"THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS": TWO PARABLES FOR HISTORIANS*

By Roy F. Nichols

Historians, like other folk, sometimes enjoy filtering wisdom out of nonsense; and so it was with Roy Nichols when he detected a distillation of the frustrations suffered by historians in that children's masterpiece of 1862, "Alice in Wonderland," by the mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. Nichols' experience with history had commenced in 1900, when the four-year-old's mother began reading to him stories about famous people and notable events. Active pursuit of truth, and fiction, in history had been his major adult occupation through two decades by the time that the archivists besought him for a luncheon talk at a joint meeting with the American Historical Association. His pleasure in utilizing Alice's adventures and that of his listeners in hearing of them doubtless accounts for the fact that demands for reprints thenceforward far exceeded the supply. Therefore, this light-hearted presentation, capped with serious and purposeful suggestions on means for reducing historians' frustrations, is here reproduced. To flavor the dish most fully, the reading of this reprint might well be preceded by a rereading of "Alice" herself.

(J. P. N.)

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

The historian, when he steps into the great building which houses the national archives in such vast profusion, is in a situation so intriguing and so perplexing that his plight imme-


1 A paper read at the joint meeting of the Society of American Archivists and the American Historical Association, December 29, 1939.
mediately suggests that of Alice in her famous Wonderland. In fact, the fable of Alice in Wonderland, if read aright, will serve as a valuable guide and object lesson to the historian as he surveys his new-found treasury of the sources.

The author of Alice seems to have foreseen some of the historian's difficulties and in the manner of parables sought to guide him or at least challenge him by subtle hint and phrase of double meaning. He was quite evidently concerned with the historian's difficulties in presentation and realized that historical writing was often ineffective and forbidding, thus destroying whatever influence it might otherwise have. One has only to recall the famous attempt of the Mouse to dry out his auditors by a reading of history to appreciate this point.\(^2\)

The creator of Alice was also aware of the pitfalls and the occasional absurdities of pointing out morals drawn from history; witness his merciless ridicule of the absurd sequences of the moralistic thought of the Duchess who failed to take advantage of her own precept that if one took care of the sense, the sounds would take care of themselves. He was aware of the need of simple and direct diction, as he makes clear by his gentle raillery at Alice's predilections for polysyllabics which she did not actually understand but used because they were "nice grand words to say." He feared that history, if too involved by unscientific method, might in reality become the subject which the Mock Turtle had to study in his watery youth, namely "mystery, ancient and modern."

The author seems to have foreseen the controversy concerning objectivity and subjectivity and the nature of the frame of reference which the historian applies. He strove at length and with great ingenuity to impress the ideas that the historian should seek to adjust himself to reality and not reality to him. Thus the varied descriptions of Alice's sundry eatings and drinkings to relate her size to the kaleidoscopic dimensions of Wonderland. Alice always sought to subject herself to the truth of the situation; she did not sigh for her own definition of reality.

\(^2\) The historical prescience of the author is so great that one can indulge the fancy that Lewis Carroll might not have been the Reverend Mr. Dodgson, but some eminent English historian, say Bishop Stubbs. This use of a quotation from some English historian whom I am unable to identify sounds like a jibe at a contemporary. Quoth the Mouse, "This is the driest thing I know."
Most significant of all the suggestions in this parable for the historian as he seeks to develop the new possibilities open to him in the National Archives is the question of the significance of searching. Too many follow the reasoning of the dialogue between Alice and the Cheshire Cat in the wood just after the child of the Duchess had scampered off in the likeness of a pig. "Cheshire Puss," said Alice, "would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" (How familiar is that question from the lips of the neophytes.) The Cheshire Cat replied with infinite wisdom, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." And so on until they ended with the joint conclusion that Alice was "sure to get somewhere" if she "only walked long enough." Such philosophy unfortunately dominates much historical research. A sense of significance does not seem to many to be essential.

