THE HISTORIAN AND HIS DAY

FOR a good while now a fairly strenuous contest has been in progress between two opposed schools of historical thought. Accepting a classification proposed by one of the keenest though most courteous of the riders in the lists, the division lies roughly between the "present-minded" and the "history-minded" historians. In the course of time many historians have joined one side or the other in the controversy with the natural consequence that there has been some sense and a good deal of nonsense talked on both sides. In general, for some subtle psychological reason that I am unable to fathom, the kind of scholar who, distrustful of "ideas" and "theories", believes that history is all "facts" has tended to take the side of the "history-minded" historians. For more obvious reasons the chronic "do-gooder", who believes that knowledge justifies itself only by a capacity to solve current problems, lines up with the "present-minded" position.

This peculiar aligment has frequently obscured the issues at stake. It is easy to expose the feebleness and absurdity of those who want only "facts" and of those who want only current problem-solving; and it is fun, too. Consequently the attacks on both sides have often been directed mainly against these vulnerable positions, and it has sometimes seemed as if the main bodies were too busy assaulting their opponents' camp followers to come to grips with one another. For, of course, there is nothing intrinsic to the history-minded position that precludes "ideas" or "theories" or, if you prefer, generalization. Nor is there anything in present-mindedness that demands an optimism as to the efficacy of history as a panacea for current social ills.

Obviously it is not fair to judge either the history-minded or the present-minded historians by the vagaries of their respective lunatic fringes. Casting off the eccentric on both sides, there remains a real and serious divergence of opinion, as yet apparently irreconcilable, maintained on both sides by scholars whose achievements entitle their views to respectful consideration. The divergence is connected at least ostensibly with a funda-

mental difference in general outlook between the two parties to the argument. In a sense the present-minded are realists in the field of history, the history-minded are idealists.

The approach of the latter to the problem is essentially apodictic. They say we *ought* not to intrude our contemporary value systems and preconceptions and notions into our reconstruction of the past. They insist that it is our *duty* as historians to understand the past in its terms, not in our own; and they document their thesis with some undeniably horrible examples of what has happened in the last century to historians who looked at the past with the dubious prepossessions, current in their own day, but since invalidated or replaced by other prepossessions equally dubious. Truly there is nothing quite so passé as the intellectual fashions of yesteryear. We find them at once especially ludicrous and especially disturbing when they are worn by men of high talents. We do not like to see the nineteenth-century present-mindedness of so perceptive a man as J. R. Green transforming the roughneck barons of Runnymede into harbingers of nineteenth-century democracy and nationalism. Our embarrassment is even more acute when the victim of present-mindedness is a great historian. We are unhappy when we watch Bishop Stubbs adding Victorian liberalism to the cargo that the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to England from their North German forests. And as the conviction of sin is brought home to us we are warned, "There but for the grace of history-mindedness go you."

Convinced by the dreadful examples arrayed before us we resolve to eschew the wickedness of modernism and thenceforth hew to our obligation to be history-minded. And then a clear and chilly voice says: "But my dear fellows, you can't be history-minded. It might be nice if you could, or it might not, but in any case it is impossible. So all this pother about the obligation to be history-minded is rather silly. Only a particularly repulsive sort of Deity would bind men to do what in the very nature of things they are unable to do." So an almost medieval emphasis on the *duty* to be history-minded is deflected by a rather Machiavellian observation as to the *facts* of life. Medieval assertions about what statesmen *ought* to do Machiavelli met with assertions about what statesmen—the human animal being

what it is—are *sure* to do. History-minded assertions about what historians ought to do are met with present-minded assertions of what—the history-writing animal being what he is—the historian is certain to do. The harsh fact of life is that, willy-nilly, the present-day historian lives not in the past but in the present, and this harsh fact cannot be altered by any pious resolve to be history-minded.

