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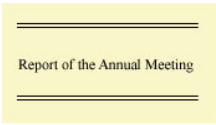

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HAROLD ADAMS INNIS AS HISTORIAN

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IN 1892 and 1894 Canada produced two men who were to achieve international eminence in politico-economic scholarship, Jacob Viner and Harold Adams Innis. The elder, on receiving his bachelor's degree in the spring of 1914, with Canada in the depths of depression and no Canadian university prepared to guide his higher studies, cleared out for the United States. There he was quickly caught up in teaching and public service and did not return. The younger, who received his degree two years later, when men he knew were fighting at Ypres and on the Somme and when the first great sag in Canadian recruiting had set in, graduated, as it were, from economics to artillery. Next year Innis sealed in blood his covenant with a new Canada that was born at Vimy Ridge. In 1918 he too went to the United States for advanced studies, but returned to his abiding niche at the University of Toronto in 1920. Not until the last months of his life did he frankly acknowledge that the intensity of his nationalism had barred him from accepting advancement abroad, but now, as one looks back over his thirty years of productivity, Canadianism stands out as the central thread, probably as the motive force of his life and work. In particular, he was from the beginning perturbed by Canada's historical vulnerability and subordination to powers beyond her control.

He masked his self-dedication well, subconsciously and perhaps consciously, until his last finished utterance, "The Strategy of Culture," in which he aimed to make up for what he regarded as the timidity of the Massey Report. In his course from rather uncertain beginnings in Canadian economic history up to that final stark jeremiad for Canadian culture, he had written with an underlying studied skepticism. Employing thought-provoking generalizations, pungent phraseology, and ironical or startling concatenations, he achieved a literary style that was often as baroque and as sardonic as that of Veblen, whose rapidly-successive books had probably been the most powerful influence on him during his graduate studies.

And, since Innis was always a man in a hurry to get on from what he had digested, he was elliptical, impatient, sometimes quite obscure in defining the logical road towards his declaratory conclusions. I remember his defence of this hasty procedure on one occasion, his appeal for support to an American scholar whom he admired and believed addicted to the same practice, and his obvious amazement when the other, who wrote as profoundly as Innis but distinctly better, explained how slowly and laboriously he felt obligated to make his way into print. We must start, therefore, with the admission that, except for a few careful, even graceful, papers of his last decade, he could on occasion be ambiguous, contradictory, enigmatic, elliptical, or careless of technical canons. There are reasons for connecting

these negligent habits with his gradually-revealed mistrust of the meticulously-marshalled written word as fossilization or mechanization of knowledge and thought. For him both must be free and dynamic in time. His faith was in the *Logos*. "My bias," he said in 1948, "is with the oral tradition, particularly as reflected in Greek civilization, and with the necessity of recapturing something of its spirit."

Why, then, when any prig or purist could convict him of abundant sins, was he read and admired throughout the scholarly world? Why was he intellectually exciting? What had a Canadian nationalist to say that Europe and North America felt they had to read in spite of its difficulty and strangeness?

Some of the answers to these questions are in the realm of the imponderables. Innis had conspicuous learning, wit, and humour, for instance, but underlying all his powers and accomplishments was some genius, genius in the sense of absolute, untrammeled originality, invention, and leaping insights. To paraphrase Samuel Butler, he was capable of drawing sufficient conclusions from what appeared to be insufficient premises.

These rare gifts seemed to be almost always available in some degree. I cannot remember an occasion when we were together during thirty years that was unmarked by some fresh perception. Sometimes he could not, or would not, amplify his insights, but usually their novelty, penetration, and independence shook discussion and discourse out of caked, unprofitable forms, letting in new air and light, and stimulating discussion towards further invention.

The number and variety of good minds he could reach was astonishing. Repeatedly, to my knowledge, scholars who met him in action for the first time promptly set to work on his writings. He himself had a good deal of insight into persons, although he sometimes seemed a little puzzled by the contrast between his confident estimates of them and his inability to substantiate these. Finally, Innis repeatedly showed an uncanny sense of timing, both in administrative matters and in the knowledge of when an audience was prepared to take in some utterance that would have made no dent on their perceptions at another time. One of his colleagues, who had good cause to censure his administrative procedures, used to say that, on the other hand, Innis could often sense a crisis and deal with it before it had developed. He was shrewd and effective in academic politics.

