

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

# The Historical Revolution

English Historical Writing  
and Thought  
1580-1640

F. Smith Fussner



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## The Historical Revolution

First published in 1962, Frank Smith Fussner's introduction to the revolution in English historical writing and thought during the period of the renaissance and reformation (1580-1640) is an influential and thoroughly-researched work. It offers an introduction not only to the context of the period and the important English historians of the era, but also provides a thorough historiographical approach which deals with the purpose, method, content, style and significance of these historians within the framework of this 'historical revolution'.

## THE HISTORICAL REVOLUTION

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**THE HISTORICAL  
REVOLUTION**

*English Historical  
Writing and Thought  
1580-1640*

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*by*

F. SMITH FUSSNER



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FOR JANE



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The research for this book was carried on at a number of institutions, at all of which I was given every consideration by the librarians and record keepers. Most of the books cited in the text were used in Widener Library or in the Houghton Library and Reading Room at Harvard University. Most of the manuscripts were consulted at the British Museum, and at the Public Record Office in London. Other libraries, both English and American, provided books and manuscripts which proved most useful. My thanks go to all of them.

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## A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE

THE FOOTNOTES IN THIS BOOK serve two purposes: (1) they identify quotations or paraphrased passages, and (2) they call attention to books and articles which contain further bibliographical information, or which provide important interpretations. There is no formal bibliography—the footnotes to the separate chapters will serve to guide the student to some of the relevant manuscripts, and to useful secondary works. The *Short Title Catalogue*, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and other standard works of reference, especially the catalogues of the manuscript collections in the British Museum and in the Oxford and Cambridge libraries must be consulted by anyone interested in doing further research. The *Calendars of State Papers, Domestic* and the various calendars published by the Historical Manuscripts Commission are obvious sources of information. No attempt has been made to cite all of the relevant material contained in these, or in other works consulted in writing this book.

In general, I have tried to give the kind of bibliographical comment that would prove useful to interested students. A comprehensive bibliographical essay would have added greatly to the length of this book, and would have duplicated much that can be found readily in such works as the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, or Douglas Bush's *English Literature in the Earlier 17th Century*. In the notes I have omitted most of the secondary works dealing with well-known writers, or with well-known historical problems. Hence, my bibliographical references must be supplemented—they are meant to provide useful starting points for further research; they are not commentaries on contemporary scholarship. Research specialists will recognize significant omissions (not all of which can be excused as being deliberate), but the works I have cited are, for the most part, important contributions to the subjects discussed in the text. Not all of the books referred to in the text are mentioned in the notes; and no attempt has been made to provide bibliographies of the writings of individual historians. Anyone who wishes to find out more about the ways and means of writing history in the seventeenth

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century will quickly discover that there are a great many important sources still waiting to be explored.

The abbreviations used in the notes are the following: (1) British Museum manuscript collections are preceded by the initials B.M. Manuscript (MS.) numbers refer to the bound manuscript volume numbers. (2) State Papers at the Public Record Office are designated S.P. All of these are domestic state papers, and may be found by consulting the appropriate Calendars. (3) the *Calendars of State Papers, Domestic*, are abbreviated *C.S.P. Dom.* (4) The *Dictionary of National Biography* is abbreviated *D.N.B.* (5) Books are referred to by short title only, after the initial citation of the full title.

In quoting from manuscripts I have modernized both spelling and punctuation. Quotations from books retain the original spelling, except that certain vagaries of typography have been silently amended; also, in a few cases, I have modernized spelling in the interests of stylistic fluency. Citations from prefaces and from unnumbered pages in books are by Signatures, but this was not thought necessary in short prefaces.

F. S. F.

## INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH HISTORY HAS BEEN WRITTEN IN many ways and under various titles, the aim of the honest historian has always been to tell a true story of what men have thought and felt, done or left undone in the course of time. The only witnesses of a remote age are the records and remains which the living generation inherits from the dead. Every historian must make use of those records and remains in order to answer the questions he puts to himself. What questions the historian asks, and what arguments and evidence he gives, betray the nature of his interests and the extent of his skill, knowledge, and taste. The skill he shows in questioning his evidence will help to decide his stature as a scholar. But no matter what special techniques he may use to elicit truth, he must ultimately rely on his own knowledge and understanding of men; without this, all interpretation is crippled and limps.