What we say about any historical epoch in some way reflects our experience and that experience was accumulated not in the fifteenth, in the sixteenth, or in any other century than the twentieth. When we look back on the past, we do so from the present. We are present-minded just as all earlier historians were present-minded in their day because for better or worse we happen to live in our own day. Indeed the very horrid examples cited by the proponents of history-mindedness afford irrefutable evidence that the best of former historians were in their day present-minded, and we can hardly hope to be different. So the best thing for us to do is to recognize that every generation reinterprets the past in terms of the exigencies of its own day. We can then cast aside our futile history-minded yearnings and qualms and deal with the past in terms of our day, only mildly regretting that, like all the words of man, our own words will be writ on water. By this intellectual stratagem the present-minded turn—or seek to turn—the flank of the history-minded.

We must admit, I believe, that some points in the argument of the present-minded are true beyond dispute. It is certainly true, for example, that all that we think is related to our experience somehow, and that all our experience is of our own day. But though this be true, it is also trivial. It is a plea in avoidance dressed up as an argument. Granting that we can have no experience beyond what we have acquired in the course of our own lives, the question is, does anything in that experience enable us to understand the past in its own terms rather than in terms of the prepossessions of our own day? Banal statements about the origin of our ideas in our own experience do not answer this question; they merely beg it.

In the second place, I think we must admit that in some respects all historians are present-minded, even the most de-

termined proponents of history-mindedness. All historians are indeed engaged in rewriting past history in the light of at least one aspect of present experience, that aspect which has to do with the increments to our positive knowledge that are the fruit of scientific investigation. Consider a single example. Up to a few decades ago the Dark Ages before the twelfth century were considered an era of total regression, technological as well as political, social and cultural. Then Lefebvre de Noëttes described results of certain experiments he had made with animal power. He had reproduced antique harnesses for draft horses. In such harness the pulling power of the horse proved to be less than a quarter of what it is in modern harness. But "modern" harness, involving the use of a rigid horse collar, makes its appearance in Europe in the tenth century. So in the Dark Ages a horse could deliver about four times the tractive force that it could in antiquity. Now I am sure that no historian would suggest that we disregard Lefebvre de Noëttes' experiments in our consideration of medieval agrarian history; a fourfold increase in the efficiency of a very important source of power is something that no economic historian can afford to overlook. Yet when we do apply the results of Lefebvre's experiments to medieval agriculture we are being present-minded in at least two ways. In the first and more simple way we are rewriting the history of the Middle Ages in the light of the present because until the present the particular bit of light that was the work of Lefebvre did not exist. But we must go further. It was not pure accident that such work had not been done in earlier ages. Historians in earlier ages would not have thought of going about the investigation of medieval agriculture as Lefebvre did. In making his historical investigations by the scientific, positivist method of experiment and measurement, Lefebvre was distinctly reflecting the preoccupations of his own age and of no earlier one. Scientific-mindedness in this particular area of study at any rate is present-mindedness.

It seems to me that the proponents of history-mindedness must, and in most cases probably do, concede the validity of this kind of present-mindedness in the writing of history; and if this is all that present-mindedness means, then every historian

worth his salt is present-minded. No sane contemporary scientist in his investigations of the physical world would disregard nineteenth-century advances in field theory, and no sane historian in his work would rule out of consideration insights achieved in the past century concerning the connection of class conflict with historical occurrences. But this is only to say that all men who are professionally committed to the quest of that elusive entity—the Truth—use all the tracking devices available to them at the time, and in the nature of things cannot use any device before it exists. And of course the adequacy of the historical search at any time is in some degree limited by the adequacy of the tracking devices. In this, too, the historian's situation is no different from that of the scientist. Adequate investigation of optical isomers in organic chemistry, for example, had to wait on the development of the techniques of spectroscopy. If this is what present-mindedness means, then present-mindedness is not just the condition of historical knowledge. For *all* knowledge at any time is obviously limited by the limits of the means of gaining knowledge at that time; and historians are simply in the same boat as all others whose business it is to know.

