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The Study of History and the Interpretation of Documents

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"History," writes Jacob Burckhardt, "is the most unscientific of sciences." Other writers of even greater eminence have denied that it is entitled to be termed a science at all.

Yet as Motley remarked in one of his letters, "History-writing must be pursued honestly as a science, if it is to be permanently valuable, and not as a trade." "By such a course only can it be made," to use the language of Guizot, "a great school of truth, reason, and virtue."

By the ancients Clio was styled "the eldest daughter of Memory and the chief of the Muses."

Carlyle has told us in an eloquent passage that:

"History, as it lies at the root of all science, is also the first product of man's spiritual nature, his earliest expression of what can be called thought. . . . Let us search more and more into the past; let all men explore it as the true fountain of knowledge, by whose light alone, consciously or unconsciously employed, can the present or the future be interpreted or guessed at."

The study of history ought, therefore, not only to satisfy our curiosity about past events, but essentially modify our views of the present, as it deals with the great principles upon which the everyday life of the world is still carried on.

Whether the study or the writing of history can be regarded as an exact science in the literal sense of the word may be a subject of reasonable doubt, but it can hardly be disputed that there is an increasing tendency to treat both in a scientific spirit, just as there is similar inclination to treat the study of science, historically. This is undeniably a modern development. A century ago, history, treated as a science, was unknown, on this continent at least. What passed under that name was a mere collection of fables, of heroic and sentimental legends, of unauthenticated traditions, or records.

Within the memory of living men, the work of historical research has been immensely facilitated and the scientific spirit in its pursuit singularly stimulated by the introduction of scientific methods in the collection, arrangement, and care of the materials for history, the publication of guides, inventories, and calendars, as well as the textual reproduction of documents themselves by transcripts, photography, or in print, and by the publication of source-books.

Facts must necessarily constitute the staple raw material of history. It strives to be a transcript of the life that is now past. It treats of man in his proper sphere of activity, in his relations with the forces of nature and the efforts of other men. It is chiefly concerned with the workings of his intellect, his will, and his passions so far as they revealed in objective action. Its main purpose, therefore, is to promote an accurate knowledge of the activity of man's spiritual nature.

It should also endeavour to verify and test the truth of its own statements and conclusions.

History has been flippantly described as "an arid region abounding in dates." This saying has been probably inspired by a bitter memory of those useful compilations, known as school histories, which results in a conviction that history must necessarily be tedious and wearisome. The natural reaction from this view is responsible mainly for the production of the sentimental, emotional, unreliable popular history, in which the author attempts, as Gibbon said politely about Voltaire, "to cast a keen and lively glance over the surface of history."

Facts, by themselves, are, of course, not history. Historical materials or documents, standing alone, are not history. They must be organized, elaborated, and combined. This must be done with the proper spirit and in a judicial manner. A story has been told of a naval officer who beguiled the tedium of a long voyage by working out problems in navigation with the master of a merchant ship. A dispute arose between them on one occasion, and the officer, exhibiting gleefully the results of his calculation, remarked: "Figures won't lie." The other, looking it over critically, discovered an error, and, pointing it out, retorted: "Yes, figures won't lie if you work them right, but you must work them right." The same rule applies exactly to historical materials and facts. They won't lie if you work them right. But this must be done. Otherwise, "a little disproportion in the emphasis, a little exaggeration of colour, a little more or a little less limelight on this or that portion of the group, and the

result will not be the truth, although each individual fact may be as indisputable as the multiplication table itself."[1]

History, beyond doubt, had its beginnings in a form of biography, or rather of autobiography. The mighty hunter or fisherman, the man of deeds, or uncommon skill and success, became inspired with an irresistible desire to make his actions known to his fellow-men and, if possible, to posterity. As generally they were known only to himself, he had to tell his own story, and it lost nothing in the telling. It was oft-repeated, sung or chanted, by him, by members of his family, or by his friends and followers. The deeds of Nimrod, of Hercules, or of Samson, and other mighty men were thus perpetuated in popular tradition, and handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

Frequently this man of action was not endowed with the faculty of oral expression, and the women of his family or clan, or some weaker male person, gifted in that way, took up the tale, embellished it and magnified it.