Few historians have loved the past merely for its own sake, or for the sake of its gross remains. It is what living men and women have created or maintained or destroyed that lends to history all its poetry. The past offers little escape or refuge from the present; it is the reality of a once-present life that forms the subject matter of history. The great writers of history have been creators and artificers, not merely recorders and clerks for bygone generations. The best historical writers of the early seventeenth century were men of passion as well as erudition. To them 'a society of the living and the dead' was an unquestioned assumption. Their works may be found catalogued under diverse titles, under headings from Antiquity to Topography, but all have in common a lively interest in the relation of past to present. All contributed, in various ways, to the modern idea of history. The subject of this book is the way in which English historians of the early seventeenth century wrote history, and their ideas about their work.

The word 'history' has sometimes been narrowly defined to mean the events or incidents of the actual past, as distinguished from the records and remains of the past, and from the historian's written account of past events. History, historical evidence, and historiography

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are a rather pedantic triumvirate, however, and I have preferred to follow the common usage of historians—'history' may mean the evidence, the past, or the historian's account of it; the word's meaning should be clear from the context in which it is used.

The idea of history in any age, like the idea of property, or of progress, is an unstable compound; it is put together as needed, by historians or by philosophers, out of the irreconcilable opinions of men. Every man has opinions about the past, and there is hardly a field of inquiry which does not make some use of 'historical' evidence. In this book I have defined the idea of history in terms of the attitudes and writings of seventeenth-century historians. It is no easy matter, however, to decide which writers were historians. Obviously, not everyone who has written about the past can be called a historian, yet it is equally plain that there have been writers, like John Stow, too modest to call themselves historians, who have, nevertheless, written great historical works. According to the seventeenth-century historical theorists, few men deserved the title of historian. It was easy enough to distinguish invidiously between antiquaries, chroniclers, and historians, but in practice the distinctions made, for example, by Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning*, are too arbitrary to be of much use. In practice, nearly every historian of note in the seventeenth century was interested in antiquarian studies, and profited from them. John Selden, who had no use for the 'sterile part of antiquity' which merely described what had been, knew well how to value the 'precious and useful part of it'. I have therefore disregarded theoretical classifications in favour of a broad common-sense definition: the writer of history was anyone who wrote about the past in order primarily to describe or explain to his contemporaries the actions or traditions of earlier generations.

Writers who were primarily concerned with legal precedents or with theological or political discourse merit consideration only in so far as their research seems to bear directly on the writing of history. A considerable traffic in facts about the past was carried on by lawyers, heralds, genealogists, theologians, and others, but these men were not necessarily interested in the once-actual life of the past. They were more likely to be concerned only with those records and remains of the past which were of immediate use in their work. Historical facts were important to them in terms of a current intellectual coinage; what mattered was the minted value of a fact—its purchasing power, so to speak—not its historical significance. To

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the herald, for example, armigerous ancestry was a fact to be entered as a credit on some current account. The herald, as such, was not interested in social history and its problems. To what extent writers and investigators in related fields influenced historians is a difficult question which permits of conjecture but not of proof. I have made conjectures, but I have not tried to track the cold trails of particular influences.

The present work is primarily concerned with tracing the origins of certain modern problems of historical inquiry, and with the development of critical historical methods, particularly in the early seventeenth century, when historical research of the highest quality was being accomplished.

The problems and methods of historical research in medieval England have been described by Professor Galbraith, who traces the medieval line of historians to its end in the early sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In the century which followed, new techniques, attitudes, and facilities for research were developed, and these revolutionized the study of history. What brought about this 'historical revolution', and what its intellectual effects were, can only be conjectured on the basis of the studies and evidence at present available. The hypotheses of explanation offered in this book are meant only as hypotheses—*caveat lector*. I have examined many different kinds of historical writing with a view to defining the nature and methods of historical inquiry. Had my purpose been to write a history of historiography in the early seventeenth century this would have been a very different book. As it is, certain important writers, such as Spelman, have received only brief notice, while Bacon, Raleigh, Stow, Camden, and Selden have been singled out for discussion in separate chapters. My reason for selecting these writers is simply that I believe they do represent the main currents of historical writing and thought in the period. Other selections could be made and easily justified. Specific works were chosen for detailed study in order to illustrate typical problems in the development of English historiography; the varieties of history are dealt with in a separate chapter.

