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The Failure of the Historians

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THE FAILURE OF THE HISTORIANS¹

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THE failure from which this paper takes its title is that of English-speaking historians—taken as a body, and in the last twenty years—to have made any contribution to the discussion of current international affairs at all commensurate with what might, as I think, have been expected from them.

In pointing to that failure, I must ask not to be taken as implying more than I mean, and it would be well, perhaps, therefore, if I first made clear what I emphatically do *not* mean.

In the first place, I am not suggesting that the historian has, or can be expected to have, any necessary superiority in the discussion of international affairs. A man may turn historian merely through liking for academic life or through a slightly "escapist" curiosity about antiquity, or simply as a means of earning a livelihood, and none of these things has any necessary connection with that native sagacity which is required for the conduct of foreign policy. It is true that, by reason of his training, the historian should be in a position to say something of value about foreign affairs, but then, the relations of modern states involve so many factors that there are many other people, not historians, who, by virtue of *their* training (as soldiers, economists, etc.) are also in a position to say something valuable; and if it be said that there must be someone to put all these contributions together, that someone (have we any equivalent for the French "philosophe"?) may well be found anywhere among the general body of educated men. No amount of historical training can create judgment where none is in-born.²

Secondly, I must not be understood as pleading for the study of that contradiction in terms, contemporary history. Courses in very recent history do appear in our curricula (including the curriculum for which I am responsible) but, for myself, I regard such courses as concessions to necessity rather than as things which are desirable in themselves. I think that training in historical method is best obtained by the study of periods which are more remote. For it is here that we touch on one of the many differences between the historian and, for example, the journalist. The journalist will tell you that he is accustomed to dealing with conflicts of evidence; but the historian of past ages is accustomed to dealing with something which is more important; he is accustomed to dealing with gaps in the evidence, and to making a sharp distinction, therefore, (as the journalist—with his "it is well known in certain circles"—or his "we are credibly informed"—or his

¹Throughout this paper, I have used the first person singular. I am aware of the objections to this practice, but as this paper is an expression of personal opinion, considerations of honesty seemed to preclude the use of the editorial "we," and considerations of style weighed heavily against the repeated use of such circumlocutions as "the present writer," "the writer of this paper," etc.

²In Bolingbroke's view, "The study of history without experience is insufficient." He went on to assert what, to me, is a more important truism, "that experience itself is insufficient without genius"; meaning by genius, in this connection, I take it, the innate ability to profit by experience.

"there is reason to believe"—does not distinguish) between the places where he is on firm ground and the places where he has gone on to inference or guess-work. So that I beg that I may not be confused with the advocates of history-up-to-the-minute.

Thirdly, it may be suspected that an amateur of Bolingbroke has adopted his subject's maxim that "history is philosophy teaching by examples," and—even if, lacking the eighteenth-century assurance, he cannot now, like the eighteenth-century aristocrat, dismiss research on the Middle Ages as "learned lumber"—is about to urge that it is modern history which should be emphasized, and that even modern history should be studied chiefly because it is politically useful. This last, if I understand him rightly, was Seeley's view, and I can only say that I think its practice is studded with pitfalls. It may be true, as Sir Richard Lodge declared, that "few things are more likely to contribute to the stability . . . of a democratic state than the training of its members by an intelligent study of history," but Sir Richard was careful to add that it is the historian's business "to supply knowledge rather than convictions; to furnish his students with the means of forming their own judgments, and not to force down their throats his own opinions"; and I think that most of us will agree that it is precisely as we get nearer to the present time that it is hardest to get our students to deal in knowledge and not in convictions; hardest to teach them that it is just possible that they may be mistaken. The English student seems likely to learn the methods of dispassionate enquiry more easily from a study of Anglo-French relations under Danby than from a study of the same relations under Curzon, because, in the first case, his national, and other, prejudices are less likely to be involved; and even the Marxist undergraduate—and which of our classes is without him?—can sometimes be persuaded to tolerate a seminar in method, provided that it deals with a period which is remote enough from that of the prophet.

The view that we should use history as a source from which to draw practical lessons, which will enable us to construct a science of politics, passes easily into the view that we should study the past primarily as a means of explaining the present, a doctrine which seems to me to be at least as dangerous, if not so obviously so, as the older doctrines which would have used history to teach religion, or civic morality or patriotism. In my own teaching, I find that possibly my greatest difficulty is to prevent my students from imposing, on all the complexities of the past, an artificial and arbitrarily simplified pattern which is vaguely associated with their idea of "progress." They know little or nothing of the scientific doctrine of evolution, properly so called, but, like most people of the last four generations, they have a vague idea that "Science," through its affirmation of the idea of evolution, has somehow given a final sanction to the idea of automatic and inevitable human progress; so that they approach English history, for example, as though it were like the unrolling of a carpet which had proceeded from Alfred to Mr. Gladstone in an undeviating and inevitable straight line, and as a manifestation of a single principle.

With this audience, I need not labour the point that such an approach is radically unhistorical. Its obvious defect is that it treats each period in the past, not for itself, but merely as a stepping-stone to its successor, and leaves us, as Chesterton pointed out, perpetually on our knees to our own grandsons. This, in turn, means that we select for emphasis,

in each century, those developments which (as, from our later vantage point, we now know) were most palpably leading on to the next century. Thus, because we know that Parliament was to emerge victorious from its seventeenth-century conflict with the Crown, we take care to understand the case of Parliament, but somewhat less care to understand the case of the Crown; whereas the "actual" seventeenth century was both—both the cause of Parliament and the cause of the Crown.

In the same way, we are led to pick out, and to emphasize, in any period, the sanguine, forward-looking personalities or groups because, again from our later vantage ground, we know that it was their ideas which were to gain acceptance. Quite apart from the question of whether we go on to idealize these "winning" tendencies or not, it seems to me to be bad, historically, that they should even be emphasized. For the "real" seventeenth century was not merely Pym and Shaftesbury and the elder Sunderland; it was at least equally—some might say, more typically—Hyde and Danby and Halifax; for if it takes two to make a quarrel, it emphatically took two to make a past quarrel, losers as well as winners; and it is limping history, surely, which only concerns itself with understanding the winners. The Elizabethan-Cavalier ideal of a real King-in-Parliament—a sagacious sovereign at one with a loyal and faithful Commons—was to become outmoded; but is it not defective Tudor and Stuart history which fails to examine an ideal which was held by so many Tudor and Stuart Englishmen? Government-by-party was to replace government-above-party; but a history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries which omits the fact that the latter idea was held by Englishmen as important as Marlborough and Godolphin and Shrewsbury and Harley, is surely mutilated history? The extremes to which the "history-to-explain-the-present" school can go can be seen in Mr. Wells, who first projects an ideal of his own imagining into the future, and then proceeds to approach all past history in terms of that ideal, awarding marks for good conduct to those individuals who appear to him to have been tending towards his private ideal, and contemptuously dismissing those (for example, Napoleon) who were not.