Now I do not believe that the proponents of present-mindedness mean anything as bland and innocuous as this. On the contrary I am fairly sure they mean that the historian's boat is different from, and a great deal more leaky than, let us say, the physicist's or the geologist's boat. What then is supposed to be the *specific* trouble with the historian's boat? The trouble, as the present-minded see it, can be described fairly simply. The present-minded contend that in writing history no historian can free himself of his total experience and that that experience is inextricably involved not only in the limits of knowledge but also in the passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, in the events, crises and tensions of his own day. Therefore those passions, prejudices, assumptions, prepossessions, events, crises and tensions of the historian's own day inevitably permeate what he writes about the past. This is the crucial allegation of the present-minded, and if it is wholly correct, the issue must be settled in their favor and the history-minded

pack up their apodictic and categorical-imperative baggage and depart in silence. Frequently discussions of this crucial issue have got bogged down because the history-minded keep trying to prove that the historian can counteract the influence of his own day, while the present-minded keep saying that this is utterly impossible. And of course on this question the latter are quite right. A historian has no day but his own, so what is he going to counteract it with? He is in the situation of Archimedes who could find no fulcrum for the lever with which to move the Earth. Clearly if the historian is to be history-minded rather than present-minded he must find the means of being so in his own day, not outside it. And thus at last we come up against the crucial question—what *is* the historian's own day?

As soon as we put the question this way we realize that there is no ideal Historian's Day; there are many days, all different, and each with a particular historian attached to it. Now since in actuality there is no such thing as The Historian's Day, no one can be qualified to say what it actually consists of. Indeed, although I know a good number of individual historians on terms of greater or less intimacy, I would feel ill-qualified to describe with certainty what any of their days are. There is, however, one historian about whose day I can speak with assurance. For I myself am a historian at least in the technical sense of the word; I have possessed for a considerable time the parchment inscribed with the appropriate phrases to indicate that I have served my apprenticeship and am out of my indentures. So I will describe as briefly as I can my own day. I do so out of no appetite for self-revelation or self-expression, but simply because the subject is germane to our inquiry and because it is the one matter on which I happen to be the world's leading authority. Let us then hurry through this dreary journal.

I rise early and have breakfast. While eating, I glance through the morning paper and read the editorial page. I then go to the college that employs me and teach for two to four hours five days a week. Most of the time the subject matter I deal with in class is cobwebbed with age. Three fourths of

it dates back from a century and a quarter to three millennia; all of it happened at least thirty years ago. Then comes lunch with a few of my colleagues. Conversation at lunch ranges widely through professional shoptalk, politics, high and ghostly matters like religion, the nature of art or the universe, and the problems of child rearing, and finally academic scuttle butt. At present there is considerable discussion of the peculiar incongruence between the social importance of the academic and his economic reward. This topic has the merit of revealing the profound like-mindedness, transcending all occasional conflicts, of our little community. From noon to bedtime my day is grimly uniform. There are of course occasional and casual variations—preparation of the ancient material above mentioned for the next day's classes, a ride in the country with the family, a committee meeting at college, a movie, a play, a novel, or a book by some self-anointed Deep Thinker. Still by and large from one in the afternoon to midnight with time out for dinner and domestic matters, I read things written between 1450 and 1650 or books written by historians on the basis of things written between 1450 and 1650. I vary the routine on certain days by writing about what I have read on the other days. On Saturdays and in the summer I start my reading or writing at nine instead of at noon. It is only fair to add that most days I turn on a news broadcast or two at dinnertime, and that I spend an hour or two with the Sunday paper.

Now I am sure that many people will consider so many days so spent to be a frightful waste of precious time; and indeed, as most of the days of most men, it does seem a bit trivial. Be that as it may, it remains one historian's own day. It is his own day in the only sense that phrase can be used without its being pretentious, pompous and meaningless. For a man's own days are not everything that happens in the world while he lives and breathes. As I write, portentous and momentous things are no doubt being done in Peiping, Teheran, Bonn, and Lost Nation, Iowa. But these things are no part of my day; they are outside of my experience, and though one or two of them may faintly impinge on my consciousness tomorrow via the headlines in the morning paper, that is probably as far as

they will get. At best they are likely to remain fluttering fragments on the fringe of my experience, not well-ordered parts of it. I must insist emphatically that the history I write is, as the present-minded say, intimately connected with my own day and inextricably linked with my own experience; but I must insist with even stronger emphasis that my day is not someone else's day, or the ideal Day of Contemporary Man; it is just the way I happen to dispose of twenty-four hours. By the same token the experience that is inextricably linked to any history I may happen to write is not the ideal Experience of Twentieth-Century Man in World Chaos, but just the way I happen to put in my time over the series of my days.

