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## WHAT IS HISTORIOGRAPHY?

Forty years ago I was fascinated by the *study* of history—the mechanics of research, of that sort of research at all events (there are other kinds) which has been defined as “taking little bits out of a great many books which no one has ever read, and putting them together in one book which no one ever will read”. Later I became less interested in the study of history than in history itself—that is to say, in the suggestive meanings which could be attributed to certain periods or great events, such as that “the spirit of Rome is an acid which, applied to the sentiment of nationality, dissolves it”, or that “the Renaissance was the double discovery of man and the world”. Now that I am old the most intriguing aspect of history turns out to be neither the study of history nor history itself, in the above noted senses, but rather the study of the history of historical study. The name given to this aspect of history is the unlovely one, as Mr. Barnes says, of Historiography.<sup>1</sup>

What precisely is historiography? It may be, and until recently for the most part has been, little more than the notation of historical works since the time of the Greeks, with some indication of the purposes and points of view of the authors, the sources used by them, and the accuracy and readability of the works themselves. The chief object of such enterprises in historiography is to assess, in terms of modern standards, the value of historical works for us. At this level historiography gives us manuals of information about histories and historians, provides us, so to speak, with a neat balance sheet of the “contributions” which each historian has made to the sum total of verified historical knowledge now on hand. Such manuals have a high practical value. To the candidate for the Ph. D. they are indeed indispensable, since they provide him at second hand with the most up-to-date information. From them he learns what were the defects and limitations of his predecessors, even the most illustrious, without the trouble of reading their works—as, for example, that Macaulay, although a brilliant writer, was blinded by Whig prejudice, or that Tacitus’s estimate of Tiberius has been superseded by later researches,

<sup>1</sup> *A History of Historical Writing*. By Harry Elmer Barnes. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1937. Pp. x, 434. \$3.50.)

or that Thucydides's trenchant account of the Peloponnesian War suffers from the author's unfamiliarity with the doctrine of the economic interpretation of history. Knowing the limitations of our most famous predecessors gives us all confidence in the value of our own researches: we may not be brilliant, but we can be sound. We have the great advantage of living in more enlightened times: our monographs may never rank with *The Decline and Fall* as literary classics, but they will be based upon sources of information not available to Gibbon, and made impeccable by a scientific method not yet discovered in his day.

Mr. Harry Elmer Barnes's *History of Historical Writing* is far more than this—more than an annotated catalogue of historical works. Yet in some sense it is this too, a little too much so, more so perhaps than his purpose called for or than he intended. There are parts of the book which left me with little but an envious admiration for the author's erudition, his easy familiarity with the contents of innumerable books of which I had never heard. My first impression, indeed, upon finishing the book was that I could happily find within its covers the name of every historian since the time of Menetho. Of course no real scholar would get any such impression. Not being a learned person, I am easily astounded by anyone who knows the titles of a thousand and one books. But still, I have looked at bibliographies—for example, the *Bibliographie de l'histoire de Paris pendant la Révolution* by Tourneux, in five large volumes; and recalling this impressive work I realize that even the bare titles of all the books on the French Revolution alone could not be contained in Mr. Barnes's small volume. What a list of all the historical writings since the time of Menetho would run to I know not, nor wish to know—a dreadful thought! And so, not to slander Mr. Barnes, I hasten to say that there must be innumerable writers whom he does not mention, and even, I like to think, many whom he has never heard of. He has after all selected only a few, relatively speaking; and he has selected them, if at times with insufficient restraint, for a definite purpose.

Mr. Barnes states his purpose as follows:—"to characterize the intellectual background of each major period of human advance in western civilization, show how the historical literature of each period has been related to its parent culture, point out the dominant traits of the historical writing in each era, indicate the advance, if any, in historical science, and then make clear the individual contributions of the major historical writers of the age". At this level historiography should be something more than an estimate of the contributions of

historians to present knowledge. It should be in some sense a phase of intellectual history, that phase of it which records what men have at different times known and believed about the past, the use they have made, in the service of their interests and aspirations, of their knowledge and beliefs, and the underlying presuppositions which have made their knowledge seem to them relevant and their beliefs seem to them true. The historiographer who wishes to succeed at this level should acquire much precise knowledge, but above all he should cultivate a capacity for imaginative understanding. If he wishes to fail, he should cultivate a capacity for being irritated by the ignorance and foolishness of his predecessors.