He did not waste either these intangible endowments or his cultivated powers. Those who worked with him marvelled at his rapidity and catholicity in marshalling evidence and at his power and assurance in distilling it. They realized too, perhaps, how much energy those activities could somehow draw from a man who never completely recovered from his war-wounds. Knowing how instantly he could relax and how consistent he was in refusing to be hurried out of mischievous, free-ranging talk and laughter with his friends, they could guess at the tight concentration of his private working hours.

But who can tell us how he kept available his enormous learning? His explanation to me was that he took "very full notes" of his reading, but my ultimate impression was that, although it seems incredible, most of those notes were available in his head. At any rate his master

calculating-machine was inside his own brain-box, where a powerful mind digested knowledge into meaning and yet remembered the ways that would, when necessary, lead back to that knowledge in note-books and on scraps of paper, in printed sources, and in monographs of the utmost variety. His bulging little office, with its cascades of seldom-disturbed books and papers, and his habit of answering most letters at once in crabbed longhand on a half-sheet of note-paper were almost hilarious commentaries on the card-indexes, carbon copies, manila folders, filing cabinets, and bookshelves, whose endless management keeps the rest of us as safe from thinking and writing as stamp-collectors at their albums. Yet I cannot recall his not answering a letter or failing to come up with apt, if sometimes cryptic, scholarly help when it was needed.

II

The twenty years between the wars formed a rare brief period when the Canadian spirit of enterprise found an unprecedented amount of intellectual and æsthetic expression. In particular, life was truly exciting for students of Canada, for hardly a month passed without some fruitful, stimulating revelation. The dynamic, of course, was a newly-proud nationalism strong enough to persist through two economic booms and busts. In 1920 the *Canadian Historical Review* emerged from its 25-year old chrysalis, and shortly afterwards the Canadian Historical Association also made its metamorphosis. In 1918 and 1922 W. P. M. Kennedy gave constitutional history a brilliant, new, flying start, and about the same time Sir Robert Borden turned from politics to public lectures about the genesis of Canada's novel standing in the world. In 1923 Innis published his doctoral dissertation and first book, a history of the Canadian Pacific Railway which, while it did not satisfy either its author or its sponsor, Professor Chester W. Wright of the University of Chicago, proved to be the cornerstone of a new structure in Canadian intellectual life.

What are we to call that structure? Superficially it began as economic geography, for Innis formally subscribed himself as a professor of that art as late as 1934, and it persisted as economic history, if we are to accept the words of his unfinished presidential address for the American Economic Association last year. Yet, though he himself seemed a little diffident of assuming the title, he is probably best thought of as a practitioner in political economy. And, since that protean term has during two centuries rung all the changes from literal economy in politics to Innis's own omnibus loaded with everything from codfish to culture, it must be affirmed that, within political economy, his deepest, most unfailing, and most passionate loyalty was to history — the past brought to bear upon the present. The burden of his thought during the last ten years of his life was profound, even utter, disillusionment with the mere Cult of the Present. Again and again he pleaded with his peers to cut *along* the grain of human experience not *across* it. Adaptable tradition became to him one strong safeguard against nihilism.

Apparently he began his enquiries a generation ago with concern over the role of new, externally-exploited countries in the world economy, that huge complex of capital, production, and distribution and the political and social behavior that goes with it. Naturally he started on his own country, its staples, and their distribution, ever regardful of its unique environmental characteristics, its peculiarities in techniques and transportation, and its intricate relationships of subordination to greater outside economic, political, and cultural powers. Who before him, for instance, had even speculated, much less learned, about the powerful patterns of force that were composed from the distinct qualities of bank or shore, ship or boat, green or dry, fisheries, on the one hand, and of mercantilism, bullion and salt supply, and world markets, on the other. I recall a time when we were both working at the Nova Scotian archives and, during our walks to and fro, he exposed to me, largely in terms of technology, unthought-of dynamics in the life of the Maritime Region. This was Veblen transplanted, an utterly new phase in Canadian scholarship.

