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## SHAPING THE PAST

Men have always, it would seem, tried to clear up their ideas about times past by organizing their knowledge into patterns. As knowledge has accumulated, the patterns have become more and more complex. But if anything is to be done with accumulated knowledge, patterns there must be. Otherwise human memories remain just vast heaps of odds and ends, serving no practical purpose, fit only for removal — if they could be removed. They present much the same situation as would confront a stranger set down in the middle of a great and ancient city at night: a warren of streets leading in all directions, that is, in no direction, with people milling about and talking in a language not understood. A great deal of our intellectual effort is directed to bringing some kind of order out of the chaos of our memories.

### I

There is hardly a single aspect of human experience, however simple, that the human mind does not subject to this *ordering* process. A person gets up in the morning, goes through a fixed routine of actions in preparation for the day — a fixed routine worked out in his own mind, planned. A minor car accident occurs in the street along which we are passing. Immediately everyone directly or indirectly concerned starts to work out his version of the sequence of events. The simplest of occurrences are necessarily historical occurrences.

The range in scale from the trivialities of the day to the procession of the centuries is astronomical in its proportions. But to try to subordinate the procession of the centuries to our minds, we arrange. In arranging we collect, we throw out, we rearrange, we look for

similarities — in short, we write history. In this huge “departmental store” of man’s past, there are goods of every description. It may be our job is in the “Men’s Clothing” or the “Groceries”, or elsewhere. Wherever it is we must make ourselves acquainted with our surroundings and understand and extend their orderly nature. As we mount in the Departmental Store of the Past, we oversee more and more “departments”. Eventually, if we are of major calibre, we try to get an idea of it as a whole. Few succeed: there are really no universal historians. The task is too big. What some do is to “have a shot” at over-viewing the whole business by propounding schemes of arrangement. Such men are the Spenglers and Toynbees of the historical profession.

Men invariably give some kind of classification to their own past, just as they do to their present. This classification of the past often just takes the shape of myth and legend — the “Rome founded by Aeneas” sort of thing as furbished up by Vergil. Or, on the American Continent, the vague myths of the Indian tribal founders, such as “Hiawatha” and “Nanibojou”. In early phases of civilization, such myths and legends may be built up into more or less intellectually respectable concepts and theses. A long series of these may be traced in our own civilization, practically from the beginning down to the present. What is the word to apply to them? Myth? Legend? Tradition? Belief? Dogma? Concept? Thesis? Each one of such words has different connotations, but within each one hovers a similar idea. Each one contains an attempt to order the past. The attempts differ from each other according to the degree to which their instinctive or imaginative content is replaced by the rational.

The definitions given to such words will be as various as the persons using them. A myth may have little or no relation to reality about it. “There were giants in the land — once upon a time”! People simply accept and believe the myth. The flying Greeks, Daedalus and Icarus — of course, they flew! A hard and fast distinction between “myth” and “legend” would be difficult to set up. “Legend” may have a little more realistic content than “myth”, that is all. Thus it would probably be wrong to speak of the “myth” of the Trojan War, but perhaps right to speak of the “legends” of the Trojan War, for apparently some vague body of tales was handed down about “the ten years war in Troy”. “Tradition” takes us a little closer to actuality. Historical events

distorted and out of focus, but nevertheless historical or semi-historical, constitute the stuff of tradition. That game of bowls that Drake was playing on Plymouth Hoe, for example, when the Armada was sighted. What about the white men who may have come to Mexico centuries before Cortes, whose memory is supposed to have had considerable place in aiding Cortes' conquest? Myth? Legend? Tradition? I would say "legend", for the memory was too indefinite to merit the application "tradition".