Gradually the deeds of the heroic individual almost insensibly became a portion of the biography of the patriarchal family, the most important product of human evolution in the early days of civilization. This community of kinsfolk thus became the first great history-making group.

In time this group was enlarged to the clan, the tribe, and the nation. The process of primitive history-making still went on in much the same way, having been largely taken in hand by the women, or by men, who were in some way physically unfitted for the chase.

As a rule primitive man, whose chief occupations are hunting and fighting, makes little, if any, distinction between war and the hunt. All other men, not belonging to his particular group, are foes, or at least trespassers on his hunting-grounds, and regarded by him just as he does other varieties of wild game, being only a more dangerous, and, consequently, a nobler quarry. All means and devices are right in his efforts to kill or capture them.

The biography of the nation, or the political society, or commonwealth finally evolved, became what we call history.

Next came the aspiration to record the notable deeds of the individual or clan in some more permanent and evident form than by mere oral repetition. For this purpose the rock-walls or cliffs of their native hills afforded at once the most prominent situation and most lasting material.

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[1] Mahan: From Sail to Steam, p. 168.

The invention of some form of writing enabled them to supplement a pictorial representation of these notable events by inscriptions giving an explanation. The eastern ruler seldom shrank from an effort to immortalize himself by the inscription or portrayal of his deeds of cruelty even in imperishable stone. Yet the truth of the record was considered a matter of the utmost importance. Rawlinson tells us that Darius states "his great fear that it may be thought that any part of the record he has set up may be falsely related" and that he has abstained from narrating certain events of his reign "lest to him who may hereafter peruse the tablet, the many deeds that have been done by him may seem to be falsely recorded." This counsel of perfection, it would seem, was honoured more in the breach than in the observance. The biographical element, however, was still strongly predominant.

To the actors, engrossed in this ceaseless warfare with the forces of nature or with other men, the influence of the rivers, mountains, forests, and plains, and other natural features of the country in aiding or impeding them, was taken so much as a matter of course that they seldom even referred to it. Consequently it has not always received the attention it deserves. It can only be ascertained by close and patient study.

Macaulay has recorded that when he first visited Rome, he hastened to the place where the Pons Sublicius once stood, to make sure how well his ballad of Horatius agreed with the topography. His biographer relates that he took care to see Glencoe in rain and in sunshine; that he paid a second visit to Killiecrankie; that he spent two full days at Londonderry, taking pains to sketch a good plan of the streets, walking alone or in company four times round the walls of the city. In one of his letters, referring to a change of plan as to his history, Macaulay says:

"I must visit Holland, Belgium, Scotland, Ireland, France. . . . I must see Londonderry, the Boyne, Aghrim, Limerick, Kinsale, Namur again, Landen, Steinkirk."

Many other great historians have been tireless students both of geography and topography.

Still more difficult to establish and yet of equal importance are the psychological and economic impulses responsible for the wandering of the nations and most great national and racial conflicts. Without a knowledge of their psychology, how can their history be properly understood or written? How can the facts be justly appreciated? How can the characters of the chief actors be fairly estimated? The

motive forces of human history must be found in the moral constitution of humanity.

How great is the difficulty of forming an equitable judgment of the actions of public men when private emotions as well as reasons of state are found to influence them, and their actions may appear to result as much from private inclination as from national policy?

"In life, as we actually experience it," says a great writer, "motives slide one into the other, and the most careful analysis will fail adequately to sift them." And in another passage, "There are practices in the game of politics which the historian, in the name of morality, is bound to condemn, which nevertheless in this false and confused world, statesmen to the end of time will continue to repeat."[2]

Freeman, it is hardly necessary to recall, invented the catch-phrase that "present history is past politics," which had a great vogue, but only states a partial truth. Buckle asserted that genuine historical evolution consists in intellectual progress. Most modern economists concur in the view that the dominating forces in historical development are economic. Many churchmen believe that the chief factor in history is religion.