He spoke with authority because from the beginning he studied economic, political, and social behavior *in situ* as well as in the records. (In the instance mentioned he had just then shifted from the Ragged Islands fishery to the ancient files of the *Acadian Recorder*). During the teaching year he was most often to be found behind barricades of books and hitherto-unused government documents in the Faculty Reading Room at the University of Toronto Library. During vacations he attacked other repositories of source materials at home and abroad, when not travelling the length and breadth of Canada — travelling, too, light and at his own expense, uncushioned by research grants. There is, in fact, at the philanthropic foundations in New York, a large fund of incredulous stories about Innis's belief in hundreds rather than thousands of dollars for the assistance of a few true and productive scholars.

When he himself was on the track of knowledge, he could sleep in his clothes on the deck of a ship, in a day-coach, or at a railway station, and eat whatever he could get. Yet he never paraded his austerity or condemned greater indulgence in others if they were assiduous in scholarship. In his early days at Toronto, he was regarded as something of an academic maverick, but some of his perceptive colleagues believed in him and defended him until his reputation was made by a single book. The book was *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven, 1930). Its declaratory sub-title was *An introduction to Canadian economic history*.

It is doubtful that any other Canadian monograph, except perhaps F.-X. Garneau's *Histoire du Canada*, has had an equal impact on Canadian intellectual life. After it, I suspect, few scholars wrote about Canada without wondering what Innis would think of their work. I know that I never did. The book's sweep was so thorough that it substituted an economic, geographical theme for the previous political, personal thesis of Canadian development. As western Canadians know and have come to protest, it substantiated the Laurentian hypothesis of Canada's evolution that the geographer Marion I.

Newbigin had glimpsed at about the same time and had sketched in *Canada: the Great River, the Lands and the Men* (London, 1927).

Innis's thematic achievement was grand and unprecedented, and it was accompanied by such a far-ranging array of often minute evidence that it compelled surrender to his arguments even where they were irregularly buttressed. His formal documentation could only be described as whimsical and his scholarly apparatus as casual, but every page of his text conducted the reader deep into the problems and opportunities of the men in the field, Indian and European, or of their managers nearer the economic capitals, or of the politicians whose services they tried to evoke. In effect he wove geography, economic history, changing technology, political adaptation, and far more theory than is evident, into such a vivid, variegated, and tough fabric of explanatory exposition that its rough spots and irregularities could be ignored. One felt that he had collected, carded, and spun the fibres and that then the artist in him had responded by composing the coherent design that their nature commanded. He was always both the inductive and the deductive thinker.

Innis regarded himself as a constant user and modifier of economic theory, but not as an economic determinist. In the first matter, he felt that the economic theories worked out in older countries than Canada were not strictly applicable, and his inductive work in Canadian and other economic history was designed to demonstrate the adaptations that must be made before deductive reliance on theory was permissible. His aim was to accord a central position to economic theory or, to put it another way, to achieve an economic theory for Canada that could confer some of the perspective that he felt Canadians conspicuously lacked. Transcending Canada, as he proposed to say in his presidential address to the American Economics Association, "economic history is primarily concerned with extending the universal applicability of economic theory and of strengthening a central core of interest."

In the second matter, that of economic determinism, his conspicuous humanism is the substantial refutation. No one was more fascinated than he by the compulsive tradition and imponderables in man; his spirituality, religious and æsthetic; his will; and his odd anti-economic motivations. Even when a good deal of this was eclipsed by his final obsessive despair over our Cult of the Present, he would admit the importance of human "cussedness" and intractibility, inadequate as he felt they were without constructive leadership from the intellectual élite. During most of his life he felt that he, and other economic historians, must be on their guard against economic determinism and out-moded or politically-adulterated Marxian simplifications. Yet he did not close his mind. In 1940, writing about one part of *The Cod Fisheries*, he said: "I can't avoid the commercial interpretation," and last August, writing about another man's book, he said: "It is rather Marxian in its approach as you would expect, but not the less penetrating and interesting."

III

If one had to guess when Innis acquired the self-assurance that enabled him to be the most productive and imaginative of Canadian scholars, the date would be 1928 or 1929. Two of his books had been published. *The Fur Trade* had been accepted for publication by Yale, and he had made his standing at the University of Toronto. Most importantly of all, ten years of unremitting study of his country and the materials for its history made him feel that he knew what he was talking and writing about, even, probably that he could now trust his insights as starting-points towards understanding. His powers of work at this time were astounding.

