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The Historian's Problem

President's Address

George M. Wrong

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ANNUAL MEETING

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

THE HISTORIAN'S PROBLEM

BY PROFESSOR GEORGE M. WRONG

Canada is so vast a country that, unless we who are interested in its history take some trouble to meet in conference, we shall be ignorant of what each of us is doing and shall in consequence lack co-operation. The anchor of a nation is in its traditions. Every great achievement is due to sacrifice and those who are most conscious of what their heritage has cost are the most likely to value it. People in other parts of Canada sometimes wonder at the depth of national feeling in French Canada. We find its secret in a long story of labour and sacrifice reaching back for more than three hundred years. English-speaking Canada has a shorter story, it is hardly yet conscious of the quality of its founders, and for this reason it still lacks the sense of unity in tradition which makes the Scot and the Englishman proud to be known as such.

During more than half a century the study of history has been going through a period of reconstruction. The writers of the eighteenth century were content to tell a story of events as they happened, without a too ardent pressing into causes, but this will not do for our age. We must interpret the setting and the spiritual sources of events. Consequently we have now many aspects of life related to history. We have pre-history, the study of what man was before anything was written about him; we have archaeology which links what he made with his hands to the mind which inspired the doing of it; we have geography, the interpretation of the scene of his life and its influence on his activities; we have philosophy and psychology linked with history to show man's nature and outlook, to explain his motives, to determine whether he is the mechanical expression of his physical surroundings, moving with action and reaction like the swing of the pendulum of the clock, or something more. Croce tells us that history and philosophy are the same thing. The last and most comprehensive ally in the study of man is anthropology, to which man becomes a phenomenon to be interpreted as one whole in his physical structure, his mental outlook, and the mode in which all this has found expression in every age and in every part of the world.

The historian may well feel awe as he stands in the presence of these bases of his work. It was an unhappy remark of the historian Freeman that history is past politics. It is no more true of the past than of the present that life can be expressed in terms of politics. We may find three stages in the passage to the highest plane of historical interpretation. The first is the making sure of the facts. On this we are now spending great labour as the accumulations in archives reveal. This is the foun-

dation of all history, but it is only a foundation. We must pass to a second stage, to the understanding and the interpreting of the soul of a people on the basis of these facts. We must exercise imagination and try to see things in the past as the actors saw them; try not to read into their minds what was not there, or to fail to understand what was there. We are always in danger of underestimating or exaggerating the past. While, on the one hand, ignorant people care nothing about it, and never inquire as to the causes of the present, there is the other tendency to think that a simple event of two hundred years ago has a deeper significance than has its parallel of to-day. Imagination fastens upon a few figures to which it gives heroic stature and it thus tends to make of the king Alfreds, the Drakes and the Washingtons something more than human. History is, however, the enemy of hero worship. It is the interpretation of life and it has no hero to magnify, no villain to denounce, and no cause to support. It has, however, the right to discriminate between the true and the false and to pass judgments on what has made or marred a nation or an individual. In writing history sympathy with one side or the other is no proof of partisanship. It becomes dangerous only when it distorts the judgment and leads to a fear of truth which may discredit the favoured side. A too ardent nationalism is the enemy of historical truth.

The third problem of the historian is that of presentation. It is simply true that readers of history are now in revolt against the dull chronicle, against the mere record of a succession of facts which lacks selection and emphasis upon the salient. The writing of history is not the drawing of a colourless outline; it means painting with the vivid tints of nature. It is something to have acquired a scrupulous sense of facts, but there is a danger in archives, in note books crowded with facts, in the desire to find something new, which may upset the verdicts of the past. Thucydides gives speeches which were never delivered but he is none the less a sound historian. Research is only a preliminary in the writing of history. Fact is the touch-stone but history is much more than a succession of events for causation is not to be found in the mere succession. An imaginative drama may give a more illuminating view of a man's character than a record of all the facts of his life. To be effective history must be expressed with a sense of proportion in a style that makes clear and vivid what it touches and that reveals understanding of human motives.

There are problems for historians to answer which he will not find solved in the Archives. Why does a nation's culture change? What produces its literature? Why do civilizations rise and why do they decay? Do the facts show that there is this law of action and reaction in human life? Can we discover the principles which determine the character and destiny of nations? Can we determine whether democracy or aristocracy gives the better form of government? Is there a law or even a fact of progress and what is progress? Does it mean an advance, a deeper understanding in the average man's conception of life and if so how does this express itself? Can we discover what determines human action; economic pressure, religion, national feeling, class outlook? Man is the real problem. He is fickle; he is immature; as anthropology is showing us he is governed by irrational traditions. He is himself the greatest obstacle to exact interpretations in history, and perhaps this is why it can never be finally written.

Truth is exciting and interesting and to set out to find the truth about man's past is the most fascinating of all tasks. To-day we have new social forces of which we are only beginning to understand the meaning. Scientific discoveries produce unexpected results in history. Lord Bryce said that the knowledge of quinine might have changed the course of history in the Middle Ages. Italy and Germany were united in the Holy Roman Empire, but the German Emperors could not live in Italy for climatic reasons and this difficulty quinine could have overcome with the possible result of a great Italo-German Empire. This may seem far-fetched but it is unquestionable that the invention of the telegraph has altered the whole course of diplomatic history. Formerly ambassadors in distant countries had to face crises by their own discretion on the spot, but now ambassadors in all parts of the world can act on daily instructions from their own government. In consequence politics have been unified, on a world scale, with one deplorable result of a world war.

The facility of movement by the automobile is altering the character of our civilization. Many people now travel for long distances who in former times would never have left home and they acquire a changed outlook on life. The radio is enabling the humblest peasant to listen to the accents of the king as he speaks. The cinema enables all the world to see him lounging with his friends on the deck of a ship. In consequence reserves, formerly rigid, have been broken down, and with this have gone some of the reverence for rank and authority which has played so vital a part in our society. These things require interpretation in our own day and other factors in other days require similar interpretation as forces in history.

What a task is that which history sets itself! The historian is a man and may say with the Roman historian that nothing human is alien to him and his field is to interpret the incalculable fertility of man's life. We may be well assured that until man has become superman there will not be a science of history, for only a being more than man can read all the influences which mould his conduct. There is no uniformity in his actions, there is no single motive, no law of reason, to which he is always obedient. When he may seem to be seeking only economic well-being a gust of passion will lead him to risk economic ruin in pursuit of some will-of-the-wisp. If we ask with the Psalmist, "What is man that Thou are mindful of him?" we must answer that we do not know, but that this only stimulates us to further search. He is often false to himself and so false to others that perhaps more than half of his written testimony about them is untrue. How in this medley to find truth? That is the historian's absorbing problem.