Ethics certainly give to history its most rational goal. A living German philosopher declares that "a real understanding of history is not possible without ethics; universal history is the realization of the moral . . . within humanity." This seems a rather cryptic saying.

It must be admitted that the white man has been guilty of much cruelty and dishonesty to the savage but he does not like to speak of it and whenever necessity compels an unwilling reference, he has invariably some apology ready about manifest destiny, the advancement of civilization, or taking up the white man's burden, in which he yields an involuntary tribute to the higher ethical conscience.

As the religion of Buddha gained followers among the Hindus, Indian society gradually became impregnated with a conviction of the nothingness of life. To escape and not to dominate became the keynote of their faith. And as they believed human life to be insignificant, its history as a matter of course, seemed insignificant too. As Mr. Lowes Dickinson observes, it is not an accident, but a consequence that there are no Hindu historians.

Among more virile races, on the other hand, history from being a mere glorification of the chief or reigning monarch, developed into a form of ancestor-worship, or a filio-pietistic chronicle. And such it continued to be until comparatively recent times, and to a certain

[2] Froude: History of England.

extent, still is. To use Macaulay's words in one of his ballads, much popular history is little more than "a nurse's tale."

This has been a fruitful source of error and misrepresentation.

"For the study of history," said Charles Francis Adams in an address to the Massachusetts Historical Society, "there should be but one law for all. Patriotism, piety, and filial duty have nothing to do with it; they are, indeed, mere snares and sources of delusion. The rules and canons of criticism applied in one case and to one character must be sternly and scrupulously applied in all other similar cases and to all other characters; and while surrounding circumstances should, and, indeed, must be taken into careful consideration, they must be taken into equal consideration, no matter who is concerned. Patriotism in the study of history is but another name for provincialism. To see history truly and correctly, it must be viewed as a whole."

This is surely sound doctrine, and it may be remarked that nowhere had the "filio-pietistic method" of dealing with history taken firmer root or flourished more vigorously than in Massachusetts.

John Fiske, another son of New England, in a foot-note to his "Discovery of America," referring to the manner in which some discreditable event had been ignored by a Spanish chronicler, remarks with a touch of sarcasm: "That is the way history has too often been written. With most people it is only a kind of ancestor-worship. What may be called the Cosmopolitan school of history is, perhaps, a thing yet to be developed; for the fact is, our histories are all Catholic or Protestant—European or American—English, French, Spanish or German—Whig or Tory—Federalist, Democrat, or Republican. The historian invariably scrutinizes the record through eyes jaundiced by faith, or patriotism, or filial affection, or partizan zeal; and he is even lauded for doing so. He dilates on the blood-sealed devotion of the martyrs to the faith he professes, and the valour of the soldiers and sailors of the land of his birth; he execrates those who oppressed the one, and depreciates those who fought against the other . . . Ancestor-worship is the rule."

The conquered race, the beaten party, the lost cause seldom receives fair play and rarely has been given a hearing. Hannibal's own story or an account of his campaign in Italy by Brennus would probably throw some new light on Roman history.

The real actions of some remarkable persons in the past have been almost forgotten because their names have become inseparably

associated with legends that are at best doubtful, and in some instances have been proven to be untrue.

Even the most recent history is not wholly free from such myths and legends, which have received wide circulation, and whose origin can scarcely be traced. I need only refer to the fables of the "Angels of Mons," of the "Crucified Canadian," and of the devastating effects of "turpinite." Already two good-sized volumes have been published in France dealing with the "legends, prophecies, and superstitions of the Great War."

The propensity for fabrication and exaggeration, even among writers of much talent and eminence, is by no means extinct. The fact that it is sometimes combined with superior abilities and attainments, and even with a certain sense of honour, is certainly a strange anomaly.

It has been said very truly that Michelet turned the whole history of France into a symbolical poem.

