

Report of the Annual Meeting

Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Cultural History

R. Flenley

Volume 14, numéro 1, 1935

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300144ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300144ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Flenley, R. (1935). Cultural History. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 14(1), 51–57.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300144ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1935

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

CULTURAL HISTORY

By R. FLENLEY
University of Toronto

Historical work in Canada to-day has a double task: on the one hand that of utilizing the resources of the archives to write or re-write our history, the *chasse aux documents* and their interpretation; on the other that of absorbing, criticizing, applying, and even contributing towards more general changes in concepts of history. There is no lack of activity in the former of these aims. This paper is concerned with the latter, which, in the fury of the chase, is perhaps apt to be a little overlooked.

By cultural history I do not mean the history of literature, art, or religion, but the general history, "any and every manifestation of humanity", of which such subjects, together with political, economic, and institutional history, form essential and integral parts. Voltaire, it is generally agreed, was the founder of what the French call "history of civilization"; our own translation of the German phrase is not wholly satisfactory. Both in the *Age of Louis XIV* and in the *Essay on Manners*, Voltaire was concerned to depict the "spirit and ways of mankind". In the *Essay*, which deserves a better title, Voltaire wrote the first modern world history, and showed a marked freedom from national prejudices. The Enlightenment, of which Voltaire's efforts in history formed a part, was almost too successful, however, for it precipitated the French Revolution, with its all-absorbing intensity. The succeeding Romantic Movement, while it brought a deepening and enriching of historical interest and imagination, poured this into the channels of the Nationalist Movement of the nineteenth century. The dominant writing of that century was both political and national. Ranke, its master, wrote the histories of many nations, and shared in the dominant interest of his country, though Treitschke's work represented more completely the triumph of the nation-state in Germany. In England the trend fitted in with the political and constitutional evolution as depicted (say) by Macaulay. Yet it was natural enough that as the century wore to its close there should arise in Germany a controversy between the political historians and those who now, following Burckhardt or Freytag, called themselves "cultural" historians. The cultural historians differed (and still do) about the definition of their subject. Some of them tried to confine it within the national framework of the century. Thus Steinhausen, following his master Freytag, wrote the history of "German" culture. So too Lamprecht, though his interpretation of history as a socio-psychological science was a general one, applied it to a single country, his own. And, of course, to-day the historians of Nazi Germany have followed this course, linking it up with the race theory which, like the idea of cultural history, also goes back to a Frenchman, Gobineau. But other German historians rejected so confining a view, and saw cultural history as the all-embracing survey of every side of human activity. For modern times, such views may be illustrated from Friedell's definition of history:

It will be seen, therefore, that historical science, rightly interpreted, embraces the whole of human culture and its development. It is a consistent probing for the divine in the world's course, and is, therefore, theology; it is research into the basic forces of the human soul and is, therefore, psychology; it is the most illuminating presentation of the forms of state and society, and, therefore, is politics; the most varied collection of all art-creations, and is, therefore, aesthetics; it is a sort of Philosopher's Stone, a Pantheon of all the sciences. At the same time it is the only form in which we of to-day have the means to philosophize, an inexhaustibly rich laboratory in which we can undertake the easiest and most profitable experiments on the nature of man.

The emergence of this view, is, of course, bound up with, and dependent upon, other developments of the past half-century and more. In the first place we have become increasingly "world conscious" as never before: we know more of what is happening all over the world, and are more directly conscious of, and concerned with, such happenings. The evolution of the ideas of H. G. Wells in this regard, as revealed in his *Autobiography*, seems to me characteristic. It is, of course, easy to point to Fascism and Nazism, or even to Russia, where Communism seems every day to take on a more national colour. But whether or not we regard these (and many other) evidences of extreme nationalism as manifestations of a threatened creed fighting for its life against newer conceptions of society, nevertheless they do not invalidate the assertion that we all, historians or not, must think to-day in wider terms than that of the national group. This growing world-consciousness has another aspect also important for history. We of the West have been inclined, encouraged by the triumphs of western arms and western technology, to regard our own civilization as the latest, fullest, and most supreme fulfilment of history. To-day that belief is shaken, just as western domination of the world is being shaken. We are, of necessity, more conscious of other peoples and of other cultures than our own. Whether we like the Marxian interpretation of history or not, we cannot deny that Marx's views were supranational in their appeal to proletarians of the world, or that they have had considerable influence. And Marx himself, of course, was but an example of the influence which changes in industry in most of western Europe and America (a cultural but not a national area) had on thinking men.