"Belief" and "dogma" are not far removed from "myth". Did Christ actually turn water into wine at Cana? It would be impious to doubt it. Therefore it is not doubted, right to this day. But presumably belief in the miracle has not been polished up, put into a set form and (except as with other Biblical miracles) proclaimed ceremoniously and made into an article of faith. If this had been done, belief in the miracle at Cana, since it established the authenticity of all Jesus's miracles, would have become, in my understanding of the term, a dogma and there would have been no course for the faithful but to accept it, just as they had to accept the dogma of the Bodily Assumption of the Virgin Mary. A dogma takes whatever is the received account and makes it into something hard and fast, a spiritual, or religious "law" and commandment. If it does not seem to accord well with reality, whatever that is, so much the worse for reality.

With words such as "concept" and "thesis" we are in a different area. We pass from belief to rationalism, from the emotional to the intellectual. Since man is far from a rational being and the most rational of us will hang on to our irrationalities, the passage is never neat and tidy, perhaps never completed. One is reminded of the efforts of certain mathematicians and astronomers to get clearer views of the universe. Newton, great genius though he was, apparently was unsatisfied with mathematical certainty, and spent much of his later years, so it is said, pursuing the unrealistic chimaeras to be found in vague religious exercises. But *concept* and *thesis* simply aid in finding out something about reality and in formulating some kind of general position on what has been found out, and in this line of proceeding, there are chances of hitting a mark and thereby securing general acceptance. That is what Galileo found out, despite the Church's efforts.

## II

The systematizer of the human past, the historian and his colleagues,

has probably not got into as much trouble for heresy as have the Galileos and still more the Darwins. But he has got into a good deal. His confrontations with "The Establishment" have at least not been so spectacular as were those of Galileo with the Papacy. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they have not had such wide publicity. Of course if instead of "historian" we use some such word as "commentator" or "critic", then we are in an area of equally sharp dissent. In our "western" civilization, we begin with the martyr Socrates — martyr to "truth" — and pass rapidly to the never-ending procession of early Christian martyrs, medieval heretics, Protestants, Revolutionists. The essence of dissent is refusal to accept things as they are. Dissent is injury to the gods, or attempt at their destruction. The Christian martyrs to Roman paganism were dubbed "atheists", and from the point of view of orthodox Romans, rightly so. Dissent is merely a less intensified form of atheism. As such, it will always be persecuted.

Neither among the scientists nor among the historians are there many individuals whose inner urges compel them to dissent so sharply from things as they are as to earn for them the martyr's crown. The evils of Hitlerism produced, as far as I know, no historian martyrs in Nazi Germany, though after the nightmare was over, excellent thoughtful gentlemen like Friedrich Meinecke\* could rub their eyes and wonder what had happened to them and their fellow Germans that had blinded them. But it is hard to think of commentator or historian who has set himself so squarely across the stream as to get himself drowned. In the 17th century Thomas Hobbes wrote himself into some unpopularity but not to the executioner's block. In the 18th, Voltaire and his fellows said very nasty things about the established religion. But Voltaire kept an "escape hatch" open there in his retreat near the Swiss border. In any case, in the 18th century, religion, even in Catholic France, was becoming a fair mark to shoot at.

When Gibbon wound up his *Decline and Fall* with "I have narrated the story of the triumph of barbarism and religion" he knew he was at the time on the good, safe soil of Switzerland, though even he, even he when back in 18th-century England, might have hesitated to be too outspoken about "our good old King George III". Not that in all probability he would have wished to be, for the man who in his youth, had "sighed as a lover and obeyed as a son" was surely no man to wish

to bring down his own house upon his head. Distant Rome was a legitimate target, a long way off. The silly, narrow-minded man, George III, who lost the American colonies (and was afterwards to alienate Catholic Ireland) being near at hand was perhaps another matter [though his father had been viciously lampooned as mere Prince of Wales].

The sharp dissenters, the genuine burned-at-the-stake heretics will usually be sought in vain among the commentators and historians. For them, we have to go to people with fire in their eye, to the religious. As we draw closer to our own day, martyrdom, moreover, becomes harder and harder to achieve. For the English-speaking world, in the sphere of religion, The Act of Toleration, 1689, removed it, not to an infinite distance but to a considerable.