Now it may seem immodest or perhaps simply fantastic to take days spent as are mine—days so little attuned to the great harmonies, discords and issues of the present—and hold them up for contemplation. Yet I will dare to suggest that in this historian's own humdrum days there is one peculiarity that merits thought. The peculiarity lies in the curious relation that days so squandered seem to establish between the present and a rather remote sector of the past. I do not pretend that I am wholly unconcerned by the larger public issues and catastrophes of the present. After all I will never be called upon to testify to the purity of my doctrine before the Papal Inquisition of the sixteenth century; but I might be required to do so by less powerfully armed inquests of 1954. Nor am I without opinions on a large number of contemporary issues. On some of them I am vigorously dogmatic as, indeed, are most of the historians I know. Yet my knowledge about such issues, although occasionally fairly extensive, tends to be haphazard, vague, unsystematic and disorderly. And the brute fact of the matter is that even if I had the inclination, I do not have the time to straighten that knowledge out, at least except at the cost of alterations in the ordering of my days that I am not in the least inclined to undertake.

So for a small part of my day I live under a comfortable rule of bland intellectual irresponsibility vis-à-vis the Great Issues of the Contemporary World, a rule that permits me to go off half-cocked with only slight and occasional compunction. But during most of my day—that portion of it that I spend in dealing

with the Great and Not-So-Great Issues of the World between 1450 and 1650—I live under an altogether different rule. The commandments of that rule are:

1. Do not go off half cocked.
2. Get the story straight.
3. Keep prejudices about present-day issues out of this area.

The commandments are counsels of perfection, but they are not merely that; they are enforced by sanctions, both external and internal. The serried array of historical trade journals equipped with extensive book review columns provides the most powerful external sanction. The columns are often at the disposal of cantankerous cranks ever ready to expose to obloquy "pamphleteers" who think that Clio is an "easy bought mistress bound to suit her ways to the intellectual appetites of the current customer."[1] On more than one occasion I have been a cantankerous crank. When I write about the period between 1450 and 1650 I am well aware of a desire to give unto others no occasion to do unto me as I have done unto some of them.

The reviewing host seems largely to have lined up with the history-minded. This seems to be a consequence of their training. Whatever the theoretical biases of their individual members, the better departments of graduate study in history do not encourage those undergoing their novitiate to resolve research problems by reference to current ideological conflicts. Consequently most of us have been conditioned to feel that it is not quite proper to characterize John Pym as a liberal, or Thomas More as a socialist, or Niccolò Macchiavelli as a proto-Fascist, and we tend to regard this sort of characterization as at best a risky pedagogic device. Not only the characterization but the thought process that leads to it lie under a psychological ban; and thus to the external sanction of the review columns is added the internal sanction of the still small voice that keeps saying, "We really shouldn't do it that way."[2]

[1] *American Historical Review*, LI (1946), 487.

[2] I do not for a moment intend to suggest that current dilemmas have not suggested *problems* for historical investigation. It is obvious that such dilemmas are among the numerous and entirely legitimate points of origin of historical study. The actual issue, however, has nothing to do with the point of origin of historical studies, but with the mode of treatment of historical problems.

The austere rule we live under as historians has some curious consequences. In my case one of the consequences is that my knowledge of the period around the sixteenth century in Europe is of a rather different order than my knowledge about current happenings. Those preponderant segments of my own day spent in the discussion, investigation and contemplation of that remote era may not be profitably spent but at least they are spent in an orderly, systematic, purposeful way. The contrast can be pointed up by a few details. I have never read the Social Security Act, but I have read the Elizabethan Poor Law in all its successive versions and moreover I have made some study of its application. I have never read the work of a single existentialist but I have read Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* from cover to cover. I know practically nothing for sure about the relation of the institutions of higher education in America to the social structure, but I know a fair bit about the relation between the two in France, England and the Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I have never studied the Economic Reports to the President that would enable me to appraise the state of the American nation in 1950, but I have studied closely Hales's *Discourse of the Commonwealth of England* and derived from it some reasonable coherent notions about the condition of England around 1550. Now the consequence of all this is inevitable. Instead of the passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, the events, crises and tensions of the present dominating my view of the past, *it is the other way about.* The passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, the events, crises and tensions of early modern Europe to a very considerable extent lend precision to my rather haphazard notions about the present. I make sense of present-day welfare-state policy by thinking of it in connection with the "commonwealth" policies of Elizabeth. I do the like with respect to the contemporary struggle for power and conflict of ideologies by throwing on them such light as I find in the Catholic-Calvinist struggle of the sixteenth century.