Marx was an exact contemporary of Darwin (they died within a year of each other), and Darwinism, and the general scientific development of which it formed part, have been of the greatest importance for historical ideas and methods. The doctrine of evolution encouraged a genetic, evolutionary view of history; it accustomed us to the idea of a changing world, and it provided an acceptable doctrine of progress in human affairs. By its reading of the past, human history, so far from being confined within the narrow limits of nations, now became merely a chapter or two in the story of the general development of living creatures. The scientist also taught (or helped to teach) the historian to apply "scientific method" to his evidence, and to seek after scientific impartiality; he even encouraged him to believe that history might, after all, be "a science, no more and no less". Scientists have also, in recent times, paid much attention to the history of the respective branches of science, and by so doing they have brought this branch of history into closer touch with other branches more familiar to the historians. I am not competent to try and indicate the effects of the more recent developments of physics and astronomy on

historical thought and writing: how the discovery that the stars are composed of like matter to our own earth and the shrinking of our planetary system in an ever-expanding universe will affect our perspective of history; whether the parallelism of atom and universe may encourage us to see the universal element in the smallest units of history; whether a conception such as that of light bending back on itself has any relation to views such as those of Spengler of the repetition of cultural phases. But whatever the influences may be on history, we will hardly be wrong in claiming that they will be exerted in the direction of giving it a broader basis and outlook than much of our "political" history has had or can have.

The development of archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and psychology has materially affected our views of the past. Archaeology has come to play an increasing part in history, and the spade of the archaeologist brings up for the most part evidence of a cultural rather than a political nature. This is how an archaeologist defines his task.

The primary purpose should be the application of a technique that will enable us to unripple, by the aid of all scientific means and at whatever pains, the meaning of the human materials embedded in the strata. Often the humblest of these materials—ashes, bones, potsherds, carbonized seeds, etc.—are the most revealing. Even a museum specimen is valuable only in proportion to our knowledge of its human background. Every fact turned up by the spade feeds that knowledge, and any fact overlooked by an excavator, or missed through haste and incomplete study, may be an irreparable loss.¹

Anthropology goes the same way. The researches of the anthropologist into primitive society have opened up new fields of inquiry for the historian, revealed gaps in historical knowledge, *e.g.*, in respect to the earlier history of Central America, and shown what can be done (and perhaps what cannot be done) by the comparative method. He, too, is interested in cultural history. "In general", says Wissler, "we may formulate our interpretation of the historical conception of anthropology by re-naming it the cultural point of view."² "We anthropologists say", to quote Marett (*Anthropology*), "Let any and every portion of human history be studied in the light of the whole history of mankind, and against the background of living things in general." I do not agree that the historian can (or should) turn himself into an anthropologist, but he cannot but be influenced by the science and its point of view.

Geography, at long last to find representation in the teaching of a Canadian university, builds up its survey of human history on soil and environment, and from them geographers like Huntingdon draw the widest conclusions about cultural and social developments. Here again, while we need not necessarily accept all their conclusions³ we must at least be cognizant of them.

Psychology, from William James to Freud and Watson, has likewise turned to the fertile field of history. To the psychologist (to quote Barnes) "the determining factor in historical development is the collective psychology of an era and of a given cultural group. Its adherents rightfully claim that it is not only the most scientific but also the most all-

¹W. F. Bade, *A Manual of Excavation in the Near East* (University of California Press, 1934).

²H. E. Barnes, *Psychology and History* (New York, 1925), p. 115.

³*Vide* Toynbee in his recent *Study of History*, vol. I, for a partial confutation.

inclusive of the various types of historical interpretation." Lamprecht declared that, "history in itself is nothing but applied psychology", and made an attempt to write German history in these terms. But even if we argue that, in fact, psychology has made its plainest contribution to history through individual rather than through social psychology, by helping to produce the so-called "new biography", and question the completeness of the claims of the psychologist, it is probably true that historians have been more influenced by the development of psychology than they realize or would admit. And this science, too, lays emphasis on factors in history which are in general of a cultural character.

Finally sociology, likewise thinking in these wider terms, attempts to pull all these sciences together and (in the words of one of its historians, Müller-Lyer) to "locate man in his proper place in the great plan of Nature, and to understand his history as part of the great plan of natural events, and thus to acquire a deeper understanding of all human beings". The sociologist is concerned with civilization, past, present, and future, again involving a view and use of history different from the one usually employed by historians.

Thus from a number of directions history has been bombarded (much as the atomic nucleus has been bombarded in recent times by the efforts of the physicists) by a number of new forces, all of them laying emphasis on elements in history which had formerly been not, of course, disregarded, but given less prominence. How have the writers of history responded to this bombardment? Perhaps more than we have realized. It is over twenty years since J. H. Robinson of Columbia University collected some essays into a volume with the arresting title of *The New History*. By this, Robinson meant the history of intellectual development, including, above all, the comparatively recent growth of scientific thought. Robinson, here and elsewhere, did little more than indicate the direction in which he would work out his views, but his influence has been effective through his teaching and training of American historians. Yet Robinson, although acclaimed by scientists and psychologists, hardly worked out a new synthesis of history; he rather drew attention to a side of history which called for greater attention. F. S. Marvin with his Unity Series of histories, and H. G. Wells with his World History, probably did more to popularize, if not to create, such newer and wider conceptions of history. H. G. Wells, no historian and concerned rather with the spread of certain political and social views, accomplished a great and needed work by attempting to apply the new scientific knowledge to history, and by bringing out the unity of world history.