Gabriel Monod, on leaving the Ecole Normale, before visiting Italy on a journey of investigation, called to consult Taine, who was already famous as a writer and a lecturer at that celebrated training college. Taine in an instant revealed to the young student his own method of inquiry. "Take a seat, sir," he exclaimed. "What ideas are you going to verify in Italy?"

Taine visited England to obtain material for his last volume of the History of English Literature and met Frank Palgrave, a great friend of Tennyson, to whom he began talking about that poet. "Was he not in early youth, rich, luxurious, fond of pleasure, self-indulgent?" he asked. "I see it all," he continued, "in his early poems—his riot, his adoration of physical beauty, his delight in jewels, in the abandonment of all to pleasure, to wine and——" "Stop, stop," cried Palgrave, impatiently, "as a young man Tennyson was poor, his habits were simple as they are now, he has never known luxury in your sense, and if his early poems are luxurious in tone, it is because he is a poet and gifted with a poet's imagination." Taine seemed disconcerted, but thanked Palgrave and went away. When the book was published he found Tennyson was still painted as the young voluptuary and rich profligate of Taine's imagination.

From his youth Taine's method of composition was to seek out some general idea, formulate it, and then group about it in harmony the results of his later researches so far as they agreed with his theory.

Numberless are the romantic stories which have been fathered on slight authority upon Napoleon, Washington, Lincoln, Sir John Macdonald, and others, and but too readily accepted by the public.

Biographers are seldom candid with respect to the faults and failings of their subject. As Lord Jeffrey said in a review of Hardy's Life of Lord Charlemont: "The author's chief fault is *that he does not abuse anybody*, even when the dignity of history and of virtue calls loudly for such an infliction."

The eulogistic biographer is consequently responsible for the diffusion of much falsehood respecting historical events. We must remember that, to use the words of J. R. Green, "truth in history as well as truth in science is only part of that great circle of the Truth of God."

As regards autobiography, of which there is an ever-growing mass, Holmes somewhere remarks that there are only two individuals who can tell the true story of a man's or a woman's life. One is the person concerned and the other is the Recording Angel. The autobiographer cannot be trusted to tell the whole truth, even though he may tell nothing but the truth and the Angel does not allow the record out of his hands.

The value of oral tradition is constantly growing less and has become in many parts of the world nearly negligible. Still the transmission of historical information by oral repetition persists in a remarkable manner where population is fairly stable and undisturbed. The vicar of Radway, in a recent book about the Edge Hills in England, refers to three such items told to him "by a man over seventy, who heard them from his grandmother, who lived to be over ninety. She had them from her grandfather, who was a boy when the battle of Edge Hill was fought in the Civil War in 1642."

Yet it must be remembered that memory is never passive but that its activity is continuous and cannot be controlled. In certain respects it can scarcely be distinguished from the imagination, for which it furnishes materials, which are frequently already remoulded and changed. Never do we remember events exactly and fully in every minute particular. Our present state of mind always, or nearly always, modifies in our recollection what we felt, or what we did, or what we saw in the past.

Inscriptions still have a certain value as historical material, yet it must be duly checked and discounted, as many of them are liable to the faults of the over-friendly biographer, since they are usually designed to commemorate the importance of an event or the talents and virtues of a deceased individual. The mendacity of an epitaph has become proverbial. The eulogistic inscriptions on the tomb of Anthony Forster in Cumnor church and the wall-tablet in memory of

Sir George Prevost in Winchester cathedral are singularly at variance with the estimates generally accepted by the historian.

The chief and, indeed, almost the only sources of material for the history of modern times consist of written or printed documents. Written documents may be broadly divided into three classes: those that are official, those that are semi-official, and those that are non-official or private. Each class has its peculiar limitations as to credibility and trustworthiness. Official documents are usually marked by a certain restraint, which is found to a less degree in the semi-official, and still less in private correspondence, which is frequently coloured by the personal bias or passions of the writer.