How well has Mr. Barnes succeeded in accomplishing his purpose? On the whole, well enough. Mr. Barnes has, to be sure, a certain capacity for being irritated. It is a defect of his quality. He is that rare phenomenon, a learned crusader. He is passionately interested in the application of scientific knowledge to the task of creating the good society. He is profoundly convinced that history, rightly understood, throws much needed light on the causes of the plight in which we find ourselves at the present moment; convinced, therefore, that historians, if only they would fully emancipate themselves from antiquarianism and bring their knowledge to bear upon present social problems, could contribute more than they do to the solution of those problems. I suspect that what really irritates Mr. Barnes is after all not the historians but rather the fact that so few people make any effort to appropriate the knowledge available, so many people prefer the *Saturday Evening Post* to the most up-to-date popular works on the social sciences; and this irritation is in part conveniently relieved from time to time by disparaging and opprobrious remarks about "the orthodox historian"—a species supposed to have flourished unashamed before the time of James Harvey Robinson and not yet wholly extinct.

Since the orthodox historian plays a minor role in the present book, a word needs to be said about him. I am not sure that I have ever met the fellow in the flesh. By definition he appears to be a timid, refined professor, a little apprehensive about holding his job, who is interested in political, military, and diplomatic events, is unaware of the importance of economic, social, and cultural influences, and greatly exaggerates the role of individuals as causal factors in the historic process. What puzzles me a little is that on this showing Mr. Barnes himself, although rarely accounted timid and never known to be restrained by the fear of losing his job, can be otherwise orthodox when

the occasion calls for it. In his book, *The Genesis of the World War*, I seem to remember, he dealt exclusively with political and diplomatic events and ended by naming four individuals whose nefarious activities were largely responsible for bringing on the war. What puzzles me still more is the fact that, although from Mr. Barnes's general discussion of the "new history" I should expect virtually all historians prior to the twentieth century to be orthodox, I find in his pages singularly few historians who adhere strictly to the orthodox line. On the contrary, in the chapters on "Social and Cultural History" and "Kulturgeschichte", I find evidence leading me to suppose that the new history is at least as old as Voltaire, and that a great many of the most distinguished historians of the last two centuries have by no means confined their interests to political history or notably exaggerated the role of individuals as causal factors.

It was Freeman who said that "history is past politics", and in his day interest in political and constitutional history was, it is true, very strong. But Mr. Barnes might have found an explanation, very satisfactory to the new historians I should have thought, of that fact. It was a time when the major problems of society were political and constitutional, a time when revolutions were primarily concerned with the form of government and the construction of the right kind of constitution for guaranteeing the political privileges and imprescriptible natural rights of individuals; and what, then, were these political historians doing if they were not bringing history "to bear on the present", if they were not "exploiting the past in the interest of advance", which, according to James Harvey Robinson, is what the new historian does and all historians should do? Can it be that even Freeman was, in his own day, a newer historian? But Freeman was still alive when the economic interpretation began to make headway, and today I would find it difficult to name a historian of ability who could, according to Mr. Barnes's definition, be rightly classed with the strictly orthodox. I am grateful to Mr. Barnes for not classing me with the orthodox, partly because I dislike the term on principle, whatever it means, chiefly because I do not like to be outrageously conspicuous. But still I do not mind being thought a little eccentric, and so I will risk the following observation: when the devotion of my colleagues to social history becomes such that a History of American Life can be written with only a perfunctory mention of politics, it is well to remember that politics has after all had something to do, as much at least as sport, with making American life what it is.

But I am making too much of Mr. Barnes's irritations and disgusts. They obtrude only late in the book and are at most only a minor defect. Taking the book as a whole, Mr. Barnes has done well what he set out to do. He has "characterized the intellectual background of each major period", if with no special insight or freshness, at least well enough to enable the reader to understand "the dominant traits of historical writing" in each period—to understand, for example, why historical writing in the Middle Ages necessarily differed from historical writing in classical times, why the Humanists fashioned their histories on Roman models, why the religious disputes of the Reformation turned theologians to the study of church history, and so following. Particularly good in this connection is his notation of the relation between the discovery of new countries and the growing interest in the history of social institutions and his indication of the conditions in the early nineteenth century which stimulated an interest in the philosophy of history.

