HISTORY AS A LIVING FORCE*

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WHAT would George Washington think if he were suddenly to come to life today and find that he was riding in a jeep? How would Benjamin Franklin feel if he were to find himself in a flying fortress, twenty thousand feet above the earth's surface? What would John Paul Jones think of one of our modern landing barges, carrying tanks, and other mechanized equipment all ready to drive ashore and engage the enemy? What would be the reaction of Andrew Jackson to a tank, of Robert E. Lee to a flame thrower, or even of Teddy Roosevelt to a modern submarine?

In civil life as well as in military we have machines which would astonish past generations. How would Julius Caesar feel if he should suddenly come to life in a New York subway train? What would Anne Hathaway think of a modern kitchen, with its innumerable conveniences? What would Thomas Jefferson do if he could hear a voice speaking from Moscow, London, or Australia? How would Abraham Lincoln like to ride in an automobile, shave with an electric razor, or see a moving picture? We possess machines to do everything from sinking battleships to washing dishes, from propelling a speeding express train to clipping the hair on our necks.

When the first machines were invented, they came only at infrequent intervals. The spinning jenny, the power loom, the steam engine, and the other early inventions were spaced years

*Address delivered at the annual dinner of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, Harrisburg, October 16, 1943.
apart. But these early machines begat a new and more numerous
generation of machines, and this generation in turn sired another
still more numerous generation until today the earth fairly crawls
with machines without number. Not merely do they constantly
become more numerous; the ratio of increase appears to rise by
geometric progression. Malthus's theory of population growth
has long been discredited, but had Malthus propounded his theory
for the machine rather than for the human being, he might have
been correct.

Every time a new machine is put into use, it causes some
modification in the way men live from day to day, in their social
adjustments and relationships. When a new machine began to
function only occasionally, society had a long period of time to
adjust itself to each in turn. As new inventions have crowded
upon us with greater and greater frequency, however, we have
had less and less time to make the necessary adjustments, and
we seem to live in a world of increasingly unstable physical sur-
roundings. The furnishings in our homes, the clothes we wear,
the vehicles in which we ride, the weapons with which we fight—
all seem subject to constant change, so that what we have today
is out of date tomorrow.

This lack of stability of our physical surroundings raises a
horde of difficult and complex problems for the world today.
Internally each country is under the necessity of making rapid
and drastic adjustments to the machine, of frequently reorganiz-
ing its social order to meet new conditions. Externally, in its
relations with other states, each country has likewise to make
constant adjustments in meeting the problems of the machine age.

In this period of flux there is grave danger that the machine
will run away with us, will get completely out of control. As
has often been said, our knowledge of technical subjects has out-
run our understanding of social and economic matters so that
our social order has gotten out of balance. A congressman riding
on a streamlined train may subscribe to many of the economic
theories of the horse-and-buggy era; a big business executive
may be almost completely ignorant of many of the social changes
of the past century. Unless this gap between technical knowledge
and social ignorance is closed, there is grave danger that our
civilization will be unable to bear the strain. And in those
countries where government action rests upon public opinion,
as in our own, it is essential that knowledge of these problems be in the possession not only of the leaders but also of the masses of the people.

Within the past few decades there have developed various studies whose purpose is to bring enlightenment regarding social and economic matters, the so-called social sciences. They were predicated originally upon the idea that just as chemistry and mathematics and the other physical sciences could be founded upon certain well known scientific facts and reactions, so the social sciences, economics, sociology, history, and the others could likewise be based upon the laws that govern society, provided only that those laws could be discovered and applied. Thus research in these fields was conducted in order to discover such laws, and, while the laws proved more elusive than had been expected and human relationships appeared to involve limitless complexities, nevertheless a great mass of valuable data was brought to light, ready for the use of society—if society would indeed make use of it.