In another way, they may be classified into those that are contemporary with the events they purport to relate, and those of a later date. Considering them from still another point of view, it is most important to know whether they contain the statements of an actual eye-witness or of some other person. In other words, is the evidence direct or hearsay? "One eyewitness," says W. E. Henley, "however dull and unprejudiced, is worth a wilderness of sentimental historians." But it must be remembered that eyewitnesses are seldom unprejudiced and that their statements are often much impaired by personal bias, by the nervous excitement of the moment, or by a limited range of observation. Then a subsequent narrative or report is often pieced together by some person, who was in a very limited sense, or quite possibly in no sense at all, an eyewitness, from the statements of several participants. So much inevitably depends on the personal point of view and individual facilities for seeing, hearing, and appreciating what actually took place. A curious example of this is reported to have occurred at the Congress of Psychologists held at Goettingen, shortly before the war. At an evening session, when all present, who were mostly lawyers, physicians or men of science, were in complete ignorance of the test to be made, a violent scene was enacted by two persons, supposed to have come into the hall from a neighbouring ball. It was very brief, lasting only for twenty seconds. Under a pretext that a judicial investigation might be held, the president requested each of the spectators to draw up an independent account of this little drama. Among forty reports that were handed in, only one contained less than twenty per cent. of errors, fourteen contained between twenty and forty per. cent., twelve contained between forty and fifty per cent., and thirteen contained more than fifty per cent. In thirty-four reports, between ten and fifteen per cent. of the details were absolutely imaginary.

In general, however, written records vary in historical value in proportion to their proximity to the event. Accounts written long after by eyewitnesses, based solely on recollection and not upon a diary or other record made at the time, are seldom of great weight as historical material, except in the matter of corroboration.

The great historian of the Peloponnesian War states that in his work he had not followed either the first account or his own opinion, but related what he had either seen himself or learned from others with the utmost diligence. "To find the truth," he writes, "caused me great trouble for the writings of the various events were not agreed in their accounts, but both sides were affected by partizanship and failure of memory."

Such, indeed, must have been the experience of every subsequent seeker after truth. And the aim of every honest student of history and of every fair-minded writer of history must be the ascertainment and statement of the truth to the best of his ability.

A topographical or pictorial document similarly varies in value in proportion to the date of its execution. Maps and sketches, prepared from memory, after a considerable lapse of time, are seldom reliable.

Occasionally the genuineness of a document may be doubted or questioned. In times of stress, documents are sometimes forged or mutilated to serve national, or political, or personal ends. It has been proved, for instance, that so eminent a man as Benjamin Franklin resorted to an extensive fabrication of documents to discredit his adversaries and advance the revolutionary movement. Some of these were long accepted as being genuine.

The sources of error, even in the original documents, are very numerous.

The writer may have been self-deceived or may wish to deceive others.

The editor, or copyist, or printer, may have introduced errors or made omissions either purposely or unintentionally.

In the printing of contemporary official documents, it was, and probably still is, the practice to suppress or alter passages, the publication of which may appear indiscreet or impolitic at the time. Frequently certain documents are selected for publication and others suppressed. Sometimes two despatches or official letters are prepared, one for publication and the other to be kept secret.

The judicious editor has occasionally resorted to the same practice and omitted some statement, which he considered discreditable

to the person or nation concerned. Jared Sparks was a notable offender in this respect.

The writer may have expressed himself vaguely or obscurely, or made use of words in a different sense from that in which they are now understood.

The evidence of the documents available is often conflicting, contradictory, or defective. Important documents may have been destroyed, mutilated, or lost sight of. Of many important negotiations and transactions no written record was preserved. Metternich relates in his Memoirs that at the Congress of Vienna "the most difficult affairs and the arrangements most complicated in their nature were, so to speak, negotiated from room to room, no sending of couriers, no written negotiation, no medium between the courts; all these things, so necessary in ordinary times, had disappeared . . . the courts concerned are without any written accounts of the most important negotiations."