I am frequently made aware of the peculiarities of my perspective when I teach. The days of my students are very different from mine. They have spent little time indeed in

contemplating the events of the sixteenth century. So when I tell them that the Christian Humanists, in their optimistic aspiration to reform the world by means of education, were rather like our own progressive educators, I help them understand the Christian Humanists. But my teaching strategy moves in the opposite direction from my own intellectual experience. The comparison first suggested itself to me as a means for understanding not Christian Humanism but progressive education. There is no need to labor this point. After all, ordinarily the process of thought is from the better known to the worse known, and in some respects I know a good bit more about the sixteenth century than I do about the twentieth. Perhaps there is nothing to be said for this peculiar way of thinking; it may be altogether silly; but in the immediate context I am not obliged to defend it. I present it simply as one of those brute facts of life dear to the heart of the present-minded. It is in fact one way that one historian's day affects his judgment.

In the controversy that provided the starting point of this rambling essay, the essential question is sometimes posed with respect to the relation of the historian to his own *day*. In other instances it is posed with respect to his relation to his own *time*. Having discovered how idiosyncratic was the day of one historian we may inquire whether his time is also peculiar. The answer is, "Yes, his time *is* a bit odd." And here it is possible to take a welcome leave of the first person singular. For, although my day is peculiar to me, my time, as a historian, is like the time of other historians.

For our purposes the crucial fact about the ordinary time of all men, even of historians in their personal as against their professional capacity, is that in no man's time is he *really* sure what is going to happen next. This is true, obviously, not only of men of the present time but also of all men of all past times. Of course there are large routine areas of existence in which we can make pretty good guesses; and if this were not so, life would be unbearable. Thus, my guess, five evenings a week in term time, that I will be getting up the following morning to teach classes at my place of employment provides me with a useful operating rule; yet it has been wrong occasion-

ally, and will be wrong again. With respect to many matters more important, all is uncertain. Will there be war or peace next year? Will my children turn out well or ill? Will I be alive or dead thirty years hence? three years hence? tomorrow?

The saddest words of tongue or pen may be, "It might have been." The most human are, "If I had only known." But it is precisely characteristic of the historian that he does know. He is really sure what is going to happen next, not in his time as a pilgrim here below, but in his own time as a historian. The public servant Conyers Read, for example, when he worked high in the councils of the Office of Strategic Services did not know what the outcome of the maneuvers he helped plan would be. But for all the years from 1568 during which he painstakingly investigated the career of Francis Walsingham, the eminent Tudor historian Conyers Read knew that the Spanish Armada would come against England and that the diplomatic maneuvers of Mr. Secretary Walsingham would assist in its defeat. Somewhat inaccurately we might say that while man's time ordinarily is oriented to the future, the historian's time is oriented to the past. It might be better to say that while men are ordinarily trying to connect the present with a future that is to be, the historian connects his present with a future that has already been.

The professional historian does not have a monopoly of his peculiar time, or rather, as Carl Becker once put it, every man is on occasion his own historian. But the historian alone lives systematically in the historian's own time. And from what we have been saying it is clear that this time has a unique dimension. Each man in his own time tries to discover the motives and the causes of the actions of those people he has to deal with; and the historian does the like with varying degrees of success. But, as other men do not and cannot, the historian knows something of the results of the acts of those he deals with: this is the unique dimension of the historian's time. If, in saying that the historian cannot escape his own time, the present-minded meant this peculiarly historical time—which they do not—they would be on solid ground. For the circumstances are rare indeed in which the historian has no notion whatever

of the outcome of the events with which he is dealing. The very fact that he is a historian and that he has interested himself in a particular set of events fairly assures that at the outset he will have some knowledge of what happened afterward.