In fact, the whole oracle emphasizes this need of discriminating judgment in selecting a purpose for work. For after all, Alice started her research on a chance emotion caused by the unusual sight of a white rabbit talking to himself and carrying a watch. She persistently followed this subject through to the end only to find her efforts resulting in a pack of cards or, more appropriately for the historical student, a stack of notes with no real meaning. So intricate is the maze of the new Wonderland represented by the National Archives that the fate of the historian is apt to be that of Alice unless he really takes thought regarding some of the problems which this new mobilization of data serves to emphasize.

When he enters the building on Pennsylvania Avenue, the historian is faced with problems as well as opportunities. The extent of the opportunity can be grasped with any degree of comprehension only by those who tried to work in the governmental records before the advent of the archival organization. In those days, tedious delay, fatigue, and even adventure something like Alice's were quite possible to him who might seek information. Some of the records were in one warehouse, some in another, some in a fort, some in a garage in suggestive juxtaposition to such fireproofing agencies as gasoline and oil. Some were stored in some post or depot far, far away. Material relating to a given topic might be in a dozen different offices in one department or in many departments. Some of the storage places might have light,
heat, and a table and chair. Others might have none of these facilities. Some subcellars were equipped with only a friendly, or otherwise, group of animal life which might add to the adventure. Work in an attic during Washington's summers or in an unheated storage place in her peculiar winters has undoubtedly taken toll in historian-health-years if such a unit exists. Much was frankly or otherwise lost or it was too much trouble to get it out. There was often some other place where it might be, but that place was far away or closed for some reason or other, or for reasons of deep, dark policy inaccessible to the public. Truly, research might be an adventure. On the other hand, often the only difficulty was that records were scattered, for in general most officials were courteous and cooperative.

Now all this is changed. The archives, or at least inventories of them, have been gathered from the far corners and the waste places. There they are, and from a comfortable chair in an air-conditioned room Alice can have in an incredibly brief space of time the whole of her wants assembled, no matter in how many departments or agencies they may originally have been confined. If they are not as yet in the National Archives, there is machinery to get copies from locations carefully described in the nationwide inventories.

This glowing picture, however, must not be accepted as a description of perfection. There are still some anomalous situations. For instance, the documents of the Senate are conveniently placed at the National Archives, but by some trick of fate those of the House of Representatives, instead of being likewise accessible, are in the Library of Congress, where a special set of permissions has to be obtained to see them. This can be borne if the scholar has plenty of time, but who has plenty of time?

Besides this work of assembly, the National Archives has advanced the interests of history along other lines. It has copying services, either photostat or microfilm, which make it possible to have the archives in effect transported to wherever you may be. It has an extensive collection of maps and photographs as well, but of even greater interest and potential usefulness is the library of motion-picture films. This has added a new tool to historical research.

Those who are working in the period since 1900 have the
opportunity now of going to the National Archives for a new source, a motion-picture record of a variety of events, or documentary film prepared to illustrate certain conditions or problems. Biography can now be vivified. Those writing about public figures of the last few years can see them in action again and can hear the voices of those who have lived more recently. Such an opportunity should serve to make possible a more accurate and vivid appraisal. Certain phases of human personality are now immortal. Also, it is no longer necessary to depend upon fleeting impressions born amid the flutter and flash of the silver screen. The National Archives is equipped with a movieola machine so that Alice can see the pictures under a magnifying glass, run them at a speed to suit herself, and hear the sound recording repeated.

This great organization then, all can agree, presents a great opportunity. But there are problems as well as conveniences, problems which are acute in many fields of the profession and which certain functions of the archives, national and otherwise, if developed, can do much to solve. Otherwise, Alice will be lost.

Particular reference is made to the problem of quantity in relation to source material. This is particularly striking as Alice reads the “Guide to the Material in the National Archives” now in press, sections of which have already appeared in the annual reports of the archivist. There she learns that records connected with United States Food Administration, 1917-1930, measure 22,000 feet, those of Veterans’ Administration, 1861-1929, 59,000 feet, those pertaining to NRA, 4,200 feet, and measurements likewise lengthy are found for a variety of other classes of materials. Anyone who stops to consider the number of feet in a mile begins to understand the problem.