Even the waste-paper baskets were carefully examined and their contents destroyed lest they should inadvertently reveal the secrets of the diplomats.

It is understood that the same practice prevailed to a great extent at the recent Conference of Versailles.

An eminent writer on the contemporary history of the United States says that the chronicle of the frauds connected with the manipulation of land grants to railways and the shameless sale of legal privileges cannot be written, because in most instances, no tangible records have been left.[3]

Contradictions and discrepancies abound everywhere in the written records. These may be largely ascribed to the individual point of view, or to the character or temperament of the writers.

The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table said that there were at least six personalities involved in a dialogue between any two individuals; for instance with respect to John and Thomas, there were:

Three Johns—
1. The real John, known only to his Maker.
2. John's ideal John; never the real one, and often very unlike him.
3. Thomas's ideal John; never the real John, nor John's John, and often very unlike either.

Three Thomases—
1. The real Thomas.
2. Thomas's ideal Thomas.
3. John's ideal Thomas.

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[3] Beard: Contemporary American History, p. 31.

This apparently fantastical idea really applies with more force to the interpretation of documents and makes many historical characters problematical.

Contemporaries seldom know the exact truth or the whole truth of what is happening about them, and it is only after long and patient study that the historian of a later age may succeed in arriving at an approximately full and accurate comprehension of the sequence of events in their relations of cause and effect. Contemporaries can scarcely hope to do more than collect materials for those who may attempt in after years to write a true and faithful history of the past, with that judicial calmness and impartiality, which cannot be expected from those who have taken an active part in those events.

Account must be taken of the mutual connection of events, occurring approximately at the same time. As Carlyle has pointed out no person, however gifted and alert, can do more than observe, still less record, the series of his own impressions and sensations. "His observation, therefore, to say nothing of its other imperfections, must be *successive*, while the things done were often *simultaneous*; the things done were not a series but a group. It is not in acted, as it is in written history; acted events are in no wise so simply related to each other as a parent and offspring are; every single event is not the offspring of one but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new; it is an ever-living, ever-working chaos of being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable events. . . . All narrative is, by its nature, of only one dimension; only travels toward one or toward successive points; narrative is linear, action is solid."

That variety of narrative, which is usually termed the philosophy of history, consisting of an attempt to trace the relation of events with each other, is just as much genuine history as the descriptions of battles, political struggles, economic changes, and all other salient occurrences, which it attempts to state. Facts of that kind are more difficult to ascertain, their connection is more uncertain, the writer is more likely to be deceived or to deceive himself; but they will ever continue to be a vital part of history.

The main task of the historian, then, is not so much a matter of vivid narrative and picturesque colouring as of a proper and honest grouping of events; of tracing the true sequence by which successive occurrences are seen to lead to an inevitable result, or causes, apparently remote and unrelated, converge to a common end.

There are many fundamental requisites. They may be generally summed up as thoroughness and accuracy of knowledge; an intimate

acquaintance with the facts in all their numerous details; familiarity with the various sources of evidence; with the statements frequently conflicting or contradictory, sometimes even irreconcilable, of many witnesses, who have left their testimony as a legacy from the past. The critical faculty becomes an instrument to assist the student in the ascertainment and verification of the facts, and the appreciation of their relative importance. It acts the part at once of the judge and the jury at a trial in court; not only finding the facts but pronouncing upon their significance. The diligence, the tireless patience and labour, requisite for an exhaustive examination of the evidence, take the place of the opposing counsel, whose business it is to elicit the testimony of the witnesses on which the verdict is ultimately rendered.

Imagination, enthusiasm, emotion have their proper place. After all history cannot be truthfully and adequately written with the cold impartiality of a judge. These qualities may tend to bias, but bias may be controlled and corrected by critical analysis and just discrimination.

Imagination and enthusiasm, combined with the requisite facility and force of expression, can alone endow a narrative with life, but in the ideal historian they must be united with the scientific conscience, which regards the habit of accuracy, open-mindedness, impartiality of judgment, and the love of truth for its own sake as supreme virtues.