In recent centuries, martyrdom for political heresy has probably been somewhat easier to obtain than for religious, but in that field too, it has not been easy. It would probably have been possible for British authorities at one time or another to have got their hands on Tom Paine and condemned him as a traitor. That was not done. What would have happened in the new United States if an American citizen had assailed "the Father of His Country", George Washington? We do not know — all would have depended upon how it was done. Yet after the Second World War, the British executed "Lord Haw-Haw" for his adverse propaganda broadcasts from Germany. So if the tensions are great enough, it is still possible for the commentator, or at least the propagandist, if not the historian to achieve martyrdom.

"Tension" is probably the operative word. Its use suggests the uneasy reflection that historians readily fall in line. The charge has, in fact, been laid against them that they are merely people who see things as they are, simple determinists who live by Pope's line "Whatever is, is right". It is a serious charge. Is the historian merely a writer who records and analyzes — and accepts? The number of members of the craft who turn up on the side of the powers-that-be cannot be overlooked. To go no further back, one might begin the list by considering Edward Hyde, Lord Clarendon, (1609-1674), whose conservative version of the Great Rebellion did much to shape the accepted view of English history in subsequent generations. Of course the point must also be made that the events of the 17th century in England opened the way for two versions of history to exist alongside each

other. The "Bloodless Revolution" of 1688 gave both Englands, the old and the new, the right to go on existing, so that the extraordinary, complex amalgam of English constitutionalism was able to emerge. In the 19th and in the 20th century so far, almost every degree of dissent has foamed itself away like waves on the shore, and this climate of toleration has passed out not only throughout the English-speaking world but far beyond it. How far, however, it could withstand extreme tension and the trials that accompany it, external or internal, is debatable — Americans have not shown themselves tolerant toward Communism. On the other hand, they have set themselves earnestly to overcome one of the deepest of all prejudices, that based on skin colour, and have gone a long distance towards success (1974).

What has been the place of the historian in all this? He has clearly not been the high priest of change. Has he been more than a humble camp-follower? Has his role been merely that of cleaning up the field of battle after the fighting has ceased? A "liberal" has been unkindly defined as "a man who gets out five minutes before the fighting begins". Are historians merely "liberals"? They are, without question, people with tidy minds who are curious about just what happened, the order in which it happened and on occasion what might have happened if something else had not happened. But possession of a tidy mind does not make a man a "liberal". To be a "liberal" a person must believe in something and that that something would be preferable to things as they are.

Ranke, prince of German historians, could exclaim in a quotation familiar to all students of history that he wished to see "exactly how things happened". He wrote an unbelievable number of volumes in an effort to find out, but all his writing did not impel him to make criticism of things as they were — that is, of the semi-absolutist regime in the Prussia in which he lived. There is a defence for his failure, not the defence of expediency, still worse, of cowardice, which is no defence at all, but the defence which arises from the vast difficulty that lies in seeing things about one as they are, that is, in freeing oneself from one's own environment. Does a fish know that it lives in water? When it only is a matter of reading documents and comparing them with each other, it is, perhaps, mainly a matter of relentless application to clarify one's views on "exactly how things happened". But to sort out the rights and wrongs of the situation of the moment is quite

another matter, for to do that one must have a wide range of acquaintance among men, access to unlimited information (most of which lives only for a moment), together with intensive working knowledge of the whole human situation he is trying to understand and adjudge.

Take an election, for example. The noise of battle hurtles in the air, many contestants are well-known, many local situations are more or less well-known. The general situation is more or less well-known. The voters cast their votes and the results are announced. It is a familiar Sir John A. Macdonald quip that elections are like horse races — you know more about the results after they are over. It could almost equally validly be said that you know less about the results, except the crude results of the numerical vote. Modern “political scientists”, so-called, go about compiling innumerable tables derived from “the vote”, but apart from the little matter of their writing in a jargon that few understand, they cast little light upon “the results”.