Among the various groups of social scientists the historians played a leading part. Trained in German methods of careful, painstaking research, they delved into almost every conceivable subject—political, legal, religious, cultural, military, social, and economic—from the earliest periods for which information was available down to the present. They brought to light a mass of new data carefully checked and rechecked, so that far more exact knowledge about the past was at hand than had ever been available before.

Although the questions society must answer today are new in some ways, for every one of them there are precedents or semiprecedents, and there is not a single one concerning which information as to how similar questions were answered in the past would not be useful at the present time. Today, for example, our nation faces the imminent threat of inflation. It would seem obvious that one of the worst possible developments would be an uncontrolled rise in prices, and yet there are various pressure groups and considerable sections of public opinion which, often without knowing it, are helping to bring about that very result. Wanting immediate profits for themselves, they fail to see that one price increase will probably lead to others and that the consequent inflation will seriously harm everybody. If the public were well
informed as to what has happened in this field in past wars, knew that in every one of our major conflicts prices have climbed to dizzy heights, it would be much easier for the Office of Price Administration to do its job, and there would be less bickering about the matter in Congress. Again, if we all had clearly in mind the history of the tariff in this country and abroad, if we understood what results had followed the raising or lowering of rates on various commodities, it would be much easier for our government to formulate intelligent tariff policies. If the public had an enlightened understanding of American foreign policy since 1775, our national mind would hardly be in such a muddle regarding postwar relationships.

If it is essential that the masses of the people be educated regarding the background of current problems and issues, is it not the responsibility of the historian to see that they are so educated? The historian is the specialist in the field; he is the only one who has both the information and the broad perspective which are needed. If he does not instruct the populace in his own subject, who else is competent to do so?

Can it be said, however, that at the present time the historian is failing to perform this duty? Having at hand information which is badly needed in the solution of present-day problems, is he neglecting to do his part in making this information available to the general public? Is his light hidden under a bushel, so that only a feeble glimmer shows through a crack?

At present professional historians use principally two methods in making their subject known to the public: teaching and writing. History is taught in the grammar schools, the high schools, and the colleges and universities. And as for writing, every year professional historians turn out thousands of scholarly volumes, pamphlets, and magazine articles. These two methods are not bad as far as they go. But do they go far enough? Are the professional historians reaching the masses of the people? Are mere teaching and writing scholarly treatises enough? Are there other avenues of approach which ought to be considered?

I wonder if there is not a great deal which the trained historian can do, in addition to what he is now doing, to sell history to the public, to make history the living force that it ought to be in the lives of the populace. I believe that use should be made of some of the channels for reaching the public which have been developed
only recently and also that more effective use can be made of the older channels.

No device for reaching large masses of people is more effective than the radio. From one station we can command an immediate area, from a limited network of stations we can present our case to an entire region, from a national network we can make contact with the whole nation, and by short wave we can reach the world at large. Frequent broadcasts of sound historical material, closely related to present-day problems, can have a tremendous influence upon popular sentiment, can go far to educate the public about such matters. What can be accomplished in this field is effectively described in Broadcasting History: The Story of the Story Behind the Headlines, the current issue of the Bulletin of the American Association for State and Local History. This bulletin, by Mrs. Conyers Read, gives the history of the weekly broadcast of the radio committee of the American Historical Association. Believing that historical knowledge in relation to current issues should be made generally available, the committee arranged first with the Columbia Broadcasting System and later with the National Broadcasting Company to put on a weekly program. It was felt best for historians not to broadcast directly but instead to have a broadcaster who would obtain the needed information from specialists in various fields and who would himself actually prepare and give the broadcasts. After certain preliminary work and one abortive series of broadcasts the series began on March 8, 1938, and has been continued ever since. What the subject each week will be no one knows until a few days ahead, since it is necessary to wait as late as possible in order to fit in with the spot news. Once the subject is determined, there has to be fast work in getting in touch with historical specialists in the field, assembling the needed information, writing the script, and making final preparations. The result is The Story Behind the Headlines which we hear every Sunday night, with Cesar Saerchinger as broadcaster, a commentary on some phase of current events with the historical background brought in. The series has aroused nation-wide interest and has helped to bring about a better general understanding of current events and issues.