Equipped in this fashion, and believing that the citizen should put his capacities at the service of society, late in 1929 Innis was confronted by the tragic impact upon Canada of an unprecedentedly severe economic depression. That depression seems to have made him acknowledge his concern with *political* economy. What he accomplished during the next ten years passes understanding, particularly the understanding of those who remember the crippling and prolonged effects of the depression on vulnerable Canada. Let me do little more than list the chief activities that he undertook, sometimes alone and always as a principal agent.

In 1928 he persuaded the University of Toronto Press to publish *Contributions to Canadian Economics,* whose articles and bibliographical notes formed a foundation for the revival in 1929 of the Canadian Political Science Association and for the initiation in 1934 of the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science.* Ever mindful of students' needs and impecuniousness, in 1929 he culled from his vast findings, and published, a remarkable collection of *Select Documents in Canadian History,* 1497-1783, to which in 1933 he and A. R. M. Lower added a sequel covering 1783-1885 before the design crumpled under the weight of materials available for subsequent years. In 1933 he helped to organize and edit for the Canadian Institute of International Affairs a series of studies entitled *The Canadian Economy and its Problems* (Toronto, 1934), and it was characteristic of him that at the last moment, when it was pointed out that no study existed of the effects on Canada of the Panama Canal, he wrote one himself fast enough to have it added as an appendix.

Meanwhile he had agreed to help Dr. J. T. Shotwell of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in planning and editing the large series entitled *The Relations of Canada and the United States,,* a task that he performed perhaps all the more generously because of his then latent fears of the United States. He certainly strained out some of the eirenical piety that cropped up naturally during the decade of that project and, meeting generous understanding in Shotwell, used the series as a vehicle for several almost purely Canadian studies in economic history.

Stricken Nova Scotia also secured his services in 1933 as a member of its Royal Commission of Economic Inquiry. Its report (1934) sounded a novel note when Innis unobtrusively refrained from signing what amounted to little more than a lament for vanished free trade and

substituted, in characteristically compressed and staccato form, a pioneering economic history of the distressed Province.

All the while he had been writing and speaking about various neglected aspects of the Canadian economy and had persuaded the Ryerson Press to publish *Problems of Staple Production in Canada* (1933), the first of what were to be characteristic collections of his shorter utterances, roughly grouped and published under some thematic title then dominant in his mind. I used to think that he used this device against the day when he would write an economic history of Canada, but have concluded that he believed more in setting men thinking than in instructing them. He also took part in the great test research project designed by Isaiah Bowman and others for the Social Research Council, in the form of the nine-volume *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement Series*, by writing his highly original *Settlement and the Mining Frontier* (1936). Still another enterprise was his long, valiant, and partially successful campaign to reform and revitalize the Royal Society of Canada. Finally, he was sought out by Anne Bezanson, Shepard Clough, Arthur Cole, Edwin Gay, E. A. J. Johnson and others who activated the Committee for Research in Economic History, miraculously created the Economic History Association, and in 1940 produced its notable journal as a make-weight for the impotence of Europe at war.

The culmination of this period was *The Cod Fisheries*, substantially finished about 1938, and painstakingly revised for publication in 1940. This was the most ambitious enterprise in economic history and political economy that Innis ever undertook, for it presented a novel and perhaps unique problem in exposition. To realize this, one has only to consider that, whereas the normal study is centripetal and has a natural unity around a core, *The Cod Fisheries*, as its subtitle, *The history of an international economy*, indicates, was centrifugal and amounted to the study of very complicated activities in the North Atlantic Maritime Region and of their equally complicated radiating relationships with the rest of North America, the West Indies, South America, Western Europe, and the Mediterranean. It cannot be claimed that Innis found any magical artistic formula to solve his problem in some great unifying emulsion, but the degree of his success, by sometimes fairly brutal expository means, was far beyond ordinary expectation.

For historians of Canada, then, the ten or twelve years after 1927 were a period of incomparable enrichment from a single scholar. One should add to the publications already indicated the long, closely-argued introductions and contributory essays that he wrote for books by others, perhaps most notably for four of the volumes in the Shotwell series: J. A. Ruddick *et al.*, *The Dairy Industry in Canada* (1937); N. J. Ware and H. A. Logan, *Labor in Canadian-American Relations* (1937); G. P. de T. Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada* (1938); and A. R. M. Lower, *The North American Assault on the Canadian Forest* (1938); also his edition of *The Diary of Andrew James McPhail* (1940).

