On History (1908)

By Bertrand Russell

OF ALL THE studies by which men acquire citizenship of the intellectual commonwealth, no single one is so indispensable as the study of the past. To know how the world developed to the point at which our individual memory begins; how the religions, the institutions, the nations among which we live, became what they are; to be acquainted with the great of other times, with customs and beliefs differing widely from our own – these things are indispensable to any consciousness of our position, and to any emancipation from the accidental circumstances of our education. It is not only to the historian that history is valuable, not only to the professed student of archives and documents, but to all who are capable of a contemplative survey of human life. But the value of history is so multiform, that those to whom some one of its sides appeals with especial force are in constant danger of forgetting all the others.

I.

History is valuable, to begin with, because it is true; and this, though not the whole of its value, is the foundation and condition of all the rest. That all knowledge, as such, is in some degree good, would appear to be at least probable; and the knowledge of every historical fact possesses this element of goodness, even if it possesses no other. Modern historians, for the most part, seem to regard truth as constituting the whole of the value of history. On this ground they urge the self-effacement of the historian before the document; every intrusion of his own personality, they fear, will involve some degree of falsification. Objectivity before all things is to be sought, they tell us; let the facts be merely narrated, and allowed to speak for themselves – if they can find tongues. It follows, as a part of the position, that all facts are equally important; and, although this doctrine can never be quite conformed to in practice, it seems nevertheless to float before many minds as an ideal toward which research may gradually approximate.

That the writing of history should be based on the study of documents, is an opinion which it would be absurd to controvert. For they alone contain evidence as to what really occurred; and it is plain that untrue history can have no great value. Moreover, there is more life in one document than in fifty histories (omitting a very few of the best); by the mere fact that it contains what belongs to that actual past time, it has a strangely vivid life-in-death, such as belongs to our own past when some sound or scent awakens it. And a history written after the event can hardly make us realize that the actors were ignorant of the future; it is difficult to believe that the late Romans did not know their empire was about to fall, or that Charles I was unaware of so notorious a fact as his own execution.

But if documents are, in so many ways, superior to any deliberate history, what function remains to the historian? There is, to begin with, the business of selection. This would be admitted by all; for the materials are so vast, that it is impossible to present the whole of them. But it is not always realized that selection involves a standard of value among facts, and therefore implies that truth is not the sole aim in recording the past. For all facts are equally true; and selection among them is only possible by

means of some other criterion than their truth. And the existence of some such criterion is obvious; no one would maintain, for example, that the little Restoration scandals recorded by Grammont are as important as the letters on the Piedmontese massacres, by which Milton, in the name of Cromwell, summoned the tardy potentates of Europe.

It may be said, however, that the only true principle of selection is the purely scientific one; those facts are to be regarded as important which lead to the establishment of general laws. Whether there ever will be a science of history, it is quite impossible to guess; at any rate it is certain that no such science exists at present, except to some slight degree in the province of economics. In order that the scientific criterion of importance among facts should be applicable, it is necessary that two or more hypotheses should have been invented, each accounting for a large number of the facts, and that then a crucial fact should be discovered which discriminates between the rivals. Facts are important, in the inductive sciences, solely in relation to theories; and new theories give importance to new facts. So, for example, the doctrine of Natural Selection brought into prominence all transitional and intermediate species, the existence of rudiments, and the embryological record of descent. But it will hardly be maintained that history has reached, or is soon likely to reach, a point where such standards are applicable to its facts. History, considered as a body of truth, seems destined long to remain almost purely descriptive. Such generalizations as have been suggested – omitting the sphere of economics – are, for the most part, so plainly unwarranted as to be not even worthy of refutation. Burke argued that all revolutions end in military tyrannies, and predicted Napoleon. In so far as his argument was based on the analogy of Cromwell, it was a very lucky hit; but certainly not a scientific law. It is true that numerous instances are not always necessary to establish a law, provided the essential and relevant circumstances can be easily disentangled. But, in history, so many circumstances of a small and accidental nature are relevant, that no broad and simple uniformities are possible.

And there is a further point against this view of history as solely or chiefly a causal science. Where our main endeavour is to discover general laws, we regard these as intrinsically more valuable than any of the facts which they inter-connect. In astronomy, the law of gravitation is plainly better worth knowing than the position of a particular planet on a particular night, or even on every night throughout a year. There are in the law a splendour and simplicity and sense of mastery, which illuminate a mass of otherwise uninteresting details. And so again in biology: until the theory of evolution put meaning into the bewildering variety of organic structures, the particular facts were interesting only to the professed naturalist. But in history the matter is far otherwise. In economics, it is true, the data are often subordinate to the attempts at science which are based upon them; but in all other departments, the data are more interesting, and the scientific superstructure less satisfactory. Historical facts, many of them, have an intrinsic value, a profound interest on their own account, which makes them worthy of study, quite apart from any possibility of linking them together by means of causal laws.