The radio committee of the American Historical Association has shown the way. What is now needed is for the rest of us to follow that example so that broadcasts of the kind are multiplied
many fold. There is room for several additional programs over national hook-ups, and there is a great deal of room in the local field also. Suppose, to be specific, that when the next city election is held in Harrisburg, a series of radio programs were to give the history of your city elections and to tell in detail just what had been accomplished and what had failed of accomplishment by the candidates and parties seeking election. When a change is proposed in the tax rate, suppose that a radio program were to give the history of public taxes in the city. Should a referendum be held on whether to ban John Barleycorn from your midst, the local history of this subject might be broadcasted. In case a crime wave should break out, data on the history of crime and of law enforcement might be made available. By means of such programs a local historical group could play an active and useful part in solving the current problems of the community.

In addition to broadcasts closely connected with current problems there might be others with less connection of the kind, arranged for the purpose of informing the public regarding the general historical background. Such a series might be given on both a national and a local scale. A series narrating the general history of a community would be particularly instructive and interesting; and if presented at a time when classes of school children could tune in, the broadcasts could form a part of the educational program of the community.

The newspapers offer a fertile field. Well-authenticated historical columns, feature articles, and other contributions, written by trained historians or based on information supplied by such historians, could have a marked influence on popular thought and sentiment. Should a depression again descend upon the land, articles on how the problems of past depressions were met would be useful. In time of war information on how we lived through past conflicts could give a broader understanding of the problems involved and simplify their solution. Today, of course, because of the newsprint shortage, the newspapers are eliminating current features rather than adding new ones, but even at that there is room for such contributions provided they are of high quality and sufficient pertinence. I know of one such column, launched only three months ago, which has had a reasonable measure of success. For Sunday release the material is mailed to ten papers the preceding Monday or Tuesday in order to allow plenty of
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time for setting up the type before the Saturday rush. So far the column has dealt with the background of the Italian campaign, of Russian foreign policy, of the Balkan tangle, of Labor Day, of American foreign policy, and of other topics of current interest. If this can be accomplished at the present time in spite of the obstacles, it would seem that later, when the war is over and newsprint is no longer scarce, the possibilities would be much greater.

The magazines offer a similar opportunity. For every person who reads a doctoral dissertation thousands read The Saturday Evening Post, Colliers, and other periodicals. Why, therefore, can we not prepare or have prepared articles suitable for magazines of this kind? They might be written by historians themselves—provided we can find scholars capable of preparing them—or, like the radio program of the American Historical Association, they might be based upon information supplied by historical specialists but actually prepared by persons skilled in the technique of popularization. Prepared longer in advance than newspaper contributions, magazine articles would be in the nature of features giving the general background of some situation, rather than commentaries on spot news.

There is also the possibility of a popular historical magazine, and it is good news that the Society of American Historians, organized several years ago, has announced that it expects to begin publishing such a magazine in January, 1945. “The conviction” of the society, says a recent statement, “was that now 140 million English-speaking people of North America were ready to have a fuller interest in History. . . . The objective was to encourage the reading and writing of History, and, as a step toward this end, to set up a monthly magazine of History, scholarly in essentials, and of high literary quality, brightly written, and attractively illustrated. . . . These men [of the society] hoped to rescue historical writing from arid pedantry on the one hand, and from inaccurate popularization on the other; to bring the color, drama, and solid instruction of History home to millions to whom it had been unknown or who have ignored it; and to till new historical fields.” The motto of the society is Sic Historia dissipabit, which, freely translated, means “Thus will History drive away ignorance and misunderstanding.” This movement, I feel sure, will have
the good wishes and support of us all, for it can perform a great service for the American people.