### III

Another good illustration of how difficult it is to mark one's exact position on the chart of “the times” is afforded to anyone who, after reading about the situation in a foreign country, actually goes to that country. Some years ago, I had that experience with the Union of South Africa. I had read a good deal about the South African situation over the years. I knew its geography well from the map. I was conversant with the locations and numbers of the various racial groups. I knew the leading points in their attitudes. Yet when I went to South Africa, while all this was useful in orienting myself quickly and greatly added to the benefits derived from my stay, I saw at once that there were complexities of which I had not been aware and which made the picture difficult to focus. I do not mean so much the hard, objective points, such as the three divisions of the Afrikaner Church, as the nuances, the infinite day-by-day shadings that modify the general picture. That black boy in the Institute of Race Relationships in Johannesburg, for example, who sat there with downcast eyes, scarcely daring to raise them in the presence of the white, that “blankes net” (*whites only*) painted on the railway station benches — these were



simple parts of the jig-saw puzzle. But how about the Afrikaner and his family in the National Shrine at Pretoria, their faces suffused with emotion as they viewed the sculptured heroisms of their ancestors? How about the miles of new housing provided outside the cities for "the blacks"? How about that school principal in Capetown — "Cape-coloured" in origin, who hardly dare walk with me on the "white" side of the railway because of the omni-present sign "blankes net"? How about? How about? How about the many men of good-will to be found among the Afrikaners, gentlemen like Professor Kiet or the Rev. Mr. Botha? The list is endless.

The onlooker sees most of the game, the saying is. But the moment he gets into the game, he sees little more than the other participants. There lies the trouble, and the explanation both of why Ranke could not have got his wish to see "exactly how things were" (really an extra-ordinary piece of naivete) or have been expected to be a root and branch critic of the Prussianism in which he lived and moved and had his being. Great historical processes far exceed in their span of time the life of the individual. Since we, as individuals, are part of them, we cannot realize them as process, or only dimly, until they have receded far into the past.

Reports often come in these days of assaults made on people in the full view of others. The whole scene is there, in the open: the attack, the cry for rescue, the crowd. It may go even to the death of the person attacked. People stare. Some just pass by. No one does anything, no one takes a chance. Somebody in the crowd no doubt notes all the details: somebody could reconstruct the whole incident.

Is the historian just one of the crowd watching the "mugging"? Does he find the excuse for his existence in the careful account he is able to give of it? What does he expect to do with his account when he has made it? Publish it just for others to read, like a newspaper reporter? Make a nice piece of literature of it, that will bring him reputation?

Such questions shout at the historian. They all boil down to one question: what he is doing, is it in some way useful? That is an embarrassing question, but the historian must face it.

Should he have abandoned his notebook or his camera and gone to the rescue of the person being attacked? Should he "have got into the game?" What kind of superior person is he to shirk such duties?



“You see”, we can imagine him saying, “it has all come about as the result of an infinity of factors, all of them focusing on this precise moment in time. It had to happen so”. The line of verse I have already used – “Whatever is, is right” – fits in at this point. It could be transferred into other words and mean the same thing. “The will of Allah”, “Kismet”, “Fate”, “Nemesis”.

Such words bring us to theological debate, debate on a never-to-be-resolved issue, free will and determinism. These seem the two poles of human thought, which echoes about between them. To write some account of their place in human affairs would almost be to write an intellectual history of mankind. To the classical world, “fate” constrained the gods themselves. Oedipus *had* to marry his mother. Christianity seemed to lift the burden, but with Augustine it threatened again, and then Mohammed, or Mohammedan theology, imposed once more “the will of Allah” on large areas of the former Christian world. The remainder of the Christian world “see-sawed” with no clear doctrine – until Calvin once more imposed the “will of Allah” on a large section of western Europe in the form of “Predestination”. In our own day, Predestination has been transferred into the determinism of the scientists.

“This is the way things go”, the determinist predestinators say, “and you can’t do anything about it. Your fate may not be written in the stars, but it is written in your genes – genes which you have inherited from ‘the beginning of things’.”

The curious paradox about the theology of determinism is that it does not make people passive, but active.