Lastly, this viewing of the past in terms of the present³ leads us to attribute to past generations a conscious foresight of the consequences of their action which they did not possess. I need not, again, remind this audience of the more obvious examples; the tendency, because seventeenth-century puritanism contained some germs of modern democracy, to see the puritans as modern democrats or, at least, as men who saw themselves as the forerunners of modern democracy; the tendency to attribute to the parliamentary opposition under Elizabeth and James I—that is to say, to men who were feeling their way with a great deal of honest bewilderment, and among particular issues—a clear conception of what their opposition was to mean for the future interpretation of the constitution as a whole. This, it seems to me, is the great value of requiring our students to read contemporary sources; that they may see what the activities of a Peter Wentworth or a Coke

³Professor R. L. Schuyler has pointed out that there is all the more need to be on our guard against this view, because it is the attitude which comes most naturally to those who are not historically trained. See his thoughtful "History in a Changing World" (*British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, V, 4).

meant to a Wentworth or a Coke, as distinct from what, as we can see now, they were to mean for generations which were yet to come. As Mathiez put it: "My whole effort has consisted in withdrawing myself as much as possible from our present ways of thinking and judging in order to find again those of the men of the 18th century. . . . The historian ought not to question the past with formulas of the present."

I apologize for this lengthy preface, but it has been necessary to say so much in order to anticipate the more obvious criticism of what I am about to argue. I hope that I have made it clear that this paper is not going to claim that "history teaches this or that," since there will be very real differences among historians as to what it does teach. I hope that I have made it clear that I realize that the historian is fallible, and that when we are told that philosophy is the study of other peoples' opinions, and history the study of other peoples' mistakes, it is not always easy to parry the comment that they have often been the mistakes of the historians. More especially, I hope that I have made it clear that I no more wish to see history treated as the handmaiden of politics than I wish to see it made the tool of religious or patriotic propaganda. I hope that this meeting will agree with Professor Tout that "we investigate the past not to deduce practical political lessons, but to find out what really happened"; even if we add that we realize the impossibility of ever finding out the whole of what happened. In my view, history for history's sake is a perfectly tenable position.

II

Having disagreed, however, with all those schools which insist on the immediate "utility" of history, I would still suggest that the study of history, though pursued for its own sake, may yet have, as its by-products, three attitudes of mind which might be expected to show themselves in the historian when he steps outside his trade and speaks as a citizen.

The first of these three is the perception of difference. Those who use history to explain the present tend to emphasize likeness. They seek in the Middle Ages for motives which they can recognize as being those which, in their opinion, move men today, and if we point to different motives, they dismiss them as being either non-essentials or more or less consciously-adopted disguises. They look in the seventeenth century for the ideas which were clearly leading into the eighteenth, and if we draw attention to other ideas in the tangled seventeenth-century skein, they dismiss them as having been held only by "reactionaries" who were soon to be left behind by "progress." Now I think it will be agreed that the moment any one of us really embarks on research into the contemporary materials of any period, the thing by which he is struck is not likeness but difference; the fact (I apologize for the triteness of the examples) that thirteenth-century barons did not mean by "liberty" what Locke was to mean by it; that the Speakers of Henry VIII's parliaments did not mean by "freedom of speech" what the Speakers of Charles II's parliaments were to mean by it; and so on.

The second, which in some sort follows from the first, is tolerance; tolerance of cultures and of attitudes of mind which are different from our own. For example, we ourselves are the heirs of a civilization in which, since the Renaissance, secular culture has emancipated itself from the tutelage of the Church and created an independent "order"

of humanistic inquiry and science; and in which, since the industrial revolution, economic life has emancipated itself from the other traditional historic organization, the State, and created the thing which we know as the capitalist order. The Middle Ages, on the contrary, whatever their practice, could not, in idea, conceive of these autonomous "orders"—cultural, economic, political—each self-justificatory and each pursuing its ends without any reference to any over-riding religious and moral purpose. The historian of the mediaeval period, therefore, finds himself, on the one hand, living in a society which assumes that the appetite for economic gain is a constant force and that society itself is nothing more than a mechanism which adjusts itself through the play of economic motives to the supply of economic needs, and on the other, studying a civilization which treated society as a community of unequal classes, each with its own function, but all organized for a common and moral end; and to me, at least, it seems improbable that a man should study, for example, things so different as the views of the Schoolmen and those of the classical economists, and not have the borders of his tolerance enlarged.

For tolerance is surely first cousin to understanding, and it is the business of the historian to understand underlying conditions. When he encounters the Divine Right of Kings, for example, it is not his business, I hope, to remark on how silly such a doctrine (if taken literally) must appear in 1942; it is his business to inquire what it was in that doctrine which made it acceptable, in 1542, to men who (his researches will probably have impelled him to feel) were at least as intelligent and honest as ourselves. Few régimes, either past or present, have been able to deny themselves excursions into philosophical thought with the object of rationalizing their practice; and while it is the business of the political philosopher to point out that these excursions have often left much to be desired, and that these rationalizations have sometimes been quite remarkably irrational, it is the business of the historian, I take it, to depict the régime with which the doctrines were associated, rather than to examine the coherence with which they were expressed. For most generations have lived in the light of some fiction, and whether the fiction be the Divine Right of Popes, of Kings, or of the people unified according to Rousseau, our business is to record the origin and consequences of the fiction and to relate it to the *conditions* which went with it. "Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner" must come very near to being the essential temper of the historian.