Historical plays and pageants can be a potent influence. A well-written and expertly presented historical play can arouse a great deal of public enthusiasm. On a national scale such plays, presented in a large city, can exert far-reaching influence, but in the local field the possibilities are perhaps even more alluring. Every community has a history worthy of dramatization, and there could hardly be a better way of making that history known. Similar to the play is the pageant, which is especially suitable for celebrating an anniversary. In all parts of the country in time of peace hundreds of historical pageants are presented. Some are of high calibre, but most of them are of little value, mere stereotypes, having only a slight connection with local history and conditions. The highest type of pageant, properly planned and executed, and presenting a determined effort to feature local events and characters, offers fine possibilities.

Historical museums can do far more than they have yet done to make history known to the people. Already throughout the nation are hundreds of such institutions—some excellent, some indifferent, some poor. Too many of them, unfortunately, are static, displaying masses of ill-assorted items behind glass, like the remains of the late lamented in a windowed coffin. The best ones, however, by frequently changing displays, by arranging special exhibits in connection with current events, by introducing better lighting methods, by putting on historical playlets or celebrations at appropriate times, by preparing articles for the local papers, and by similar methods are pointing the way to what can be accomplished. There are still far too few historical museums in the country, and of those which exist only a limited number are doing really effective work.

Closely related to the museum field is the restoration, preservation, and marking of historic spots. During the past few decades a wave of interest in work of this kind has swept the country. Much has been accomplished, with the National Park Service and certain state and regional organizations leading the way. As a matter of fact, however, the surface has barely been scratched, for there are still tens of thousands of historic houses, water wheels, bridges, battlegrounds, and other historic sites which are crying out for proper attention. Such a site is something which
can have great influence on the public. It is not merely vague and intangible, like the decline of the Roman Empire; it is something which people can actually see and touch. The restoration of colonial Williamsburg is an object lesson of what can be accomplished in this field. Obviously, since we are not all Rockefellers, all of us cannot develop Williamsburgs, but every one of us can achieve more limited ends in this field.

Historic sites likewise need to be marked. A program along this line should be carefully planned so that it will be in the hands of trained historians and not under the control of chambers of commerce, ancestor worshipers, or other groups with special interests. Certain states, such as Virginia, have shown what can be achieved, but much more remains to be done.

Likewise, the open forum can accomplish a great deal. Discussion of current problems, with emphasis on the historical background, can arouse popular interest and inform the public regarding the various questions at issue. People like to talk and argue. If they are given a chance to do so under intelligent guidance and with necessary information, they can be educated and can educate themselves on a variety of topics.

Of great importance are the moving pictures. Their paid admissions weekly throughout the nation running into the tens of millions, they have a tremendous influence on national life and thought. As we all know, within the past few years there have been hundreds of pictures with historical settings, ranging from those which were reasonably accurate to those which were a mere travesty on history. There would seem to be possibilities for the trained historian to work in this field in order to try on the one hand to make pictures more accurate, and on the other hand to have historical pictures produced which would not be produced otherwise. Patently the moving-picture industry is highly centralized, and the techniques of production have been specialized and Hollywoodized to such an extent that the historian cannot simply walk in and tell the producers how pictures should be made. But by diplomatic approach and a concerted campaign by the proper organization probably something worth while could be accomplished.