This question of quantity has proved perplexing in various ways. In the first place, the archival problem of storing such a multitude of documents in one place in such a way as to be readily accessible upon call has provided a series of headaches that it would probably be difficult for the uninitiated to understand. The solution of the storage problem so far has been admirable. Alice can go to the National Archives, write down what she wants on a slip and have it brought to her in short order, unfolded, cleaned, and ready for use. Or, if she cannot come to the archives, she can write for it and receive a copy at cost. But that leaves
two vital questions squarely before her in this Wonderland. She must know what she wants, and, if her problem is at all comprehensive, she must have the time to examine the quantities of material at her disposal.

Often, however, a searcher in the archives does not know exactly what he wants. If he wishes the pension papers of his grandfather, that's easy. But if he is interested in the topic “American Ethics as Illustrated by Pension Applications,” he is confronted by the simple statement “Veterans’ Administration, 59,000 feet” or approximately twelve miles.

Many of the historical profession do not appear to be well-equipped to deal with such masses of material. Most have had careful training in a meticulous technique which called for the study of elaborate manuals and the examination of individual documents and sources in the light of their precepts. Each document, according to the rules, should be considered by the student and its value and truthfulness weighed judicially. Then, its pertinent contents should be recorded on a card or piece of paper of the proper size and color. Most students, as conscientious as Alice, have tried in a measure to live up to the implications of this scientific technique. But life is becoming more complex, more is happening, much more is recorded and then, alas, historians have done their work along certain lines only too well.

For years, they have been preaching the need of the preservation of documents, the recording of evidence, the collection of every scrap as sure to have use for someone, particularly among the social historians. They have been taken at their word. Historical societies, libraries, state archives, and this great national organization have risen at their behest and now they are literally hoist by their own petard. How are they to use the result, how are they to sit quietly, even in an air-conditioned room, and carefully examine and evaluate documents by the mile? Yet if one were to write the history of the New Deal in the manner that Channing and the colonial historians used for our early history, some university professor or free lance historian has got to find the time to tread these last long miles and his seminar training won’t help him much in finding time.

New techniques are needed to solve the problem of handling mass. Seminar directors can find a partial solution of this diffi-
difficulty by developing methods of cooperative research. Seminar groups are being and will be more carefully chosen, and their work more carefully planned and articulated. It may be that in history, as in science, there will be publication of joint products as dissertations. This need not necessarily mean joint authorship of professor and student, but it is worthwhile to consider the possibility of several degrees for one piece of work. It is conceivable that a well articulated seminar might produce a book, the point product of several students, edited perhaps by the director, for which the various students might receive Ph.D.'s.

Furthermore, there is need of a new group in the university world, namely, research assistants. The time may come when university authorities can be educated to realize that to each major professorship should be attached a research assistant, not a neophyte, but a trained worker at a livable salary who can be trusted to do much of the spade work. Unfortunately, so heavy are the demands of teaching and administration upon university budgets that such ideas, when suggested, are looked upon as hopeless luxuries, ideally desirable, but impractical.

However, Alice is more hopeful of aid from the archives in solving this problem. Any archival establishment, national or otherwise, if it plans to do more than serve as a guardian of records, may well study the possibility of pre-digesting material for the use of scholars. This is not a new problem and there are shelf loads of descriptive lists and calendars; in the National Archives itself there are many such, products of the staff and of thousands of WPA workers. Also the various division heads and their assistants know a great deal about the records they handle and are always available for advice. Divisions of cataloguing and classification are wrestling with this matter with good results, but the job is literally stupendous.

If the archives, particularly in records of these latter days, are to perform their true functions for scholarship, they can well undertake to do what the universities seemingly cannot do, namely, build up a staff to study the various classes of material with a view to acting as research assistants as well as consultants when scholars come to the archives. One can at least study the possibility of a procedure whereby scholars of maturity and experience using the archives may be assigned the services of a research
expert who will work along with the visitor, selecting and preparing from the mass a variety of data. This is being done in a very limited way now by those in charge of the stacks, but it is a function that could be worked out more systematically.