The third conception which, as it seems to me, must be borne in upon the historian, is that of unity and continuity. J. B. Bury said that the great transforming conception which enables history to define her scope is the idea of development, and it was a Russian historian, I think, who said that history does not leap. If someone were to say that a lively sense of the truth of this principle would make the historian (in his capacity as citizen) a liberal-conservative, advocating liberal reform upon conservative grounds, I am not sure that I should not agree.

This, then, is my position: that the historian, as such, has no special connection with, or aptitude for, politics: that if he cares to pursue his researches into, shall we say, the incidence of the land tax in Norfolk under William III and to eschew discussion of current affairs, he is entitled to do so: but that if, and when, he does speak of "affairs" as

a citizen, it might be expected that he should make a special contribution because of those attitudes of mind which his particular training is calculated to nourish, and of which I have named three. It is my complaint that, by and large, and with some conspicuous exceptions, when we have come down into the market place in the last twenty years, our utterances have been indistinguishable from those of our contemporaries who have not had our advantages.

III

The first attribute which I suggested might be looked for in the historian-turned-citizen was the perception of difference. For the educated layman, on the other hand, there has possibly never been a time when perception of differences was so blurred. The educated man of the eighteenth century was very much alive to what Bolingbroke called the different "manners, customs and interests of particular nations," but we have lived in an intellectual climate inherited from that nineteenth-century liberalism which, beginning with the assumption that, if you give all men free institutions, you make all men free, came near to assuming that, if you give all men the same institutions, you make all men the same; and there was a time in the 1920's when it was the mark of a "progressive" mind to act not merely as though we could all love one another, but as though we could all be one another.

Now without committing myself to any theory of immutable "national characters," I suggest that historians could have been of service by reminding our people that words and ideas do undergo a sea-change when they pass from a people with one historical experience to a people with another.

One of the causes of ill-will, for some years past, has been the confusion which surrounds the use of the word "democracy." In domestic affairs, we have the problem of how to reconcile the rule of law with the rule of the popular will, when modern democracy has made it plausible to attack the first in the sacred name of the second. In foreign affairs, we are confronted with the contradiction that the totalitarian régimes are undoubtedly democratic in the sense that they have the support of the mass of their subjects, and yet do things which, in our sense of the term, are undemocratic. Would the contradiction have been quite so bewildering if we had made clear the different origins of democracy in England and democracy on the Continent?

An audience of historians will agree, I hope, that the things which Englishmen imply when they use the word democracy—our parliamentary form of government and our ideals of personal freedom—are not democratic in origin: they are a legacy which our modern industrial democracy received from an older agrarian and aristocratic England. The essence of our constitutionalism—the limitation of the power of government by law—was enforced, not by the "people" acting on any theory of the Rights of Man, but partly by the substantial gentry and merchants of the seventeenth century, defending their rights at common law against the King, and partly by our religious sects, each with its distinctive social tradition, and each prepared to defend a certain religious way of life against King or Parliament alike.

The importance of these two elements—aristocratic Liberalism and sectarian Independency—in shaping the pattern of English freedoms

cannot, in my opinion, be exaggerated, and even today, enough of that pattern survives to prevent England from being a democracy in the Continental sense. If she ever becomes so, I suspect that our two hundred years of peaceful development may come to an end, and that those who love law and liberty may once more have to fight to secure what Coke called "somewhat fundamental"—those liberties at common law which the divine right of the People can no more be trusted not to try to over-ride than the divine right of kings. For liberty understood as the right of the mass to power, and liberty as the right of the individual or group to the highest degree of self-development, are not easily reconciled. Liberty, historically, has been an aristocratic ideal, and it is no accident that England, the home of political liberty and of parliamentary institutions, should possess the strongest and most continuous tradition of aristocratic government.

If we would realize how far she is from being a democracy in the historic sense, we can look across the Channel, where pure democracy did enter Western history with Rousseau and the Jacobins, and it is significant for our present purpose that the Jacobins anticipated nearly all the features of the totalitarian régimes of today: the dictatorship of a party in the name of the nation, the use of propaganda and terrorism, the idea of revolutionary justice as a social weapon, the regulation of economic life in order to promote revolutionary ideals, and, especially, the persecution of all dissenters.⁴ The genuine Continental liberals, in our sense of the term—Royer-Collard, Benjamin Constant, de Tocqueville—were so horrified by their experience of this first reality of mass democracy that they did all that they could to limit the power and prestige of the community in favour of the individual.

When "democracy" is at stake, then, I suggest that we have meant democracy according to Selden and Locke, while the Continent has meant democracy according to Rousseau, and that from this difference has come the unhappy exchange of the last decade in which, quite genuinely, we have vilified the totalitarian states as being anti-democratic, while they, with equal sincerity, have retorted that they are the real democracies. It was probably too much to expect historians to make clear to the man-in-the-street that both were right; but could we not have said it, at least, to our intelligentsia?

Not only has the history of democracy in England been different from its history on the Continent: the history of Liberalism in England has been different from the history of Liberalism on the Continent. In England, the dominant strains in Liberalism have taken a strongly religious cast, and the historic Liberal party was always closely associated with the Nonconformist churches. On the Continent, or at any rate on the Latin Continent, the dominant note in Liberalism has been anti-clericalism; and this historic fact that, in modern times, English Liberalism has always had a strong evangelical flavour, while in France, for example, its temper has been Voltairian, still leads to confusion.

⁴Since this paper was written, the latest historian of the Committee of Public Safety has suggested that the democracy of 1793-4, with its ideals of universal suffrage and increasing economic equality "raised the most portentous of political questions: the relation between democracy in this sense and democracy in the other sense, the democracy of individual liberties and representative government" (R. R. Palmer, *Twelve who Ruled*, Princeton, 1941).

At the present moment, almost every article which is written on English relations with the Continent betrays some desire to base these relations on some ideological preference, and few of them take account of the fact that, as the lines cross the Channel—because of this historic “accident” by which, in England alone, Christianity and Liberalism have gone together, while on the Continent they have been opposed—they become crossed. If we were really to base policy upon international ideas, our “natural” allies against German paganism would be the Christian parties of Europe; but such parties, for historical reasons, are usually socially and politically conservative to a degree which makes it difficult for our Liberals to work with them. Yet to ally with the forces which are labelled “Liberal” on the Continent, is to join with forces which are either anti-Christian (as in France) or terrorist (as in Spain) and which, so far from being Liberal in the English Gladstonian sense, are liable to persecute fellow-men (as in both France and Spain) for no other reason than that these profess and call themselves Christians.