Nevertheless, the characterization of the "intellectual background" and the explanation of the "dominant traits of historical writing" in terms of that background, although for the most part adequate to the author's purpose, is brief and it must be said somewhat perfunctory; it does not make the substance of the book. The greater part of the book is devoted to what interests Mr. Barnes far more—that is to say, to the "contributions of the major historical writers" and to "the advance, if any, in historical science". To estimate the value of histories and historians from the point of view of modern standards and technique is after all the principal object of the book, and this is after all what Mr. Barnes does best. Perhaps too many historical writers are mentioned, so that at times the book degenerates into a catalogue of names. "W. R. Shepherd, H. E. Bolton, W. S. Robertson, J. F. Rippey, Bernard Moses, C. W. Hackett . . . H. I. Priestley, E. C. Barker and others"—there is, particularly in the later chapters, far too much of this sort of thing. Mr. Barnes knows too much, and when the names begin to swarm in memory he allows his judgment to retire behind the cloud. He is better in those earlier, happier times when historians, not being so numerous, do not venture to gang up on him. He then finds space to tell us who they were and what they wrote with sufficient detail to make them and their writings intelligible to us. Learned scholars, not being so easily put down by Mr. Barnes's erudition as I was, will find errors here and there and some mistaken or questionable judgments. But so far as I know, Mr. Barnes's knowledge is adequate,

and his estimates, if mostly conventional, are on the whole, perhaps for that reason, essentially sound. No doubt it is beside the point to deplore the fact that "Thucydides neglected the magnificent opportunity to portray the glories of Athenian civilization". No doubt less than justice is done to Flacius Illyricus and his collaborators by stressing their "gullibility" and not sufficiently emphasizing the fact that in substituting tradition for formal logic as a test of religious doctrine and practice they were giving an immense impetus to the development of historical studies. But these are small points. On the whole Mr. Barnes has made an important addition to the literature of historiography. He has written, not an "epoch-making" book, not a profoundly original book (few books can be rightly so described), but a sound and useful book—for those not too familiar with the history of historical writing, the most informative and stimulating book, I should think, now available in English.

An author should be conceded his intention and judged by the success he attains in realizing it. For this reason I do not say of Mr. Barnes, as he says of Thucydides, that he has missed a magnificent opportunity. Nevertheless, the opportunity, whether magnificent or not, is there for those who wish to embrace it. It would be worth while, I should think, to regard historiography more simply, more resolutely, as a phase of intellectual history; to forget entirely about the contributions of historians to present knowledge and to concentrate wholly upon their role in the cultural pattern of their own time. From this point of view the historiographer would be primarily concerned with what Professor Shotwell happily calls mankind's gradual "discovery of Time" or, more broadly, with the gradual expansion of the time and space frame of reference which in some fashion conditions the range and quality of human thought.

When we think of anything, we think of it in relation to other things located in space and occurring in time, that is to say, in a time and space world, a time and space frame of reference. The development of intelligence, in the individual and the race, is in some sense a matter of pushing back the limits of the time and space world and filling it with things that really exist and events that actually happened. The time and space world of the new-born child, for example, is confined to the room in which he lies and to the present moment: everything that he observes is seen as a close-up, unrelated to anything else. The earliest men were like new-born children, knowing nothing of any country beyond the region in which they lived, nothing, or very

little and that little mostly wrong, about any past events in which they had not taken part. They too saw things as close-ups, in short perspective, unrelated to any verifiable objects in distant places or past times. The ancient Sumerians were in many ways a highly civilized people, but their social thinking was hampered by the fact that they lived in a very narrow time and space world: in their space world the human race could be destroyed by a flood sweeping the valley of the Two Rivers; in their time world the outstanding event was the Great Flood, before which stretched an unknown period, empty of content save for the eight kings believed to have reigned during 241,000 years. From the time of the Sumerians to our own day the human race has slowly and painfully extended the time and space world in which it could live, the time and space frame of reference in which it could think. The spaciousness and content of the time and space frame of reference, far more than sheer brain power, have determined the range and direction of intelligence and the underlying presuppositions that so largely shape the ideas of men about their relations to the universe and to each other.