This staff also might work upon research plans. Lists of subjects and suggestions as to the type of material might be compiled such as were planned some time ago in the field of diplomatic history. The archives could become a national seminar with a blueprint of national research. Private endowment, the national government, or the archives in cooperation with some university or universities might create a group of archival fellowships, the beneficiaries of which would be invited or permitted to work singly or in cooperation on some segment of this general plan. A good way to start this off would be the publishing of an occasional series of pamphlets entitled, "Research in the Archives." In such ways might the archives aid the historian in wrestling with the problem of quantity.

But it must be remembered that Alice was more than a venturer in Wonderland. She added to her experiences and broadened her point of view by a later journey "Through the Looking-Glass." In this experience she was like historians who join their brethren in the other social sciences and share their interests and problems. The reorientation which they are called upon to make is often like passing through a glass into a world of altered perspective. The National Archives can do much to adjust this perspective to a clearer view of the processes of social evolution and can thereby serve Alice in her later capacity of social scientist.

Reference to Through the Looking-Glass shows a similar prescience on the part of its author regarding the characteristics of social scientists. The whole idea is a commentary on the lack of historical perspective of so many of them; and the Reverend Mr. Dodgson's views of their preoccupation with contemporary observation is illustrated by the classic remark, "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place." The close reader finds many references to social science interests. There is the Red Queen's planned research and her use of the comparative method. Alice makes a grand survey of a project. There are statistical compilations. The Sheep produces a theory of prices. The interests of the White Knight show the advantages of applied techniques.
over theory. The duplication of effort, so frequent among the various social scientists, is superbly characterized by Tweedledum and Tweedledee, particularly in their famous combat arising from a quarrel over jurisdiction. And finally, the Walrus gave an apt interpretation of the social scientists' predilection for professional conventions.

“This time has come,” the Walrus said,  
“To talk of many things;  
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—  
Of cabbages—and kings—  
And why the sea is boiling hot—  
And whether pigs have wings.”

The National Archives has as much to offer Alice the social scientist as it has for Alice the historian. Its possibilities are, or should be, just as compelling to all students of society. There is a growing sense of unity among social scientists and students of the other humanities, as is evidenced by the increasing significance of the cooperative direction exercised by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. The closer affiliation of these groups has, like the organization of the National Archives, created new opportunities. It has also raised new problems. In the solution of some of the latter, the archives establishment again can play an active part.

The most important of these problems are those which are involved in the phrase recently coming into more common use, namely, the "control" of data. This problem of "control" of data is made difficult by the departmentalization of social science. Each seeks data within its own frames of reference and on its own terms. It is doubtful whether the study of society gains as much as it loses by the organization of so much of social science teaching, study, and research under the separate and distinct departments of economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, etc. Each claims a section for its almost exclusive concern which might well be of mutual interest and subject to cooperative scrutiny. Many of the most pressing problems of society, many of the most significant forms of behavior are made more difficult of understanding by being marked with the exclusive label of political, economic, or sociological. Most of them involve an understanding of all these factors.
Training for research in the field of social science has been too much dominated by these divisions. So much so that many students emerge from their graduate training as from a cloister wherein they have been taught mysteries, sacred techniques, in which the uninitiated may not share, recognizing likewise the existence of similar mysteries known only to competitive neophytes. Of course these brethren speak when they meet, they lunch together, and have been known to stand together in faculty meetings, but there is so often that intangible difference of guild.

The archives themselves offer an opportunity, despite what might at first seem their predominantly historical and political character, for some steps toward a more unified method in social science research. For the archives are in a real sense a photograph of a growing people and their problems. In the early national period the archives have but the scant records of the original departments, State, Treasury, and War, plus some legal documents and correspondence and meager legislative records. Yet even these contain valuable data on the investors of the period, about the frontier, the Indians, the public land, and such social data as is found in pension papers and census schedules. Trade statistics, foreign commercial relations, shipping, coinage, patents, copyrights, criminal prosecutions—all are the stuff of social science. With the growth of the country, the functions of the government have increased and likewise the value of the archives to social scientists. In the course of the nineteenth century, two departments directly concerned with society, the departments of the Interior and of Agriculture, were organized, and the census was then developed into a great decennial social survey.