Again, it is natural that minds which are always seeking for, and assuming, “likeness,” should look in foreign countries for the groups which most resemble themselves and should proceed to base policy on those groups. It is natural, but in the case of England, it is nevertheless dangerous. For the temper and outlook of England on the one side, and of France or Germany, for example, on the other, have been shaped by historical experiences so profoundly different that, almost by definition, a French or German group which comes near to sharing our dominant ideas and presuppositions, is likely to be,—if not actually anti-national—at any rate, unrepresentative of France or Germany as a whole and, in the long run, therefore, an unstable pivot on which to base policy. In practice, and since 1919, it has meant that we have tended to lean upon, and deal with, the Centre parties on the Continent, who alone, in any measure, shared our temper; and there is no need to recall what happened to those parties when the political winds arose.

Once more, I am not suggesting that historians, as such, should have advocated this policy or that; but I do suggest that we could have done service by indicating (as we are particularly fitted to indicate) that the whole tenor of the past has given a very different meaning to the same words when used by different peoples, and that policy will have to take account of that fact.

IV

The case of France may illustrate, also, the application of my third attribute of the historian, the perception of continuity or of the effects of the “compulsion of the past.” It has been saddening, as well as alarming, to watch the surprise of our intelligentsia at the events which have followed in France since the summer of 1940. Mr. Wickham Steed, for example, has recently written: “Something deeper than a temporary loss of nerve must have prompted the . . . surrender of Marshal Pétain and his associates. Deliberately and consciously they repudiated the legacy of the French Revolution of 1789 . . . and all the principles which the makers of the Third Republic vindicated. Similar principles were at stake in the Dreyfus Affair which, at the turn of the century, brought France to the verge of civil war. Then the Dreyfusards triumphed over the forces of ‘reaction.’ Now the behaviour of the Men of Vichy has been shrewdly defined as ‘the revenge of the anti-Dreyfusards.’ Evi-

dently the roots of 'reaction' in France lie deeper and are stronger than there seemed valid reason to suppose."

Here, again, one can only say that whoever else had "valid reason" to suppose that the "roots of reaction" were not strong and deep in France, the historian had not. Germany, Russia, and Italy have all, in our time, undergone violent revolutions and produced new and exciting "isms," with the result that our people have been shocked into taking an interest in them. In the case of France, however, it was taken for granted that we knew all about her. True, she had had her own great revolution, but that was 150 years ago, and it is not surprising, since we did so little to enlighten them, that our people should not have known that the ground swell of that revolution is running yet.

Yet this was the country in which few parliamentary candidates ever opened a speech without going back to "the principles of 1789," and where one politician could still make it a charge against another that his ancestor had been on the "wrong" side at Valmy; the country, in short, in which the profound divisions left behind by the great Revolution had never passed into French history because they had never passed out of French politics; and whoever else did not know this, we might have expected to have been reminded of it by the professional students of Mathiez and Aulard. Whoever else took the permanence and stability of the Third Republic for granted, we, who teach nineteenth-century history, had reason to know that conservative and Catholic France had long been excluded from any part in public life; to know that the Republicans had retorted to this part-voluntary, part-enforced abstention with the "République des Camarades," with a régime, that is to say, which, at best, meant "the Republic owes justice to all; jobs only to its friends," and which at worst, meant "All the jobs and quick about it."⁵ We, at least, had reason to suspect, therefore, that there might yet be a "revenge of the anti-Dreyfusards."

Just as the man in the street, confronted since 1940 with a French régime which does not suit our convenience, treats it as a manifestation, not of French history but of evil, so, since 1933, he has treated German Nazism as a manifestation, not of German history, but of evil. Evil, in my opinion, it is, but is it not also a manifestation of German history, and would it not have made a great deal of difference to the way in which we have dealt with the evil, if—instead of judging it in terms of some standard derived from our own very different experience—we had remembered the history; the history of a people set between the policy of France which would cantonize Germany by using the German South as its own, and the Slavs who lap about the German bastions; the history of a people which has never aspired, save very faintly, to the Liberalism which is ours?

There is plenty of inquiry into German history going on now, chiefly, I am afraid, with the very immediate aim of tracing the unpleasant parentage of Nazi ideas from the *Aufklärung* onwards. But what of the wider streams of German history—the history of a people "which

⁵Recall General André's scheme for using Grand Orient Masons in the Army to spy upon their Catholic fellow-officers, a procedure which Captain Mollin justified as making for efficiency since "the brain which is able to adapt itself well to the republican idea should, by that very fact, . . . be superior . . . to the brain which evolves towards the monarchical idea, which is an idea of stagnation and tradition. . . ." (D. W. Brogan, *The Development of Modern France*, London, 1940), 382.

has reached from Trieste to the Baltic; which met the Middle Kingdom behind Strassburg and the Cossacks on the marches of the Ukraine; which has drawn its inspiration at different times from Aachen or from Innsbruck, from Vienna or from Graz, from Prague or from Berlin, but which has never known a single heart; of a people formidable because its limbs are vast and spreading, yet whose unity has been precarious because these limbs have intertwined or clashed with alien growths or have given rise to distortions of their own”?

Again, I do not think that it was the historian’s business to teach policy, but I wish that more of us had insisted that “history does not leap”: that the German present had grown out of the German past and that, whatever else we did with it, therefore, to pretend to deal with it as something imposed on the German people in their sleep, and from which it would be a kindness to kick them awake, was apt to be taken in Germany itself as mere impertinence.

The public attitude to foreign countries tends to take shape in alternating fits of likes and dislikes, the fits being alike in being all too emphatic and in missing the point. From Edward III to Edward VII, being more or less permanently at war with France, we held a settled distaste, not only for French policies (which was natural) but also for French diet, French manners, and French sports (which did not necessarily follow); but once Lord Lansdowne (with some debatable assistance from Edward the Peacemaker) had made the Entente, we discovered the excellence of French civilization. The discovery was admirable in itself, but, as has been well said, it was perhaps a misfortune that we should have had to collide with Germany in order to discover the truth about the French. In the same way, the people who could only screw themselves up to the task of fighting Germany (1914-18) by assuring themselves that all Germans were Huns, were naturally the people who (post-1918) could only bring themselves to make peace with Germany by electing to believe that our late enemies were all angels and our late allies all rogues; and—to cite no other examples—when, in 1939, a London newspaper informed its readers that Turkey had always had an enviable reputation in the matter of keeping her word, it was difficult not to feel that this belated tribute to a deeply religious people was not unconnected with the fact that they had just become our allies.

