

Froude's History of England {1}

by Charles Kingsley There appeared a few years since a 'Comic History of England,' duly caricaturing and falsifying all our great national events, and representing the English people, for many centuries back, as a mob of fools and knaves, led by the nose in each generation by a few archfools and arch-knaves. Some thoughtful persons regarded the book with utter contempt and indignation; it seemed to them a crime to have written it; a proof of 'banausia,' as Aristotle would have called it, only to be outdone by the writing a 'Comic Bible.' After a while, however, their indignation began to subside; their second thoughts, as usual, were more charitable than their first; they were not surprised to hear that the author was an honest, just, and able magistrate; they saw that the publication of such a book involved no moral turpitude; that it was merely meant as a jest on a subject on which

jesting was permissible, and as a money speculation in a field of which men had a right to make money; while all which seemed offensive in it was merely the outcome, and as it were apotheosis, of that method of writing English history which has been popular for nearly a hundred years. 'Which of our modern historians,' they asked themselves, 'has had any real feeling of the importance, the sacredness, of his subject?--any real trust in, or respect for, the characters with whom he dealt? Has not the belief of each and all of them been the same--that on the whole, the many always have been fools and knaves; foolish and knavish enough, at least, to become the puppets of a few fools and knaves who held the reins of power? Have they not held that, on the whole, the problems of human nature and human history have been sufficiently solved by Gibbon and Voltaire, Gil Blas and Figaro; that our forefathers were silly barbarians; that this glorious nineteenth century is the one region of light, and that all before was outer darkness, peopled by 'foreign devils,' Englishmen, no doubt, according to the flesh, but

in spirit, in knowledge, in creed, in customs, so utterly different from ourselves that we shall merely show our sentimentalism by doing aught but laughing at them?

On what other principle have our English histories as yet been constructed, even down to the children's books, which taught us in childhood that the history of this country was nothing but a string of foolish wars, carried on by wicked kings, for reasons hitherto unexplained, save on that great historic law of Goldsmith's by which Sir Archibald Alison would still explain the French Revolution -

'The dog, to serve his private ends, Went mad, and bit the man?'

It will be answered by some, and perhaps rather angrily, that these strictures are too sweeping; that there is arising, in a certain quarter, a school of history books for young people of a far more reverent tone, which tries to do full

honour to the Church and her work in the world. Those books of this school which we have seen, we must reply, seem just as much wanting in real reverence for the past as the school of Gibbon and Voltaire. It is not the past which they reverence, but a few characters or facts eclectically picked out of the past, and, for the most part, made to look beautiful by ignoring all the features which will not suit their preconceived pseudo-ideal. There is in these books a scarcely concealed dissatisfaction with the whole course of the British mind since the Reformation, and (though they are not inclined to confess the fact) with its whole course before the Reformation, because that course was one of steady struggle against the Papacy and its anti-national pretensions. They are the outcome of an utterly un-English tone of thought; and the so-called 'ages of faith' are pleasant and useful to them, principally because they are distant and unknown enough to enable them to conceal from their readers that in the ages on which they look back as ideally perfect a Bernard and a Francis of Assisi were crying all day long--'O that my

head were a fountain of tears, that I might weep for the sins of my people!' Dante was cursing popes and prelates in the name of the God of Righteousness; Boccaccio and Chaucer were lifting the veil from priestly abominations of which we now are ashamed even to read; and Wolsey, seeing the rottenness of the whole system, spent his mighty talents, and at last poured out his soul unto death, in one long useless effort to make the crooked straight, and number that which had been weighed in the balances of God, and found for ever wanting. To ignore wilfully facts like these, which were patent all along to the British nation, facts on which the British laity acted, till they finally conquered at the Reformation, and on which they are acting still, and will, probably, act for ever, is not to have any real reverence for the opinions or virtues of our forefathers; and we are not astonished to find repeated, in such books, the old stock calumnies against our lay and Protestant worthies, taken at secondhand from the pages of Lingard. In copying from Lingard, however, this party has done no more than those writers have who would

repudiate any party--almost any Christian--purpose. Lingard is known to have been a learned man, and to have examined many manuscripts which few else had taken the trouble to look at; so his word is to be taken, no one thinking it worth while to ask whether he has either honestly read or honestly quoted the documents. It suited the sentimental and lazy liberality of the last generation to make a show of fairness by letting the Popish historian tell his side of the story, and to sneer at the illiberal old notion that gentlemen of his class were given to be rather careless about historic truth when they had a purpose to serve thereby; and Lingard is now actually recommended as a standard authority for the young by educated Protestants, who seem utterly unable to see that, whether the man be honest or not, his whole view of the course of British events since Becket first quarrelled with his king must be antipodal to their own; and that his account of all which has passed for three hundred years since the fall of Wolsey is most likely to be (and, indeed,

may be proved to be) one huge libel on the whole nation, and the destiny which God has marked out for it.