The study of history is often recommended on the ground of its utility in regard to the problems of present-day politics. That history has great utility in this respect, it is impossible to deny; but it is necessary very carefully to limit and define the kind of guidance to be expected from it. The “teachings of history,” in the crude sense, presuppose the discovery of causal laws, usually of a very sweeping kind; and “teachings” of this sort, though in certain cases they may do no harm, are always theoretically unsound. In the eighteenth century perpetually, and in our own day occasionally, arguments as to the value of liberty or democracy are drawn from Greece and Rome; their greatness or their decay, according to the bias of the author, is attributed to these causes. What can be more grotesque than to hear the rhetoric of the Romans applied to the circumstances of the French Revolution! The whole organization of a City State, based on slavery, without representative institutions, and without printing, is so utterly remote from any modern democracy as to make all analogy, except of the vaguest kind, totally frivolous and unreal.

So with regard to imperialism, arguments are drawn from the successes and failures of the ancients. Shall we believe, for example, that Rome was ruined by the perpetual extension of her frontiers? Or shall we believe, with Mommsen, that the failure to conquer the Germans between the Rhine and the Danube was one of her most fatal errors? All such arguments will always be conducted according to the prejudices of the author; and all alike, even if they have some measure of truth in regard to the past, must be quite inapplicable to the present.

This evil is greatest when history is regarded as teaching some general philosophical doctrine, such as: Right, in the long run, is Might; Truth always prevails in the end; or, Progress is a universal law of society. All such doctrines require, for their support, a careful choice of place and time, and, what is worse, a falsification of values. A very flagrant instance of this danger is Carlyle. In the case of Puritanism, it led him to justify all Cromwell's acts of impatience and illegality, and arbitrarily to arrest his survey in1658; how he accounted for the Restoration, it is impossible to say. In other cases, it led him still further astray. For it is often hard to discover on which side the Right lies, but the Might is visible to all men; thus the doctrine that Right is Might slides insensibly into the belief that Might is Right. Hence the praise of Frederick and Napoleon and Bismarck, the pitiless contempt for the negroes, the Irish, and the "thirty-thousand distressed needlewomen." In some such way, every general theory that all is for the best must be forced by the facts into defence of the indefensible.

Nevertheless, history has a function in regard to current affairs, but a function less direct, less exact, and less decisive. It may, in the first place, suggest minor maxims, whose truth, when they are once propounded, can be seen without the help of the events that suggested them. This is largely the case in economics, where most of the motives concerned are simple. It is the case also, for a similar reason, in regard to strategy. Wherever, out of the facts, a simple deductive argument from indubitable premisses can be elicited, history may yield useful precepts. But these will only apply where the end is given, and are therefore of a technical nature. They can never tell the statesman what end to pursue, but only, within certain limits, how some of the more definite ends, such as wealth, or victory in war, are to be attained.

II.

Another and a greater utility, however, belongs also to history. It enlarges the imagination, and suggests possibilities of action and feeling which would not have occurred to an uninstructed mind. It selects from past lives the elements which were significant and important; it fills our thoughts with splendid examples, and with the desire for greater ends than unaided reflection would have discovered. It relates the present to the past, and thereby the future to the present. It makes visible and living the growth and greatness of nations, enabling us to extend our hopes beyond the span of our own lives. In all these ways, a knowledge of history is capable of giving to statesmanship, and to our daily thoughts, a breadth and scope unattainable by those whose view is limited to the present.

What the past does for us may be judged, perhaps, by the consideration of those younger nations whose energy and enterprise are winning the envy of Europe. In them we see developing a type of man, endowed with all the hopefulness of the Renaissance or of the Age of Pericles, persuaded that his more vigorous efforts can quickly achieve whatever has proved too difficult for the generations that preceded him. Ignorant and contemptuous of the aims that inspired those generations, unaware of the complex problems that they attempted to solve, his rapid success in comparatively simple achievements encourages his confident belief that the future belongs to him. But to those who have grown up surrounded by monuments of men and deeds whose memory they cherish, there is a curious thinness about the thoughts and emotions that inspire this confidence; optimism

seems to be sustained by a too exclusive pursuit of what can be easily achieved; and hopes are not transmuted into ideals by the habit of appraising current events by their relation to the history of the past. Whatever is different from the present is despised. That among those who contributed nothing to the dominion of Mammon great men lived, that wisdom may reside in those whose thoughts are not dominated by the machine, is incredible to this temper of mind. Action, Success, Change, are its watchwords; whether the action is noble, the success in a good cause, or the change an improvement in anything except wealth, are questions which there is no time to ask. Against this spirit, whereby all leisure, all care for the ends of life, are sacrificed to the struggle to be first in a worthless race, history and the habit of living with the past are the surest antidotes; and in our age, more than ever before, such antidotes are needed.