It is suggested then that professional historians increase their use of the radio, newspapers, magazines, plays and pageants, museums, historic sites, the open forum, and moving pictures. In addition it is believed that the teaching and the writing of history
can be made more effective than they now are. In so far as
teaching is concerned, certain weaknesses may well be considered.
First, the majority of students take courses only at the lower levels
and therefore do not obtain the more detailed and advanced in-
formation which is needed to solve complex problems. If prac-
ticable, a much larger proportion of students should be required
to take courses in history at the higher levels. Second, not enough
connection is ordinarily shown between history and the problems
of the present. It may be all very well for the medievalist in his
researches to try to put himself back in the days of feudalism
and to forget completely all about the present, but in teaching his
subject he should consider what lessons the middle ages hold for
the man of today—and I venture to say that there are plenty.
Third, not enough attention is paid to local history. It is beneficial
to teach the history of the world at large, of Europe, or of the
United States. Such courses broaden the outlook of the student,
help him to see things in perspective. There is need, however, for
far more attention to local history, and no community ought to be
without such a course in its schools. Every child should be taught
the background of the locality in which he lives—the history of
the Presbyterian Church at Second and Oak Streets, the story of
the old mill just outside the town limits, the history of the local
banks, and many other subjects. Each child should be told about
the ideals of his local ancestors, lineal or spiritual, their religious
beliefs, their interests, their culture. Such teaching, if it is not
merely of an antiquarian nature but is ably conceived and carried
out, will bring about a better appreciation of what the community
stands for and will make for a more intelligent facing of current
local problems. Fourth, in the more advanced courses and espe-
cially in the graduate schools the purpose of teaching history
frequently seems to be not so much to give information which
will be useful in making adjustments to life today as simply to
teach others how to teach. The objectives of such courses might
well be reconsidered.

In regard to writing there is much that the scholarly historian
can do and ought to do. First, in the training of an historian much
more emphasis should be placed on fine, artistic writing. Depar-
tments of history might well make arrangements for their graduate
students to take courses in English or journalism, with the
deliberate purpose of developing an attractive style. And term
papers, theses, and other writings of graduate students might be graded on the basis of good writing much more strictly than at present. Second, students should not be required to include so much scholarly impedimenta in their writings. Much of the graduate-school technique needs to be discarded, both in the graduate school and afterward. Of course we do not want research to lose in carelessness or thoroughness, but there is no use being so obvious about it. A modern doctoral dissertation, with its innumerable footnotes and all the other evidences of so-called scholarship, is like a skyscraper so constructed that the steel framework projects in order that everyone will see how strong the building is. Of course we want the skyscraper strong and we want the thesis thorough, but we don’t want to see the framework too clearly. Third, the graduate student should be taught that as a scholar who has at his disposal information of pertinent value in solving the problems of today, he has a real responsibility in helping meet those problems. He should be encouraged not to become a mere bookworm, not to shut himself off from the masses of the people, but instead to mix with and to know all people, to make himself a leader in the life of his community.

In the program which I have attempted to outline I have been speaking primarily to the professional historian. I do not wish for a minute, however, to underrate the work and accomplishments of the amateurs in the field, for many of them are talented and influential. Much of the best historical writing today is being done by persons without professional historical training—what an indictment of that training! No, I realize that the amateurs are accomplishing a great deal, but I am speaking tonight to the professional.

Am I asking too much? Are we professional historians already so busy that we have not time for additional duties or activities? Am I, by proposing that we assume a greater responsibility in meeting current problems, suggesting the impossible?

I do not think so. Of course we are all busy, and there is a limit to what anyone can do. But much of what I suggest will require no additional time or effort. Once the change has been made, it will not be any harder to teach history along the lines proposed than in the present way. And as for writing, how much easier it will be to leave out most of the footnotes. The radio, newspapers, magazine articles, plays and pageants, museums, the
care of historic sites, the open forum, moving pictures—these can receive as much or as little time and attention as we may be able to give them. I am only proposing that we professional historians take a new interest in such things and show our willingness to cooperate with the people who are actively concerned with them.

I am not urging so much that we work harder than we are doing or take on new duties (although that would not hurt some of us) as that we look on our place in society in a new light, that we accept greater responsibility in meeting the baffling problems of the world today. We are fortunate in living in a free country, where investigation and teaching and writing are uncensored, subject to very little restriction. Our professional group has enjoyed a great and, historically, a rare privilege. But I wonder if we have not been too ready to accept the privilege without shoulder-ing the responsibility. History can and ought to play a vital part in meeting the issues of our rapidly changing, complex world. It is the duty of professional historians to see that it plays a vital part.