To all this hectic swinging of the pendulum, to all this rudderless judging of a foreign nation according to what it is doing today and irrespective of what it did yesterday and may, therefore, do again tomorrow, the historian is peculiarly fitted to supply the corrective. For he has a fund of recorded yesterdays; he, at any rate, is aware that there were heroes before (and after) Agamemnon, and he has studied the past of foreign nations, not for its effect upon us but for its own sake. It could be wished that we who have been trained to understand other ages, across the gulf of time, had more frequently, and more publicly exercised this habit of understanding across the gulf of frontiers. Even for the purpose of fighting other people, it seems better to understand them.

V

I suggested that one of the attitudes of mind which is developed by the study of history is that of relating an institution or a policy to the conditions which accompanied it or gave rise to it. Could we not

have done more to make clear this connection—between a thing and its underlying condition—in some of the controversies which have filled the last twenty years?

For two hundred years before 1914, British foreign policy had rested upon three keystones: naval supremacy, the balance of power on the Continent, and abstention from Continental commitments. In application, these had come to mean the two-Power naval standard and a diplomacy aiming at the prevention of disputes among the Great Powers and the localization of such disputes if they arose. Between 1919 and 1922, these traditional policies were swept away. By the acceptance of parity with the next strongest naval power, British naval supremacy was ended. By the acceptance of the obligations of the Covenant of the League of Nations, a policy of abstention from commitments was exchanged for one of acceptance of commitments of the widest sort; a policy of seeking to localize conflicts for one of generalizing them; and a policy of upholding the balance of European power for one which must, in practice, destroy the balance.

Now—and again let me emphasize this—I do not think that it was the business of the historian to approve or condemn this change. I do think that it might have been his business to signalize it. The journalists could be relied upon to draw attention to the Russian and German revolutions, because they made a noise in the world, but here was a silent revolution, at least as momentous in its consequences for the world, and it passed unnoticed. I do not think that it was our business to attack or defend this revolution. I think that it might have been our business to point out that it had taken place; to relate the traditional policies to the conditions in which they had been embedded, and the new policies to the new conditions.

As it is, public discussion of foreign policy in the English-speaking world has gone on for twenty years as though completely unaware that what had been done did involve a profound revolution; half the public demanding the new policies while assuming that the old conditions remain, and the other half seeking to apply the old policies under the new conditions. The journalists had never known what the connection was between the historic policies and the conditions which led to their adoption, and they had some excuse for asking, for example, that, at one and the same time, the government should act to preserve the balance of power and also uphold a Covenant which was destructive of that balance, or should put at the service of the new policy, the naval supremacy which had only been tolerated by the rest of Europe because we had used it to promote the old policy. But we who have studied the *foundations* of British policy had the less excuse.

Again, and without taking sides in the controversies which have centred round the League of Nations, was there no contribution to those controversies which the historian was particularly equipped to make? It was left to the Marquess of Crewe to remind us that, at the turn of the century, "world opinion" regarded the United States as the "aggressor" in the Spanish-American War, and Britain as the "aggressor" in the South African War; and—to descend from Privy Councillors to professors—I have sometimes reminded myself that if the League had been in existence in 1860, it would have been bound to condemn (and, presumably, to call on British naval power to arrest) Garibaldi's expedition against Naples as a plain aggression against a

state with which Piedmont was officially at peace. Even had the historian done no more than remark on such reminders of the past, it would have been much. For the implications of these two reminders alone—the one, that the “aggressor” of one generation may be the “defender of order” in the next; the other, the age-old problem of reconciling the cause of “freedom” with the cause of peace—go to the root of more of our confusion in the last twenty years than is easily computed.

In the same way, it was natural enough that, in the years after 1919, the North American man-in-the-street should forget the combination of fortunate circumstances which had placed North America in a highly special position, should count unto himself for virtue, therefore, what was due to good luck, and should adopt, in addressing European states, an attitude of self-righteousness which always reminded Europeans of a millionaire addressing the poor; but the historians were in a position to know how much national policy owes to geography, and it is perhaps a pity that more of us here did not remind our public that, not innate righteousness, but the fact that, in Senator Dandurand’s words, a “fire-proof” curtain separated us from trouble, was at the bottom of much of our national outlook.⁶

VI

I have already disavowed any wish to claim that history teaches this or that; but, even on this dangerous ground, I suggest that, if history cannot be safely used as material for prophecy, it may as a by-product afford some tentative hints.⁷

An historian reflecting, in the 1920’s, for example, on the role allotted by French policy to the states of the Little Entente and to Poland, might have recalled that there was a period when the same role was allotted by the same policy to Sweden, Turkey, and Poland, and that that policy was successful—until the point at which Prussia and Russia united against the French satellites. Such an historian would have been unwise to prophecy: but he would have had ground for thought.

In the same period, when so large a body of Anglo-Saxon opinion was acting upon the assumption that a defeated Germany would recognize that her defeat had been good for her because it would allow her “better elements” to slough off her Prussianism, an historian might have recalled the resurgence of a neurotic French nationalism some fifteen years after Waterloo, and the appearance of Boulangism some fifteen years after Sedan.⁸ He would have been unwise, I think, to pretend to a pathology of nationalism, or to formulate any iron law of cause and

⁶Those were the years in which the unwearying repetition, by Canada at Geneva, of the invocation to European states to “regard the 3000 miles of undefended frontier and do likewise,” led a perhaps pardonably exasperated correspondent to assert that “nothing save the diplomatic politeness of the other delegates to the Assembly prevented them from asking Canada to go home and sit on the 3000 miles until she had learned another tune.”