There is, indeed, no intrinsic cause why the ecclesiastical, or pseudo-Catholic, view of history should, in any wise, conduce to a just appreciation of our forefathers. For not only did our forefathers rebel against that conception again and again, till they finally trampled it under their feet, and so appear, *prima facie*, as offenders to be judged at its bar; but the conception itself is one which takes the very same view of nature as that cynic conception of which we spoke above. Man, with the Romish divines, is, *ipso facto*, the same being as the man of Voltaire, Le Sage, or Beaumarchais; he is an insane and degraded being, who is to be kept in order, and, as far as may be, cured and set to work by an ecclesiastical system; and the only threads of light in the dark web of his history are clerical and theurgic, not lay and human. Voltaire is the very *experimentum crucis* of this ugly fact. European history looks to him what it would have looked to his

Jesuit preceptors, had the sacerdotal element in it been wanting; what heathen history actually did look to them. He eliminates the sacerdotal element, and nothing remains but the chaos of apes and wolves which the Jesuits had taught him to believe was the original substratum of society. The humanity of his history--even of his 'Pucelle d'Orleans,--is simply the humanity of Sanchez and the rest of those vingtquatre Peres who hang gibbeted for ever in the pages of Pascal. He is superior to his teachers, certainly, in this, that he has hope for humanity on earth; dreams of a new and nobler life for society, by means of a true and scientific knowledge of the laws of the moral and material universe; in a word, he has, in the midst of all his filth and his atheism, a faith in a righteous and truth-revealing God, which the priests who brought him up had not. Let the truth be spoken, even though in favour of such a destroying Azrael as Voltaire. And what if his primary conception of humanity be utterly base? Is that of our modern historians so much higher? Do Christian men seem to them, on the whole, in all ages, to

have had the spirit of God with them, leading them into truth, however imperfectly and confusedly they may have learnt his lessons?

Have they ever heard with their ears, or listened when their fathers have declared unto them, the noble works which God did in their days, and in the old time before them? Do they believe that the path of Christendom has been, on the whole, the path of life and the right way, and that the living God is leading her therein? Are they proud of the old British worthies? Are they jealous and tender of the reputation of their ancestors? Do they believe that there were any worthies at all in England before the steam-engine and political economy were discovered? Do their conceptions of past society and the past generations retain anything of that great thought which is common to all the Aryan races--that is, to all races who have left aught behind them better than mere mounds of earth--to Hindoo and Persian, Greek and Roman, Teuton and Scandinavian, that men are the sons

of the heroes, who were the sons of God? Or do they believe that for civilised people of the nineteenth century it is as well to say as little as possible about ancestors who possessed our vices without our amenities, our ignorance without our science; who were bred, no matter how, like flies by summer heat, out of that everlasting midden which men call the world, to buzz and sting their foolish day, and leave behind them a fresh race which knows them not, and could win no honour by owning them, and which owes them no more than if it had been produced, as midden-flies were said to be of old, by some spontaneous generation?

It is not probable that this writer will be likely to undervalue political economy, or the steam-engine, or any other solid and practical good which God has unveiled to this generation. All that he does demand (for he has a right to demand it) is that rational men should believe that our forefathers were at least as good as we are; that whatsoever their measure of light was, they acted up to

what they knew as faithfully as we do; and that, on the whole, it was not their fault if they did not know more. Even now the real discoveries of the age are made, as of old, by a very few men; and, when made, have to struggle, as of old, against all manner of superstitions, lazinesses, scepticisms. Is the history of the Minie rifle one so very complimentary to our age's quickness of perception that we can afford to throw many stones at the prejudices of our ancestors? The truth is that, as of old, 'many men talk of Robin Hood who never shot in his bow'; and many talk of Bacon who never discovered a law by induction since they were born. As far as our experience goes, those who are loudest in their jubilations over the wonderful progress of the age are those who have never helped that progress forward one inch, but find it a great deal easier and more profitable to use the results which humbler men have painfully worked out as second-hand capital for hustings-speeches and railway books, and flatter a mechanics' institute of self-satisfied youths by telling them that the least instructed of them is wiser than

Erigena or Roger Bacon. Let them be. They have their reward. And so also has the patient and humble man of science, who, the more he knows, confesses the more how little he knows, and looks back with affectionate reverence on the great men of old time--on Archimedes and Ptolemy, Aristotle and Pliny, and many another honourable man who, walking in great darkness, sought a ray of light, and did not seek in vain,--as integral parts of that golden chain of which he is but one link more; as scientific forefathers, without whose aid his science could not have had a being.

