby rehearsing the rights and wrongs of the case, as well as announcing the latest settlement. Then, when a later ruler of Lagash suffered a repetition of the offences committed against his city, it was natural that he should produce his own monuments, covering the whole ground again. The latest of them gives, therefore, an historical *résumé* covering a period of something like 150 years.

These Lagash documents were remarkably religious in a sense, and it is interesting to see to what a degree the gods figure in the story, though what is in question is the record of a business transaction, not merely a piece of historical writing. In the first place it had been the chief of the gods who had adjudicated upon the boundary question, and the monarch who was the overlord of both the rival cities – both Lagash and Umma – had merely registered the results of the divine decree. It was Ninsurga, the local god of Lagash, who was regarded as the sufferer when the city's land was depleted, for the city was in a peculiar sense his property. Even the inhabitants of the rival city, the men of Umma, were not regarded as the ultimate culprits – the real blame was placed on their own local god who was regarded as having inspired their offensive action. And the ruler of Lagash, when his land was invaded, made no response until he had consulted his god, against whom the offence had been committed. Only after he had received direction and encouragement from Ninsurga did he make the actual resort to war. Nor did he for a moment claim to have secured the victory. He simply reported that his patron deity had prevailed. Yet in the Vulture stele the monarch has described the concrete events which enable us to understand the whole episode. In a sense there might have been no more miracle involved than when Englishmen used to say that God had given them the victory. An interesting feature of the document is the regard that it shows for the relevant points of historical detail.

The following is a fairly close paraphrase of one of the later records of this dispute:

Enlil, the king of all the lands, the father of all the gods, marked off the boundary for Ningirsu and Shara by his steadfast word.

Mesclin, the king of Kish [the overlord of Lagash and Umma], measured it off . . . [and] erected a stele there.

[But] Ush, the *ishakku* [or ruler] of Umma violated both the decree of the gods and the promises given by men. He ripped out the [boundary] stele, and entered the plain of Lagash.

Then did [the god] Ningirsu, Enlil's foremost warrior, engage in battle with [the men of Umma in order to fulfil Enlil's word]. By the command of Enlil he hurled the great Shush-net upon them, and heaped up their skeleton (?) piles in the plain . . .

Eannatum, the *ishakku* of Lagash, the uncle of Entemena, the [later] *ishakku* of Lagash, marked off the boundary with Enakalli, the *ishakku* of Umma. He led out its ditch from the Idnun [canal] to the Guedinna; inscribed stelae along that ditch; and restored Mesclin's stele to its [former] place. But he did not enter the plain of Umma. He built there the Imdubba of Ningirsu, the Namnunda-Kirgaria, the shrine of Ningirsu, [and] the shrine of Utu [the sun-god]. He allowed the Ummaites to eat the barley of [the goddess] Nanshe, and the barley of Ningirsu, to the amount of one *Karû* per person [in return for a charge]. He levied a tax on the Ummaites, and brought in for himself a revenue of 144,000 'large' *Karû*.

This barley remained unpaid. Ur-Lumma, the *ishakku* of Umma, took away the water from the boundary-ditch of Ningirsu and that of Nanshe. He ripped out the [boundary] stelae and put them to fire. He destroyed the dedicated (?) shrines of the gods which had been built in the Namnunda-Kigarra. He obtained [help] from foreign lands. Finally he crossed the boundary-ditch at Ningirsu.

Ennatum fought with him in the Gana-ugigga [where are] the fields and farms of Ningirsu, and Entemena, Eannatum's beloved son, defeated him. Ur-Lumma fled. [Entemena] slew [the Ummaite forces] till he came to the city of Umma. On the bank of the Lumma-girgumta canal he wiped out [Ur-Lumma's] elite force of 60 soldiers. As for the men [of Umma] he left their bodies in the plain and heaped up their skeleton (?) piles in five places.

At that time, Il, the *sanga* of Hallab (?) ravaged (?) [the land] from Girsu to Umma. Il took to himself the *ishakku*-ship of Umma; stole the water from the boundary-ditch of Ningirsu, the boundary-ditch of Nanshe, the Imdubba of Ningirsu, that Girsu tract of arable land which lies towards the Tigris, [and] the Namnunda-Kigarra of Nintrussag. When Entemena, the *ishakku* of Lagash, repeatedly sent [his] men to Il because of that ditch, the latter, the *ishakku* of Umma, the plunderer of fields and farms, the speaker of evil, said: 'The boundary-ditch of Ningirsu and the boundary-ditch of Nanshe are mine'. He said: 'I shall exercise control from the Antasurra to the Dimgal-abzu temple'.