⁷“From the point of view of common sense, the notion that historical events are wholly unique is simply not tenable . . . most ‘practical’ men habitually act upon what it is no mere quibble to call a study of historical uniformities. If they act as though their experience gave them absolute uniformities, they are certain to make grave mistakes. But they would make even graver ones if they assumed that each problem they faced was wholly unique and unprecedented” (Crane Brinton in *Foreign Affairs*, XX, 213).

⁸L. B. Namier, *In the Margin of History* (London, 1939).

effect between national defeat and national hysteria; but again, he would at least have had ground for inquiring more closely into the dominant assumption of the moment.

Lastly, I have made it clear, I hope, that I am very far from sharing the view of Professor Alison Phillips (then affording a pleasing exception to the maxim that the Conservatives make history and the Liberals write it) when he wrote, in 1920: "I confess that for me the chief value of history lies precisely in the light which it can throw on the problems of the present." But there is no need to share either the purpose or the conclusions of Professor Phillips's book,⁹ in order to feel that a study of the attempt to organize international peace after 1815 was not without its significance for the parallel attempt of our own day.

VII

My complaint, then, is twofold: that we, whose training makes for the perception of differences, and for tolerance and understanding across the gulf of time, have done less than we might have done to exercise these qualities across the gulf of space, and have too often given countenance to the natural popular habit of reading the assumptions born of our own history into the affairs of nations whose history has been profoundly different; and that we, whose training makes for the sense of continuity, have done less than we might have done to set the régimes or policies of other countries in the context of the continuous past of those countries, and so to do something to correct the ephemeral "fashions" of a public opinion which swings hectically between uninformed sympathy for another nation in one year, and equally uninformed antipathy to it in the next, not according to any considered knowledge of where the spiritual energies of that nation diverge from our own, but simply as its action, at the moment, does or does not suit our convenience.

It would be tempting to speculate on the reasons for this failure, but I have already started enough hares. One suggestion, however, might be hazarded. It seems possible that our economic materialism is in part responsible for corrupting our historical sense. The fashion for economic determinism may not have led us to deny the importance of ideas, but it has led many of us to explain them as being merely the derivatives of economic conditions, and there have been times and places in which to take the independent validity of ideas seriously was to be treated as either a romantic or a reactionary.¹⁰

Now whatever else is controversial about the economic determinists, I think that it will be agreed that they are "levellers"; that they tend to eliminate differences whether of place or time, because they ignore the things which change—ideas of Power, of Law and of the State—and concentrate upon the economic appetite which, like the sexual, is a constant; and I suggest that minds coloured by the tendency to reduce all men, everywhere, to a uniformity based on the universal presence of one appetite, have been in danger of losing that historical sense which has led an English publicist to write (with whatever exaggeration) of France, that "at bottom, all Latin politics are an expression of the

⁹*The Confederation of Europe* (London, 1920), vi.

¹⁰The recent historiography of the French Revolution, with the reception given to the work of Augustin Cochin and of Professor Brinton, affords a good example.

bitter, never-ending conflict between clerical and anti-clerical," and which has led the latest historian of German political thought to insist: "The basic tie between the individual and the society in which he lives is what he thinks about the ordering of society. The niceties of political theory may often seem remote from life, but ultimately it remains true that men behave in human society in accordance with their conception of that society and of their function in it. In the case of Germany this middle link, the distinctive outlook on society . . . springs from a very bold and imaginative corpus of thought . . . : the historical school."¹¹

But with the Materialist Conception of History we leave history for sociology, and I could not do better, perhaps, than to conclude with the words of Sir William Ashley: "The general cultivated public . . . wants to know how individuals and episodes are related to some large whole, and what the significance of it all has been. If scholars competently trained will not try to satisfy this natural and laudable desire, incompetent writers will. . . . The historian . . . may expel nature with the fork of the Seminary . . . but Nemesis stands very near the shoulder of . . . 'Pure History'—and in America it usually calls itself Sociology."¹²

DISCUSSION

Mr. Trotter said that illustrations similar to those which *Mr. Fieldhouse* had drawn from the European scene, could also be drawn from the American scene. For example, in regard to the historian's obligation to perceive differences, the principal trend in the treatment of the history of the Americas during the last generation had involved an ignoring of differences in an eagerness to expand our horizons in this hemisphere and to exaggerate the importance of the term *American*. Similarly, historians as well as others had too often used the word *democracy* as though it were everywhere similar in content in this hemisphere.

Since the last war, *Mr. Trotter* said, some historians had been utopian about the hopes for a new world order, and had consequently been uncritical about the plans which were being made to bring it about. Others had reacted towards cynicism, and he wondered if this were any more valid than utopianism as an approach to history. If the historian's philosophy were either utopian or cynical, how could he hope to meet the standards suggested by *Mr. Fieldhouse*, and how could he be helpful to the people of his own day?

Mr. Brebner said: We must all be indebted to Professor *Fieldhouse* for maintaining in such lively fashion what has become a valuable convention of our annual meetings—the provocative presentation of a controversial subject in order to induce, at one session at least, an intellectual free-for-all among our members. His utterance and Professor *Lower's* of last year are so much more robust than our first experiments of ten or twelve years ago that I doubt whether I can keep up with them.

It comes as something of a surprise to find that an historian, whom most of us were accustomed to think of as spending his hours of self-indulgence in imaginary gossip with *Bolingbroke* at a London coffee-

¹¹R. D'O. Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism* (London, 1941), 10.

¹²Quoted in B. E. Schmitt, (ed.) *Some Historians of Modern Europe* (Chicago, 1942), 35.

house, has, during the past two or three years, sharply focussed his attentions on the continent of Europe in its present throes. Perhaps still more surprising is the discovery that somehow or other during these years he has become a master of the technique of the bull-fight. You will notice that our programme committee has shrewdly estimated his capacities as an artistic killer by providing no less than three bulls to serve as sacrifices in behalf of our entire guild.

It is the nasty custom of the better bull-fighters to begin their dance of death by sticking barbed darts into the forequarters of their victim. Not only do these hurt, but they are adorned with fluttering ribbons which annoy and distract, and sometimes even with strings of fire-crackers which excite the glands whose secretions intensify anger and fear. I hope I may be absolved if I choose to regard the first sections of this paper as the irritating shoulder-darts, and to deal with them a little summarily by shaking out the loosely fastened ones and rubbing off others against the walls of our arena.