Meanwhile, this general tone of irreverence for our forefathers is no hopeful sign. It is unwise to 'inquire why the former times were better than these'; to hang lazily and weakly over some eclectic dream of a past golden age; for to do so is to deny that God is working in this age, as well as in past ages; that His light is as near us now as it was to the worthies of old time.

But it is more than unwise to boast and rejoice that the former times were worse than these; and to teach young people to say in their hearts, 'What clever fellows we are, compared with our stupid old fogies of fathers!' More than unwise; for possibly it may be false in fact. To look at the political and moral state of Europe at this moment, Christendom can hardly afford to look down on any preceding century, and seems to be in want of something which neither science nor constitutional government seems able to supply. Whether our forefathers also lacked that something we will not inquire just now; but if they did, their want of scientific and political knowledge was evidently not the cause of the defect; or why is not Spain now infinitely better, instead of being infinitely worse off, than she was three hundred years ago?

At home, too--But on the question whether we are so very much better off than our forefathers Mr. Froude, not we, must speak: for he has deliberately, in his new history, set himself to the solution of this question, and we will not

anticipate what he has to say; what we would rather insist on now are the moral effects produced on our young people by books which teach them to look with contempt on all generations but their own, and with suspicion on all public characters save a few contemporaries of their own especial party.

There is an ancient Hebrew book, which contains a singular story concerning a grandson who was cursed because his father laughed at the frailty of the grandfather. Whether the reader shall regard that story (as we do) as a literal fact recorded by inspired wisdom, as an instance of one of the great root-laws of family life, and therefore of that national life which (as the Hebrew book so cunningly shows) is the organic development of the family life; or whether he shall treat it (as we do not) as a mere apologue or myth, he must confess that it is equally grand in its simplicity and singular in its unexpected result. The words of the story, taken literally and simply, no more justify the notion that Canaan's slavery was any magical

consequence of the old patriarch's anger than they do the well-known theory that it was the cause of the Negro's blackness. Ham shows a low, foul, irreverent, unnatural temper towards his father. The old man's shame is not a cause of shame to his son, but only of laughter. Noah prophesies (in the fullest and deepest meaning of that word) that a curse will come upon that son's son; that he will be a slave of slaves; and reason and experience show that he spoke truth. Let the young but see that their fathers have no reverence for the generation before them, then will they in turn have no reverence for their fathers. Let them be taught that the sins of their ancestors involve their own honour so little that they need not take any trouble to clear the blot off the scutcheon, but may safely sit down and laugh over it, saying, 'Very likely it is true. If so, it is very amusing; and if not--what matter?'--Then those young people are being bred up in a habit of mind which contains in itself all the capabilities of degradation and slavery, in self-conceit, hasty assertion, disbelief in nobleness, and all the other 'credulities of scepticism':

parted from that past from which they take their common origin, they are parted also from each other, and become selfish, self-seeking, divided, and therefore weak: disbelieving in the nobleness of those who have gone before them, they learn more and more to disbelieve in the nobleness of those around them; and, by denying God's works of old, come, by a just and dreadful Nemesis, to be unable to see his works in the men of their own day; to suspect and impugn valour, righteousness, disinterestedness in their contemporaries; to attribute low motives; to pride themselves on looking at men and things as 'men who know the world,' so the young puppies style it; to be less and less chivalrous to women, less and less respectful to old men, less and less ashamed of boasting about their sensual appetites; in a word, to show all those symptoms which, when fully developed, leave a generation without fixed principles, without strong faith, without selfrestraint, without moral cohesion, the sensual and divided prey of any race, however inferior in scientific knowledge, which has a

clear and fixed notion of its work and destiny. That many of these signs are thieves more and more ominously showing in our young men, from the fine gentleman who rides in Rotten Row to the boy-mechanic who listens enraptured to Mr. Holyoake's exposures of the absurdity of all human things save Mr. Holyoake's self, is a fact which presses itself most on those who have watched this age most carefully, and who (rightly or wrongly) attribute much of this miserable temper to the way in which history has been written among us for the last hundred years.

Whether or not Mr. Froude would agree with these notions, he is more or less responsible for them; for they have been suggested by his 'History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth.' It was impossible to read the book without feeling the contrast between its tone and that of every other account of the times which one had ever seen. Mr. Froude seems to have set to work upon the principle, too much ignored in