The record of great deeds is a defeat of Time; for it prolongs their power through many ages after they and their authors have been swallowed by the abyss of the non-existent. And, in regard to the past, where contemplation is not obscured by desire and the need for action, we see, more clearly than in the lives about us, the value, for good and evil, of the aims men have pursued and the means they have adopted. It is good, from time to time, to view the present as already past, and to examine what elements it contains that will add to the world's store of permanent possessions, that will live and give life when we and all our generation have perished. In the light of this contemplation, all human experience is transformed, and whatever is sordid or personal is purged away. And, as we grow in wisdom, the treasure-house of the ages opens to our view; more and more we learn to know and love the men through whose devotion all this wealth has become ours. Gradually, by the contemplation of great lives, a mystic communion becomes possible, filling the soul like music from an invisible choir. Still, out of the past, the voices of heroes call us. As, from a lofty promontory, the bell of an ancient cathedral, unchanged since the day when Dante returned from the kingdom of the dead, still sends its solemn warning across the waters, so their voice still sounds across the intervening sea of time; still, as then, its calm deep tones speak to the solitary tortures of cloistered aspiration, putting the serenity of things eternal in place of the doubtful struggle against ignoble joys and transient pleasures. Not by those about them were they heard; but they spoke to the winds of heaven, and the winds of heaven tell the tale to the great of later days. The great are not solitary; out of the night come the voices of those who have gone before, clear and courageous; and so through the ages they march, a mighty procession, proud, undaunted, unconquerable. To join in this glorious company, to swell the immortal paean of those whom fate could not subdue – this may not be happiness; but what is happiness to those whose souls are filled with that celestial music? To them is given what is better than happiness: to know the fellowship of the great, to live in the inspiration of lofty thoughts, and to be illumined in every perplexity by the fire of nobility and truth.

But history is more than the record of individual men, however great: it is the province of history to tell the biography, not only of men, but of Man; to present the long procession of generations as but the passing thoughts of one continuous life; to transcend their blindness and brevity in the slow unfolding of the tremendous drama in which all play their part. In the migrations of races, in the birth and death of religions, in the rise and fall of empires, the unconscious units, without any purpose beyond the moment, have contributed unwittingly to the pageant of the ages; and, from the greatness of the whole, some breath of greatness breathes over all who participated in the march. In this lies the haunting power of the dim history beyond written records. There, nothing is known but the cloudy outlines of huge events; and, of all the separate lives that came and went, no memory remains. Through unnumbered generations, forgotten sons worshipped at the tombs of forgotten fathers, forgotten mothers bore warriors whose bones whitened the silent steppes of Asia. The clash of arms, the hatreds and oppressions, the blind conflicts of dumb nations, are all still, like a distant waterfall; but slowly, out of the strife, the nations that we know emerged, with a heritage of poetry and piety transmitted from the buried past.

And this quality, which is all that remains of pre-historic times, belongs also to the later periods where the knowledge of details is apt to obscure the movement of the whole. We, too, in all our deeds, bear our part in a process of which we cannot guess the development: even the obscurest are actors in a drama of which we know only that it is great. Whether any purpose that we value will be achieved, we cannot tell; but the drama itself, in any case, is full of Titanic grandeur. This quality it is the business of the historian to extract from the bewildering multitude of irrelevant details. From old books, wherein the loves, the hopes, the faiths of bygone generations lie embalmed, he calls pictures before our minds, pictures of high endeavours and brave hopes, living still through his care, in spite of failure and death. Before all is wrapped in oblivion, the historian must compose afresh, in each succeeding age, the epitaph upon the life of Man.

The past alone is truly real: the present is but a painful, struggling birth into the immutable being of what is no longer. Only the dead exist fully. The lives of the living are fragmentary, doubtful, and subject to change; but the lives of the dead are complete, free from the sway of Time, the all-but omnipotent lord of the world. Their failures and successes, their hopes and fears, their joys and pains, have become eternal – our efforts cannot now abate one jot of them. Sorrows long buried in the grave, tragedies of which only a fading memory remains, loves immortalized by Death's hallowing touch – these have a power, a magic, an untroubled calm, to which no present can attain.

Year by year, comrades die, hopes prove vain, ideals fade; the enchanted land of youth grows more remote, the road of life more wearisome; the burden of the world increases, until the labour and the pain become almost too heavy to be borne; joy fades from the weary nations of the earth, and the tyranny of the future saps men's vital force; all that we love is waning, waning from the dying world. But the past, ever devouring the transient offspring of the present, lives by the universal death; steadily, irresistibly, it adds new trophies to its silent temple, which all the ages build; every great deed, every splendid life, every achievement and every heroic failure, is there enshrined. On the banks of the river of Time, the sad procession of human generations is marching slowly to the grave; in the quiet country of the Past, the march is ended, the tired wanderers rest, and all their weeping is hushed.