This knowledge makes it impossible for the historian to do merely what the history-minded say he should do—consider the past in its own terms, and envisage events as the men who lived through them did. Surely he should try to do that; just as certainly he must do more than that simply because he knows about those events what none of the men contemporary with them knew; he knows what their consequences were. To see the events surrounding the obscure monk Luther as Leo X saw them—as another "monks' quarrel" and a possible danger to the perquisites of the Curia—may help us understand the peculiar inefficacy of Papal policy at the time; but that does not preclude the historian from seeing the same events as the decisive step toward the final breach of the religious unity of Western Civilization. We may be quite sure however that nobody at the time, not even Luther himself, saw those events that way. The historian who resolutely refused to use the insight that his own peculiar time gave him would not be superior to his fellows; he would be merely foolish, betraying a singular failure to grasp what history is. For history is a becoming, an ongoing, and it is to be understood not only in terms of what comes before but also of what comes after.

What conclusions can we draw from our cursory examination of the historian's own time and his own day? What of the necessity, alleged by the present-minded, of rewriting history anew each generation? In some respects the estimate is overgenerous, in one respect too niggardly. The necessity will in part be a function of the lapsed time between the events written about and the present. The history of the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 may indeed need to be written over a number of times in the next few generations as its consequences more completely unfold. But this is not true of the Treaty of Madrid of 1527. Its consequences for better or worse pretty well finished their unfolding a good while back. The need for rewriting history is also a function of the increase in actual data on the thing to be

written about. Obviously any general estimate of the rate of increase of such data would be meaningless. History also must be rewritten as the relevant and usable knowledge about man, about his ways and his waywardness, increases. Here again there has been a tendency to exaggerate the speed with which that knowledge is increasing. The hosannahs that have greeted many "master ideas" about man during the past fifty years seem more often than not to be a reflection of an urge toward secular salvation in a shaky world rather than a precise estimate of the cognitive value of the ideas in question. Frequently such "master ideas" have turned out to be plain old notions in new fancy dress, or simply wrong. Perhaps the imperative, felt by the present-minded, to rewrite history every generation is less the fruit of a real necessity than of their own attempts to write it always in conformity with the latest intellectual mode. A little less haste might mean a little more speed. For the person engaged in the operation it is all too easy to mistake for progress a process that only involves skipping from recent to current errors.

If, instead of asking how often history *must* or ought to be rewritten, we ask how often it *will* be rewritten, the answer is that it will be rewritten, as it always has been, from day to day. This is so because the rewriting of history is inescapably what each working historian in fact does in his own day. That is precisely how he puts in his time. We seek new data. We reëxamine old data to discover in them relations and connections that our honored predecessors may have missed. Onto these data we seek to bring to bear whatever may seem enlightening and relevant out of our own day. And what may be relevant is as wide as the full range of our own daily experience, intellectual, aesthetic, political, social, personal. Some current event may, of course, afford a historian an understanding of what men meant five hundred years ago when they said that a prince must rule through *amour et cremeur*, love and fear. But then so might his perusal of a socio-psychological investigation into the ambivalence of authority in Papua. So might his reading of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. And so might his relations with his own children.

For each historian brings to the rewriting of history the full range of the remembered experience of his own days, that unique array that he alone possesses and is. For some historians that sector of their experience which impinges on the Great Crises of the Contemporary World sets up the vibrations that attune them to the part of the past that is the object of their professional attention. Some of us, however, vibrate less readily to those crises. We feel our way toward the goals of our historic quest by lines of experience having precious little to do with the Great Crises of the Contemporary World. He would be bold indeed who would insist that all historians should follow one and the same line of experience in their quest, or who would venture to say what this single line is that all should follow. He would not only be bold; he would almost certainly be wrong. History does not thrive in measure as the experience of each historian differs from that of his fellows. It is indeed the wide and varied range of experience covered by all the days of all historians that makes the rewriting of history—not in each generation but for each historian—at once necessary and inevitable.

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