For instance, it appears to me that we begin with a disclaimer so sweeping as practically to invalidate the whole paper in its special application. If nothing exceptional is to be expected from historians why take such pains to damn them? It is true that the author has anticipated this criticism by some rather subtle dialectic of differentiation, but I submit that the paper itself, in its matter and its manner, very thoroughly eclipses the ingenious exceptions. No doubt it had to in order to be worth its salt, but the point should not pass unnoticed.

It does seem necessary, moreover, as a tolerably humble member of a guild of characteristically modest scholars, to refuse to accept Professor Fieldhouse's persistent caricature of the historians, as historians, or as historians-turned-citizens. No doubt we share with all men the inability to see ourselves as others see us, and I may be merely exceptionally deficient in this regard, but my mature impression is that most historians whom I know recognize differences, are tolerant, and emphasize continuity. Moreover, these qualities in them seem to make them an exceptionally self-critical group of men, so much so that the reproach which they most often level at themselves is that too much history has infected them with the virus of fatalistic resignation to impotence. This is far from the arrogance which Professor Fieldhouse implies that they reveal. Perhaps the answer is, either that Professor Fieldhouse really objects only to his old enemies, the Whig historians, or that he is attacking vulgarizers, journalists, and text-book writers. In either case, he should have said so.

In fact, Professor Fieldhouse comes quite close to arrogance himself. His attitude toward students as bottles in a machine which carries them to the teacher-spout to be filled and capped is an unwarranted and probably dangerous one. Then again, in speaking of himself and other historians, there is too much insistence that "we select" historical happenings for emphasis. It would be humbler and wiser, and it would iron out some of the apparent or real contradictions in his paper, if he admitted that for the most part we historians do not select events, but that they impose themselves on us. A historian who attempts any substantial piece of synthesis is like a base-ball or cricket player. The playing-field has been marked out for him and there are a good many arbitrary ground-rules imposed upon him as well.

Further, I very much doubt whether Bolingbroke meant, by

“genius,” “the innate ability to profit by experience.” I prefer to accept the definition given in the eighteenth century by Helvétius and by his ardent young disciple Jeremy Bentham, that is, the capacity for invention. This meaning seems particularly important because the interpretation given to the word must be closely interlocked with Professor Fieldhouse’s evaluation of tradition in explaining the course of history.

The bull’s great problem at this stage of the sacrificial ceremony is that his tormentor is so agile. I must admit to feeling that Professor Fieldhouse changes his ground so often, so rapidly, and, behind his cunning cape, so mysteriously, that even when I feel I have him cornered on ground for dispute, he often leaps beyond my reach over the wooden barrier.

Try, for instance, to pin Professor Fieldhouse down on democracy. One can profitably accept a great number of his differentiations between the Continental and the British meanings given to the word, but why, in the name of all the virtues which he selects as historical, try to maintain that modern British democracy is even in major part “democracy according to Selden and Locke”? The ancient strain is there, of course; we even write books and articles about its persistence, but we have to peer behind whole generations of such things as universal suffrage, state social services, political trade-unionism, and deep-cutting capital levies in the forms of taxation, in order to detect it. The old strain of Rousseau is present on the Continent today too, but again behind sturdy walls of authoritarian bureaucracy, administrative law, military conscription, the police state, and praetorian politics. A far safer approach would be to stress the differences between states with land frontiers and a state which has still, to a reassuring degree, the advantage of occupying one whole island.

Much the same remarks would apply to his comments on liberalism and on its religious affiliations. English Nonconformity is at least as anti-clerical *vis-à-vis* the Anglican Church as French liberalism is *vis-à-vis* the Church of Rome, and so forth. I suggest, therefore, that it is thoroughly unprofitable to pursue the *matador* through his mazy manœuvres in quest of principles for international understanding. If we want to discuss international relations, let us do so in terms of power, whether conditioned by geography, population, resources, or human organization; or in terms of surrender of power, either to a master or to an international organization; for, after all, power is the business of politics.

A good deal of the comment on domestic politics in France seems basically to be the assertion that on the Continent as in England an old principle rhymed by Sir William Schwenck Gilbert and harmonized by Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan has in general held true, namely:

That ev’ry boy and ev’ry gal
That’s born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative.

One can point out in this connection that most English-speaking historians are by inclination close students of Gilbert and Sullivan, and as textual experts are sure to have noted that Sir William used the term “world.” Some of them may even have read the only really con-

vincing universal history ever written. I refer, of course, to Anatole France's *Penguin Island*.

A good many of my disagreements with Mr. Fieldhouse's comments on British policy after 1919, particularly when he sets that policy against a background of two centuries, could be summed up in a consideration which he completely neglects. This is that, from 1713 to 1900, it is roughly true to say that Great Britain's natural and acquired advantages made her the most powerful political entity in the world, but that by 1918 that was no longer true. You have to be recognized as very powerful in your own right before a lot of other Powers will let you balance them to your advantage. After 1919 the English-speaking world amply and continuously discussed this alteration in the world situation and, unless I am mistaken, American, British, and Canadian historians were conspicuous in their realization that because the League of Nations was not globally comprehensive, it was imperative to continue to examine world politics in terms of balanced powers, whether you included the League or not. In other words, there was no such momentous revolution as Professor Fieldhouse suggests, except in the sense of a decline in relative British power which seems not to have figured in his thinking.

On the other hand, if Professor Fieldhouse will lower his sword, I shall agree with him about North American self-righteousness after 1919. We all inveighed against it and perhaps if we had really "turned-citizens" we might have done something about it. I also agree, in part at least, with his remarks about economic determinists, but do we not all struggle with ourselves every day of our teaching and writing lives in the effort to cope judiciously with problems of economic interpretation of history? I do not believe that any large percentage of us has surrendered completely to determinism.

If I were forced to choose the ground for a last stand, it would be that Professor Fieldhouse's basic position is weakened by his strong inclination to emphasize tradition and to close his eyes to change. He proves to be, after all, still the eighteenth-century Tory, still trying to expose those damned Whigs. I could focus my uneasiness about all this by pointing out his complete oblivion to the growth of what is now the United States since 1714. If you add the ominous rise of Japan, and the rapid industrialization of the whole world, with all that that implies in terms of dependence on strategic raw materials, none of which phenomena figures in Professor Fieldhouse's conspectus, you are confronted with historical circumstances which are at least as important as alterations in the European balance of power. It seems particularly regrettable to neglect them completely in addressing a Canadian audience, for if the United Nations lose this war Canadians are not likely to be spared the attentions of the victors to their nickel and other natural resources, and if the United Nations win it, Canada will have as her only neighbour a Power which will be so strong that Canadians would be most unwise to expect it to behave with all that respect and imagination which they have been accustomed to believe is their due.