One wonders whether Canada could now provide the devoted and talented scholar and writer who would temporarily suspend his own curiosities in order to compose the economic history of Canada that

Innis could have written but did not. It would not be an easy job, for it would involve the testing and digestion, not only of masses of material, but of endless provocative interjections. Its acknowledged dependence on another man's mind would be open to misinterpretation. To be done properly it would have to ramify out to other parts of the world, for in economic history Innis was the conscious internationalist and contributed much to the break-down of Canadian parochialism. Yet the work could be done and, if well done, would be a great contribution to understanding. In loyalty to Innis, its *sine qua non* should be explicit denial of any authoritative finality.

IV

The War of 1939 marked the last turning-point in Innis's life of the mind. It heightened in him, if you like, the intense love of country that was born during the war of 1914. That war had scarred him. He thoroughly hated war's dehumanizing power. No doubt it is true in a superficial sense that he had decided about this time to redeem the unexpected failure of another scholar to fill a gap in the annals of Canadian staple production by writing the history of pulp and paper and of the hydro-electric power that accompanied their rise. This, for him, conventional pursuit led him into novel enquiry and thinking about cheap paper, cheap publications, broadcasting, television, and their politico-economic uses — that is, ultimately to considering the interlocked revolutions in communications and political economy across all recorded time. It is also true that Innis was during some of these years conspicuously associated in G. A. Borghese's project for the formulation of a world government, but I have detected no evidence of its direct effect on his thinking.

Yet, if one follows his course from the essays, some dating back to 1933, that were published late in 1946 as *Political Economy in the Modern State*, down through *Empire and Communications* (Oxford, 1950) and *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto, 1951) to the collection, *Changing Concepts of Time* (Toronto, 1952), that he revised during his last illness, it is apparent that the War of 1939 shook him into a profound and almost entirely new phase. It was a period of furious activity for him. Even during the post-war inundation of his university and the reorganization of its graduate school, of which he accepted the deanship, he felt obligated to serve on, and write extensively for, two exhausting Royal Commissions. He taught at Toronto and lectured in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain about his thoroughly original ideas as to the relations between communications and political and economic power, from ancient times to the present. He told me that his venturesome Beit Lectures at Oxford, published as *Empire and Communications* (1950), had to be delivered, for want of time, from little more than half-digested notes.

A great compulsion was upon him and, perhaps, a mortal urgency. Again and again, he seemed to be on the brink of a fundamental examination of philosophy, of man and his universes, but apparently the time seemed too short. Charles N. Cochrane, another Canadian scholar who, like Innis, was perhaps more searchingly

considered abroad than at home, was a help and an inspiration, but he died prematurely just after the great effort of his lectures at Yale. For Innis himself there was too much to be done and too little time to do it. In particular, Canada must be quickly roused to understand the nature and necessity of scholarship, especially in the humanities and the social studies, for science already rode high in popular esteem. "Pure scholarship," Innis reported to the National Conference of Canadian Universities on Post-War Problems in 1944, "is a growth hormone of civilization as well as a measure of its quality." The new Canadian Social Science Research Council and the Humanities Research Council of Canada owed much to his influence and support. He was appalled by the threats to scholarship that were embodied in voting mass-men, in collectivism, in statism, and in modern communication monopolies playing on the surfaces of minds that had been adroitly robbed of all their roots in time.

It is to be hoped that some person with a receptive, imaginative, and generous philosophical mind will soon attempt an exegesis of Innis' thought from the Panic of 1940 to his death; for his utterances, while strange and sometimes even contradictory to us, merit systematic analysis, especially because of their independence and originality. Many serious students have been provoked and puzzled by them. In the interim it is perhaps legitimate to offer a very tentative structure of hypotheses concerning them as something to think about, not in order to estimate the man, for time will do that, but as a temporary and adaptable support during some subsequent exploration of the ideas in his last books.