Shortly before the practised journalism of Wells set itself to race through the ages of world history, a German philosopher, Spengler, had published the results of his reflection on the rise and fall of cultures in historical times, *The Decline of the West*. Like Wells, Spengler had a very definite thesis, though it was a different thesis, and had less obviously practical applications. Historians generally, I suppose, do not accept the Spenglerian interpretation of history, with its predetermination of the future by identifying earlier cultural history with that of our own western culture (civilization); nor would all historians agree with him in his identification of what he terms the "expression forms" of various cultures, or the stages in the history of a culture. We may hesitate to follow him

when he talks (vol. I, p. 314) of a Baroque or Jesuit style in psychology, mathematics, or pure physics, or to agree that physics is "in reality an artifact of the Baroque", and approaching the end of its possible development (vol. I, pp. 412, 417); or that Pergamon is of necessity the counterpart of Bayreuth (vol. I, p. 291); that the colours green and brown have the religious significance Spengler attaches to them (vol. I, p. 252). But we cannot deny that his attempt (as he puts it, vol. I, p. 159) "To bring up, out of the web of world-happening, a millenium of organic culture history as an entity and person, and to group the conditions of its inmost spirituality", has much that is grand and imposing about it, and that there is some truth in his argument (vol. I, p. 73) that historians have been somewhat neglectful of the "historically relative character of their data". To Spengler "culture is the prime phenomenon of all past and future world-history" (vol. I, p. 105). Cultures are organisms, and world history is their collective biography. States and nations, ancient, medieval, and modern history, are irrational and outworn divisions of history.

Friedell shows, and acknowledges, the influence of Spengler, as of earlier cultural historians from Voltaire to Breysig. His *Cultural History of the Modern Age* is an astonishing performance. I know no other book which covers, or tries to cover, the same ground in the same all-inclusive fashion, although Preserved Smith traverses part of the same ground in a more limited and less controversial way. He had, of course, great difficulties in mastering his material, not least in bringing his work down to the present day. One feels that the title of his last chapter, "Gone to the Devil", may represent despair with his materials as well as with the age. The interesting thing about Friedell's book is that he tries to see modern western history as a cultural whole, including its political events. The broad divisions of his period are largely those of political history; his halting places are such familiar dates as 1648, 1756, 1870. But within these broad periods his treatment is quite other than that of the familiar type: thus while he begins his second volume with the Thirty Years' War, he describes it in new and strange terms: it is to him a manifestation of "the peculiar felted, wooden, woody, grasping, *weed-like* quality of all the cultural formation of this period, particularly in Germany" (vol. II, p. 4). It is the pre-Baroque period, in which the new world picture of the Baroque, "the rough draft of Baroque man", first appears. Friedell proceeds to work out his interpretation in political theory and history, in manners and customs, in literature and science, finding the first expression in the great age of Holland, whence he broadens out by way of Charles I and Cromwell to Hobbes and Spinoza, to build up his definition of early Baroque, as seen in the Spain of El Greco, and so back to France where Descartes created and exemplified the age of Louis XIV (vol. II, p. 69). Of course in a survey of this kind political and economic development, though they are fitted into the general scheme with amazing skill, find rather inadequate treatment. The treatment is at times jerky and distracting. Friedell admits (vol. I, p. 36) that he has had to "lump together and tear apart his materials", and we feel sometimes confused with the result. But despite this, and acknowledging that we may disagree with many of his judgments, Friedell's book is a significant and stimulating attempt at a new synthesis of modern western history.

A. J. Toynbee offers a clear example of the changing conceptions of

history, an example the more acceptable since Toynbee is neither philosopher nor social reformer, but historian *pur sang*, and an exceptionally well-qualified one. He begins his recent and as yet unfinished *Study of History* by showing how, as a result of the effects of Industrialism and Nationalism on the writing of history, the historian of the nineteenth century found his material and his subject in the nation state. But, "In the new age the dominant note in the corporate consciousness of communities is a sense of being parts of some larger universe, whereas, in the age now over, the dominant note in their consciousness was an aspiration to be universes in themselves." Hence

Just as, at the close of the age which we have left behind, the historians' work was brought into conformity with the Industrial System, and their vision was caught and bounded by the idea of nationality, so, in the new age upon which we have entered, they will probably find their intelligible field of study in some landscape where the horizon is not restricted to the bounds of a single nationality, and will adapt their present method of work to mental operation on a larger scale.