Mr. New said that he had been very greatly impressed by Mr. Fieldhouse's introductory statement, in which the speaker had indicated the task of the historian. He was not so sure that he agreed with the illustrations. He took issue with the manner in which the term "democracy" was used in the paper.

In regard to the attitude of the historian towards contemporary forces, Mr. New said that it was not adequate merely to signalize these forces, but that the historian must take sides, condemning what he thought worthy of condemnation and approving what he found worthy of approval. This raises the question of objectivity and subjectivity. In our teaching we all reveal our enthusiasms and convictions, but in public we too often try to suppress these subjective influences.

Mr. New said that the influence of the materialist interpretation of history had greatly declined during the past ten years, and he thought the historian should be helping to make this clear to the public. With the main point of the paper—that we, whose training enjoins tolerance, allows us to perceive differences, and creates a sense of continuity, have used these qualities less than we should—he was in complete agreement.

Mr. Underhill contended that the speakers had avoided discussing Mr. Fieldhouse's paper. If bull-fights are as innocuous as Mr. Brebner's remarks suggest, he would prefer to attend wrestling matches. Mr. Fieldhouse was really talking, not so much about the seventeenth century, as about the last twenty years. His real objection to the Whig historians is not that they are historians, but that they are liberals; he does not believe in the liberal philosophy. Canadian historians have been liberal in the worst sense of the word: they have seen English-speaking civilization as the exclusive bearer of the liberal virtues.

Mr. Rothney said that he wished to emphasize certain things in Mr. Fieldhouse's paper. We should not expect everyone either in Europe or America to express his ideas on politics in the same way. Historical experience is important in the formulation of these ideas. This principle is of special importance in Canada, because the French Canadians have not shared the historical experience which gave rise to our liberal political system.

Mr. Long said that Mr. Fieldhouse's paper partook of the essence of liberalism: it emphasized the sense of difference between earlier times and the present day. There are pertinent examples of the need of this sense in Canadian as well as in English and European history. In Canada the general approach to the struggle for responsible government and Dominion autonomy is from the point of view of present conditions. People are inclined to believe that British opposition to demands for self-government was prompted merely by reactionary desire to cling to power. They fail to see that British resistance must be judged in the light of conditions of the time, when the colonies were immature. Thus a prejudice against Great Britain is created. Canadian historians have not entirely freed themselves from this misconception.

Mr. Flenley agreed that the real problem is that set forth in Mr. Fieldhouse's paper. But the speaker himself has judged the downfall of France in 1940 on the basis of deep-laid prepossessions. No historian is without them, and he cannot possibly avoid being influenced by them. Of course, this does not mean that we all say the same things, but here is the dilemma: how can we possibly stand aside from our attitude towards the events we are recording?

Mr. Kenney thought that Canada ought to be rather proud of its historians. They have strengthened our efforts in the present world fight against reaction, without ceasing to be historians. Parkman, Lea, and Gibbon, who once were held up as shining examples of the historian who went down into the market-place, produced great polemics, great political pamphlets. The Canadian historians have not done this, and we can be grateful.

Mr. Saunders said that he thought the speaker had started by deploring what the historians had done, and ended by giving them an inadequate task. He seemed to be recalling us to the scientific view of history although we are all agreed that this is impossible. We should admit that we must have convictions, that we should find some ideals in history that we prefer to others, and express these preferences. Historians are disregarded by the public because they leave people to make their own judgments, refusing to give the leadership that is asked of them.

Mr. Gelber said that the central contradiction in *Mr. Fieldhouse's* paper was between the concept of history for its own sake, and the concept of history to illuminate modern events. A study of some remote period, though good as a training in method, does not fit historians to judge present affairs. The historian must himself reveal a quality of statesmanship: the major indictment against him is that often he does not. For example, in *E. H. Carr's The Twenty Years' Crisis*, the Munich agreement is described as the greatest example of peaceful change in modern times. *Mr. Gelber* gave other examples of the failure of historians to indicate the real significance of the events they are narrating.

Mr. Brown said that some distinction must be made between the subjects on which an historian should give judgment and those on which he should not. For example, he did not regard the parliamentary system as applicable in all countries, but he did think that its development in the English-speaking world was of great importance and he did not propose to surrender his right to say so. That does not mean, however, that the historian need associate himself with any contemporary movement for the reform of the parliamentary system: that is the province of the statesman.

In reply, *Mr. Fieldhouse* said that he regretted that *Mr. Brebner* seemed to minimize the difference between what he (*Mr. Fieldhouse*) had called democracy according to *Selden* and *Locke*, and democracy according to *Rousseau*. Surely there was a very real difference between mass plebiscitary-democracy and classical representative democracy? English "liberties" had originally been civil and personal rather than political—freedom from arbitrary arrest, freedom of speech and association, etc.; and nineteenth-century democracy had taken that basis for granted. The totalitarian states, however, had shown us what could happen when popular tyrants used the apparatus of mass democracy—plebiscites, popular assemblies etc.—to destroy all the old liberal guarantees of personal freedom. We had been witnessing a steady progression from Whig limited democracy, through parliamentary mass-democracy (the stage now reached by England) to plebiscitary mass-democracy and its other aspect, Caesarean mass-dictatorship.

He was also sorry that *Mr. Brebner* seemed to minimize the difference between England and the Continent. We ourselves, with our economic materialism, tended to associate the Right with the defence of property and privilege, and the Left with the attack on these things. But, in Latin Europe, there was a philosophic Right, concerned with the defence of spiritual values as against the materialism and anti-clericalism of the Left; and for the past twenty years in France there had been what he would call, for want of a better term, a Christian-Democratic movement which was attempting to bridge this gulf and to take the democracy of the Left, purge it of its materialism, and combine it with the spiritual values of a Right pruned loose from its artificial and unhistorical alliance with property and privilege.