Perhaps the underlying circumstance was that the War of 1939 brought to a focus a number of the forces that had emerged during the past two centuries with such intensity as to create a transvaluation of values. For instance, Innis was a liberal, a man for whom the freedom of the individual was probably the ultimate value. Yet in what company could such a man now find a congenial resting-place? Must he be a conservative or a radical? In terms of his judgments at such a time, he seemed most like a literal anarchist. Yet in terms of his actions, he lived out his belief that the state, the political expression of society, might depend on the services of its learned men, as, for instance, on Royal Commissions. This was, in a sense, typical of the contraditions in which he found himself involved.

Was he a democrat, even in the sense that although democracy might be an objectionable form of government, no one has invented anything more tolerable? Almost certainly democracy meant to him, as it must to citizens of large states, not government by the people, but the power of the people to choose their governors and to get rid of them when desirable. That brought him up against the capacity of the people for good sense, and it was here that his faith failed him. Apparently it failed him because Rousseau had not convinced him that man is naturally good and because his study of communications and the theory of monopoly had convinced him that popular press and periodicals, radio, moving pictures, and television had robbed most men of the traditional standards for judgment. "Intellectual man of the nineteenth century," he wrote during his last days, "was the first

to estimate absolute nullity in time. The present — real, insistent, complex, and treated as an independent system, the foreshortening of practical prevision in the field of human action, has penetrated the most vulnerable areas of public policy. War has become the result, and a cause, of the limitations placed on the forethinker."

Moreover war had fulfilled Tocqueville's prophecy of the Earth divided between the Russian and the American spheres, impelling both to subordinate everything, especially well-being and freedom, to the concentration and control of power. Spengler, Aldous Huxley, and Orwell seemed justified in their diagnoses of man's suicidal course towards mere conditioned reflexes at the command of tyrants as remote and unintelligible as the authorities in Kafka's novels.

The immediate, if not necessarily the modal menace to tolerable existence for Canadians was of course the United States, not so much through force as through infection. The antibiotic must be found in the Western European tradition because Canada showed little evidence of inherent powers of immunity. Let me substantiate this by three quotations from the last pages of Innis's last essay.

> Whatever hope of continued autonomy Canada may have in the future must depend on her success in withstanding American influence and in assisting the development of a third bloc designed to withstand the pressure of the United States and Russia.
>
> The future of the West depends on the cultural tenacity of Europe and the extent to which it will refuse to accept dictation from a foreign policy developed in relation to the demands of individuals in North America (not merely in the United States) concerned with re-election.
>
> In the words of Professor Robert Peers, Canada must call in the Old World to redress the balance of the New, and hope that Great Britain will escape American imperialism as successfully as she herself escaped British imperialism.

He concluded another paper by quoting Aldous Huxley's book-title, "Time must have a stop."

Probably every reader of what Innis wrote after 1939 will disagree, not only in detail but in substance, with parts of what he finds, for that is what Innis intended. He wanted to make men think and, above all, argue about what was happening to them. After travelling all over Canada and living for some time in French Canada, he deliberately abandoned any hope for liberty in Canada based upon its social and cultural variety. Although he knew that the United States possessed powerful traditions of libertarian and of anti-materialistic sorts that had persisted through almost two centuries of unprecedented political stresses and strains, he chose to ignore them in order to emphasize the authoritarian, the materialistic, and the immediate elements. He gradually narrowed his theses into such harsh and arbitrary forms that only the utterly inert could fail to be provoked by them. As Donald Innis told the American Economic Association last December, his father had discussed with him at length a proposed, but necessarily unwritten substitute for the presidential address that he had begun.

Its studied, insistent thesis was to be that the tradition of America (the United States and Canada) was to refuse to have a tradition and particularly to resist interest in the European tradition.

There we must leave him. Yet, however one views this original, fruitful, and complex mind, one is confronted by the historian, even when he chose to be polemical. For him the recent course of world development, in commercialism, imperialism, and in monopolies of communication, was hurtling towards contests between monopolies of power that had found the formula for total control in wiping men's minds clean of all save alluring, exciting impressions of each succeeding moment. The Cult of the Present, as the means to mere insensate, self-bounded power for its monopolists or oligarchs, nullified the dignity of man, of all men, even of the tyrannical possessors of power. Against it there could be only one counterpoise, the eclectic Cult of the Past, of History. Man could work for his redemption only by recalling from the past its beautiful and good inspirations and by nourishing, renewing, and modulating those strains through the present into the future.