The Oriental Moslem is usually represented as submissive to the “will of Allah,” therefore negligent, slothful, inert – though the conquests of Mohammed thirteen centuries ago and the current turbulence of the Near East do not accord with such depictions. But no one would accuse the Calvinist, wherever he has been found, of living a life of passive acceptance. Presumably the explanation lies in the Calvinist-determinist’s readiness to see in his own perceptions and ambitions “the will of God”, which naturally must be realized. The Predestinated must “do something about it”.

#### IV

Where does all this leave the historian?

I cannot imagine a pure unconcerned spectator, someone in no way whatsoever caught up in the spectacle he is observing. Under whatever circumstances we try to imagine complete detachment, it is just too much for human nature. A man could conceivably come upon a village in the middle of some vast desert or in the moon, a village completely cut off from the outside world, whose people spoke a strange tongue, but it would not be long before he got caught up in the life around him and began to see this and that, to have this opinion or that. To discover complete detachment of this sort seems to be the anthropologist's ideal and no doubt some anthropologists have come within a stone's throw of achieving it. But anthropologists are human beings before they are anthropologists.

If the imaginary anthropologist gets caught up in the life of the people he is studying, so does the historian, and remoteness in time and space does not prevent it. One can take a peculiarly desiccated slice of human experience, some trivial tribal brawl of long ago, for example, and no doubt achieve a high degree of detachment, but even in extreme cases, the human aspect of the situation will insist on forcing itself in on one, and little currents of sympathy or dislike will be set going. As one draws closer to his own time and people, such currents naturally increase in strength. Some writers can conceal them, with others they are out in the open. And they affect the reader, too!

The point is that the historian, the objective observer, may think he is the complete determinist, with the human amoebae he is observing being completely in the grip of forces larger than themselves, but he never is. He allows a little free-will to sneak in at this point or that. Sooner or later he descends from the observation post and edges towards the game. Having got into the game (of life), he has to observe the rules and join his efforts to those of the other players. He, too, plays to win: that is, he tries to shape the situation into which he is drawn, to give it a goal. The figure may serve to mark the point at which the objective observer, the arranger of the scene, the organizer of the orderly procession, the historian, crosses from past to future, from systematizer of the past to shaper of the future, to the role of the prophet.

Much could be written of the historian as prophet. The historian would not try to shape the past if he did not believe his shaping would in some respects affect the future. It is only an interest in the future

which leads to an intelligent interest in the past. History is the child of hope. The historian is not living at a single point in time, but, like other living beings, in three zones of time at once – past, present, and future. Everybody who works out an orderly body of knowledge in this way is shaping the future. The historian has no monopoly of prophecy. He is, however, a specialist in the human record and thus intellectually and possibly emotionally more directly concerned with the shape of things past and the shape of things to come than most other classes of persons. His efforts to shape the past necessarily have a bearing on shaping the future, as indeed history vividly illustrates. For example, Karl Marx, dead long ago, is still shaping the future of a large section of mankind. Marx is one of many who have done the same thing. Their efforts have been emotional and poetic, philosophic and intellectual – they have taken every conceivable shape, from high doctrine to minor thesis. They are all efforts at ordering the human experience and thus at ordering the future.

One of the good rules in almost any intellectual activity is to proceed from the known to the unknown. The past is the known, though the known imperfectly. But how does one cross to the unknown? If the historian could plot out his data on squared paper, as many other orderers of knowledge can, he could make some kind of graph of them, trace the course they have been following. This is easily done, for example, in historical studies of population, where the data are statistics, and in this case, the course is often extended from the past into the future. Predictions of future population trends are constantly made – most of them turn out wrong, incidentally – but they illustrate the point that the historian in some areas is clearly a prophet. And if he be gifted with imagination, insight, he may prophesy in areas not quite as arid as population forecasts. A person with adequate insight into the past, cannot, in all conscience, stop short at a point. It is his duty to prophesy.

Imaginative, ordered, knowledgeable insight into the past may give imaginative insight into the future.

\* See his *The German Catastrophe Reflections and Recollections*, tr., by Sidney R. Fay (Harvard University Press, 1950).