<sup>1</sup> See V. H. Galbraith, *Historical Research in Medieval England* (London, 1951), 11-12 and 44. This Creighton Lecture of 1949 should be read by all students of English historiography; the present work assumes some familiarity with the problems discussed by Professor Galbraith. My quotations from Selden in this introduction are identified in the notes to the chapter on Selden.

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The concrete problems I have investigated cluster around five major features of the historian's work: purpose, method, content, style, and significance. The meaning of these terms will be made clear in what follows.

### i PURPOSE

The historian's purpose in writing may or may not be the same as his motive for writing. Boredom with a prison room may have been the motive which first spurred Raleigh to write his *History of the World*, but Raleigh's purpose was to justify the judgments of God upon men. It was this moral purpose even more than the stately roll of his prose that brought Raleigh fame as a historian in his own lifetime. Raleigh's *History* is the archetype of all the moralizing histories of the seventeenth century. Selden's *History* was, in similar fashion, the best expression of history written with a view to its political utility. Selden's purpose in writing the *Historie of Tithes* was to give 'light to the practice and doubts of the present' and the light was meant to expose clerical ignorance and error in a matter of great political concern. In the case of John Stow's *Survey of London* the purpose was not to argue a thesis, nor to teach lessons, but to depict London's greatness. Stow's purpose was antiquarian in the sense that he wished to describe London life and London monuments, past and present. He took it for granted that the study of antiquity was useful and required no apology. As a man of his age, he subscribed to all the Ciceronian platitudes about history's moral utility, but he seldom chose to edify his readers with moral commentary. He was content to let his readers make whatever use they saw fit of his very accurate facts.

Most historical writers of the early seventeenth century thought of the purpose of history in one or another of the ways just described; that is, history served a moral, a political, or an antiquarian purpose. Often all three purposes were combined, or perhaps confused, as the case might be. Elizabethan rhetoric taught that man learns from history 'what is the best course to be taken in all his actions and advices in this world'. Such a statement could mean almost anything. All that can with certainty be said is that most seventeenth-century writers thought of politics, morality, and tradition (*alias* history) as forming a kind of trinity. The modern paradox of historicism was not yet recognized as a paradox. Perhaps only Selden could



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have appreciated the implications of Troeltsch's epigram—'we get our ethics from our history and judge our history by our ethics'.

### ii METHOD

Historical method is the means by which the purpose and end of history are achieved. In the seventeenth century most historians did not argue or write much about their methods. They did not try to define historical method because they were not self-conscious about what they were doing. Method, as Bodin used the word, meant a methodical course of study, not the means by which facts and interpretations could be established. Today historians are far more aware of historical process, and of how their own attitudes and even methods change in a changing world. Because they see themselves as a part of history, not apart from it, they have become more conscious of the problems of method. Fact no longer has a hard sharp outline. On close inspection, fact dissolves into theory. Historical method as a means of establishing truths about the past have been historicized, shown to be relative to time and place.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the evidence available to a historian, the questions he asks, and his theories or hypotheses of explanation are all determined, in part, by his historical circumstance; and all are relevant to the study of his methods. Yet this is not, as is often assumed, a justification for sceptical historical relativism. One reason for studying the methods of seventeenth-century historians is that we may be able to discover why historical methods change and why historians have failed to reach agreement about what constitutes valid method. Instead of assuming that everything is relative, historians must examine their criteria of relevance. The problem of relevance is central, as many modern historians have come to realize.

Historical method presupposes good judgment and common sense,

<sup>1</sup> Starting from different assumptions about the nature of history, R. G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), and Raymond Aron in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Boston, 1961), arrive at this conclusion. It is obvious that different kinds of historical truths have been sought by different generations, and that to some extent historical methods have developed in response to need. The question of how far a historian's fundamental philosophical assumptions about the nature of truth influence written history is also at issue here. See, e.g., *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, Y. H. Krikorian, ed. (New York, 1944), especially Edward W. Strong's essay, 'The Materials of Historical Knowledge'.