The government began also the subsidy of transcontinental railroads and the regulation of carriers in interstate commerce, piling up a mass of records mobilized by the Interstate Commerce Commission. The twentieth century brought business and labor conditions within the interest of federal government and we have the archives of the departments of Commerce and Labor and of the Federal Trade Commission. The World War was a great social mobilization, the blueprints of which are in the archives in enormous quantity. Since the war, power and air communication control and the host of agencies under the New Deal have
brought into being a wealth of data to which allusion has already been made. Such data are of just as much interest, or should be, to all social scientists as to historians.

But this is a day of planning. Much in modern life has destroyed the effectiveness of the individualistic trial and error methods of a former day. It is more and more apparent that modern research, like modern living, will tolerate less "muddling through." So if this vast collection of social science data is to be used efficiently for the society that supports its preservation, there must be more effective planning for its use, not only by the historians but by their brethren of the other social sciences as well. These latter are often too much concerned with the theoretical approach and with contemporary observation techniques to be interested in or mindful of what might be termed an archival consciousness. With such an archival consciousness better developed, the science of society could be expanded with much more adequate perspective. The directors of archives, therefore, can well consider the needs of the generality of the students of society in their planning.

What archival services can be organized to aid the social scientists in the control of data? It would be valuable if a group of consultants in economics, statistics, sociology, anthropology, and political science could be developed officially or unofficially to study the situation and advise the archivist upon methods of controlling data. Descriptions of material particularly available might be prepared and circulated. Aid provided for searchers in these various fields should be supplied in the vocabularies to which they are accustomed—for we must remember that there are several vocabularies among the social sciences and the historians sometimes get lost in them. Such consideration is no mere remote possibility for already the authorities of the National Archives have expressed their willingness to cooperate with agencies sponsored jointly by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. Some new and more embracing form of archival service may result from this study.

Thus the establishment and development of the National Archives in the progressive and enlightened fashion which has characterized its history to date, has opened up for Alice a New Wonderland in which—and this is the moral the Duchess might
have pointed out—Alice will probably not waste so much energy wandering about after white rabbits just because they talk and carry watches.

The historian's predicaments, discussed in 1939, had been in some respects alleviated by 1957, but others were magnified. Nichols' thinking about them by now had been continuous through thirty-seven years of unceasing activity marked by close participation with other educationists in broad fields of the humanities, and by administrative experience with relations between historians and a dean of a graduate school and between historians and a vice provost. The intellectual enrichment gleaned from these varied contacts had made him more than ever determined to explore solutions for historians. Hence he accepted a return-employment with the archivists, this time convening in brotherly love with members of the American Association for State and Local History. Again he sought inspiration from the ratiocinations of Mr. Dodgson, this time from his 1868 parable. Thus Nichols proceeded to invite his assorted group of listeners to pass with him, and Alice, "Through The Looking Glass."

(J. P. N.)

Alice in Wonderland After Eighteen Years

Some eighteen years ago, on December 29, 1939, to be exact, I spoke before some of you at a joint meeting of the American Historical Association and the Society of American Archivists. At that time the National Archives, organized some five years before, had become firmly established, and many of its various treasures were arranged and cataloged, ready for the scholar's use. I had been invited to speak on the new possibilities which the great archival establishment offered the historian. I then undertook to illustrate my points by concocting something of a fable in the style of Alice in Wonderland in which I pointed out certain opportunities which an historically-minded Alice might enjoy. These would be hers if she proceeded into a further region