Regarded strictly as a phase of intellectual history and not as a balance sheet of verifiable historical knowledge, historiography would have as its main theme the gradual expansion of this time and space world (particularly the time world perhaps, although the two are inseparably connected), the items, whether true or false, which acquired knowledge and accepted beliefs enabled men (and not historians only) to find within it, and the influence of this pattern of true or imagined events upon the development of human thought and conduct. So regarded, historiography would become a history of history rather than a history of historians, a history of history subjectively understood (the "fable agreed upon", the "pack of tricks played on the dead") rather than a history of the gradual emergence of historical truth objectively considered. The historiographer would of course be interested in histories—they would be a main source of information; but he would not confine his researches to them—would not, indeed, be interested in histories as such but only as one of the literary forms in which current ideas about the past find expression. Nor would he be more interested in true than in false ideas about the past: his aim would be to know what ideas, true or false, were at any time accepted and what pressure they exerted upon those who entertained them. He would not then dismiss the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or Homer's *Iliad* as irrelevant for history because they are a collection of myths or be content to say of Livy that he is a good story teller but a bad historian. Not being



primarily concerned with what the Romans actually knew about the past but with what they had in mind when they thought about it, he would seize upon the *fact* that Livy wrote his history, the *fact* that the myths it relates were current and widely accepted as true. He would realize that while a myth may not be true, that it exists is true, and that people believe it, is true and may be of the highest importance. In short, the “facts” that would concern the historiographer, the “what actually happened” that he would look for and find relevant to his purpose, would be, not the truth, but the existence and pressure of the ideas about the past which men have entertained and acted upon. His object would be to reconstruct, and by imaginative insight and aesthetic understanding make live again, that pattern of events occurring in distant places and times past which, in successive periods, men have been able to form a picture of when contemplating themselves and their activities in relation to the world in which they live. Whether the events composing the pattern are true or false, objectively considered, need not concern him.

Taken in this sense, historiography should no doubt begin with “pre-historic times”—an absurd term, as Mr. Barnes says, if we are to regard history externally, as the record of what men have done, since it implies that by far the longest span of human history occurred before there was any history. But not so absurd after all if we are to think of history from the inside, as a possession of the mind, as the developing apprehension of the past and of distant places, since the earliest men could have had very little history in that sense. Yet even the earliest men (the Cro-Magnons, for example) must have been able to form some picture, however limited in design and blurred in detail, of what had occurred and was occurring in the world. What this picture was we can only guess, although some ingenious and even illuminating guesses could no doubt be brought to birth by the anthropologists. The historiographer could at all events begin with the oldest epic stories—the Babylonian *Creation Epic*, Homer’s *Iliad*, and the like. For the early Greeks the *Iliad*, as someone has said (Matthew Arnold perhaps?), was history, story, and scripture all in one. Such differentiating terms are of course misleading, since we may be fairly sure that the early Greeks made no such distinctions. The story as told—the siege of Troy, the doings of men and gods—was all real, history simply, the record of what actually happened. And so of all people whose civilization developed directly out of primitive conditions.

Not until written records had been long in use could men become effectively conscious of the fact that the event as recorded differs from

the event as remembered. Then only could they properly distinguish between story and history—between the account of events imaginatively invented and the account of events that actually happened; then only could histories be thought of as a “branch of literature”. But the differentiation of history and literature does not at once make the gods indispensable. Inscrutable in their purposes, implacable in their judgments, rulers of men and things, the gods are still necessary: necessary for literature because they are so intimately involved in the current affairs of men; necessary for history because the creation of the world has to be accounted for, and men, even the ancient heroes and godlike kings, are incapable of so great a task. History therefore long remains entangled with religion, the gods serving as causal agencies operating behind men and events. But as the time and space world is expanded, providing an ever greater variety of novel items for comparison and appraisal, philosophy intrudes with its abstractions; and the gods, withdrawing from the immediate affairs of men to the place where absolute being dwells, fade away into pale replicas of their former selves—into the Law of Nature, the Transcendent Idea, the dynamic principle of Dialectic, or whatever it may be. Philosophy in turn becomes Natural Philosophy, then Natural Science, then Science: and science, dispensing altogether with the assistance of the gods and their numerous philosophic progeny, presents for contemplation the bare record of how as a matter of fact the outer world behaves, of what as a matter of fact has occurred in past times, leaving man alone in an indifferent universe without attempting to justify its ways to his deeds and aspirations.

This theme, or something like it, has been played, with appropriate variations, more than once—by the Greeks, by the Romans, by the Europeans in modern times. What is the relation between the development of an industrial-commercial society, the decline of traditional religious and political convictions, and the growth of skepticism and scientific knowledge? How can these related phenomena be correlated with the time and space world in which men live, the time and space frame of reference in which they think? What place has history, regarded as the *sense of the past*, as the apprehension of events, true or false, that are thought to have occurred or to be occurring in distant places and times past, in this correlation both as cause and effect? Within the range of these questions are to be found, I venture to think, many fruitful fields for the historiographer to cultivate.

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