Pursuing this search for an "intelligible field of study" by reference to the history of Britain, Toynbee concludes (p. 21): "British national history is not, never has been, and almost certainly never will be an intelligible field of vision in isolation; and if that is true of Great Britain, it must surely be true 'a fortiori' of any other national state. Therefore, if we are to pursue our quest, it is clear that we must take some larger entity than the nation as our field." We must take, he concludes after further examination, a *society*, as our Western Society, or the Hellenic Society, wherein all the parts are subject to the same general influences, though they may react in different ways. But "in order to understand the parts, we must first focus our attention upon the whole". And this whole, or society, is defined not in terms of politics or economics, but in terms of the whole civilization for which it stands and which it develops; its cultural history, in short. It is upon these terms that Toynbee sets out on his study of world history, with twenty-one civilizations (one of them western civilization) to consider: to inquire what civilizations are, how they rise, fall, and disintegrate, what their relations with each other may be—a comparative cultural history of the world on a vast scale.

Even when we come down to the current histories of particular centuries and periods we are conscious of a change of view. A. Wingfield-Stratford writes a *History of British Civilization* in order to incorporate cultural elements he finds lacking in earlier histories; the Beards describe *The Rise of American Civilization*. Actually there is neither a British nor an American civilization, and the Beards, so far as I can see, make no attempt to define what they mean by their title. Ten years ago a representative of the younger Oxford historians, Ogg, wrote a volume on *Europe in the Seventeenth Century* in which he remarked (p. 410) that "the real interest of Dutch history in the seventeenth century lies in the conflict between the separation of the seven provinces and the centralizing ambitions of the House of Orange". This of the age of Descartes, Spinoza, Leuwenhoek, Rembrandt, Grotius, and Huyghens. Actually Ogg is not, elsewhere in the volume, so unfair to either the Dutch or himself. But to-day, in a volume on Restoration England, Ogg takes a broader view of his task, and we find him including a chapter on cultural achievement, and pronouncing that on account of its progress in science "the period of the

Restoration was one of the most important in the history of human thought" (vol. II, p. 221). His contemporary, G. N. Clark, published some years ago what is probably the best brief English tribute to the newer trend, in his little volume called *The Seventeenth Century*, which he calls a summary account of western civilization in that era. It does not pretend to be either all-inclusive or exhaustive, but provides a most useful introduction to a limited period, with succinct accounts of development in economic, constitutional, political, intellectual, and religious spheres. His recent volume on the later Stuarts shows a like interest, and is itself the first volume in a new history of Britain which will, one hopes, broaden the scope of English historical writing. In a volume of 400 pages he gives nearly 100 pages to Intellectual and Economic Tendencies, Literature and Thought, the Arts and Social Life (three chapters out of fourteen in all). In the corresponding (or nearly corresponding) volume in an earlier well-known twelve-volume history of England (Longmans) Lodge gives such matters little more than one chapter out of twenty (25 pp. out of 478).

Thus there is, I think, evidence enough that in this twentieth century views of history are changing, as indeed they do continuously, since "every age has its legend of the past". It is worth while, in conclusion, to ask how such newer views may or should affect our teaching of history. To the historian of civilization it may seem that our divisions of history, and our attention to the minutiae of political, institutional, or economic history, shows a lack of proportion. Yet no one would seriously suggest that we should abandon our teaching of national history, Canadian or other, our ways of approach, and existing, well-worn divisions. The scientist is a scientist, but he is primarily a teacher and student of one branch of his subject. We are, most of us, teachers of Modern History, which in itself constitutes a considerable limitation of subject. And we could not hope to teach the history of philosophy, art, or science, with anything like the knowledge or certainty possessed by the professors of those subjects. We can, and to a certain extent do, see that our students acquire some knowledge of these subjects. The difficulty is that the student may not try, or be able, to fit the pieces of his jig-saw puzzle together, and so may not get any complete picture of historical development. That is difficult enough in any case since history is inexhaustibly varied, and the parts do not always fit. It may be that, as Friedell asserts, corpulence was a sign of the Baroque. It may also be that Leibnitz was, as he put it, "baroque through and through". But Leibnitz may not have been corpulent.

Yet if there is any validity in the synthesis provided by cultural history, we have some responsibility for seeing that the student who specializes even in Modern History should acquire some conception of this synthesis ere he leaves our hands. The ideal thing, I suppose, would be for us to conclude our survey with some general course which would bring all the various aspects of modern western history (on which we spend practically all our time) together, and relate them both to the wider world scene, and also to the general evolution of mankind. That would not be easy to do, but it would be worth trying. Further, we should perhaps be more ready to see our national histories as parts of the wider histories to which they belong, to search for, and bring out in them, the general and universal elements, remembering Croce's dictum that to negate universal history is not to negate the universal in history. Only by such recognition can history become in Acton's phrase, "an illumination of the soul".