1 American Archivist, III (July 1940), 149-158.
in her wonderland where her perceptions, sharpened by association with other realms of the social sciences, would offer her "a clearer view of the processes of social evolution." She would thus become a more effective historian and interpretative scholar. However, I was too optimistic; I went too far in my hopes. These eighteen years have not seen the fulfillment of them. Why was this? What made these dreams untrue? Can I perhaps take more thought and try another and more perceptive advance? May I again seek to illustrate my point by bringing Alice before you once more? She is an Alice eighteen years older, more mature, and, I am afraid, more confused. Let us examine some of her experiences in these troubled years of hot and cold war and intellectual confusion.¹

Alice, you will recall, set out with a desire to work on the problems of the growth and the process of definition of the power of government, how sovereigns were made, and how they behaved. She had some realization that she might work more effectively on this subject if she examined the development of governmental power in another society, not in her familiar environment but beyond the looking glass. She could apply the technique of comparative analysis. Likewise, she was sufficiently Crocean and well enough acquainted with her Collingwood to realize that history exists primarily in the mind and the imagination of the historian, and that therefore she must re-live the situation which she was studying so that she might present it to her contemporaries. So, being a simple and direct soul, she did not invent some polysyllables to describe her method, but instead quite realistically announced, "Let's pretend," and undertook to live backwards as she went through the looking glass.

This situation brought her immediately into contact with the problem of relativism. She early had to learn the hard way that what you discovered depended upon where you were. If you were on one side of the looking glass, you saw one set of factors, but all this changed when you jumped off the mantle piece into the world beyond. As she endeavored to master the intricacies of relativism by living backwards, she almost immediately was confronted with the complexities of presentism. In Looking Glass

¹This second fable will be followed more easily if readers will refresh their memories of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass.*
house, wherever she went she always came back to where she was, and she had to develop the technique of going away from what she wanted in order to get to it.

In the midst of these difficulties she had presence of mind enough to make a preliminary survey of possible means of operation, to take advice from an expert, the Red Queen, and to create a research design. First, she defined her project. She was going to explore the process of acquiring political power, the steps necessary to attain leadership. She was going to do this research and gain this knowledge not only as a Crocean reliving the past, but also as an empiricist working toward a goal in the present and very immediate future.

She realized, particularly under the instruction of the Red Queen, that she must perfect her command of certain tools. She had already experienced difficulty with her languages, so the Red Queen advised her to use French when she couldn't think of the English for anything. That had not helped her, though, when she came upon a source which used words which implied no meaning. So she had followed the precedent of her graduate student years of picking out the words she knew and trying to extract the general sense. With this insight she deduced from her reading of the sources, the epic poem "Jabberwocky," that somebody killed something, which we can agree from our superior knowledge was a reasonable deduction, although we think she could have gone further in her indication of who killed what and with what and even why. But she was in the early stages of the project and had not gained the more complete insight which was to come later.

She likewise had some instruction in the classification of data from an assiduous cataloger who was something of a taxonomist and led her through the intricacies of groups and sub-groups from the horsefly to the rocking horsefly, from the dragonfly to the snapdragon fly, and from the butterfly to the bread and butterfly, all of which presumably were to be docketed on multi-colored cards. She further gained new insight into the intricacies of interpreting data when she learned that the meaning of data depended a great deal upon the perceptiveness with which the student approached his materials, for the flowers, when she examined them for whatever information they could give, advised her, "We can talk when there's anyone worth talking to."
Then having taken advice from a Keynesian economist, with some help from a journalist about the pitfalls of operating in an inflationary economy, she was ready to proceed through the other stages of her project which she had worked out with the Red Queen. She now passed out of the stage where everything was nameless and meaningless, and was better prepared to grapple with reality in the next stage when she faced the problem as it was presented by the need for consulting with Tweedledum and Tweedledee and for mobilizing the meaning of their presentation.

The lesson in logic which they attempted to impart was arresting in its cogency: "If it was so, it might be, and if it were so, it would be, but as it isn't, it ain't." Having mastered this lesson in logic, she was called upon to grapple with the deeper metaphysical problem of the reality of being. Was she a part of the Red King's dream and, therefore, unreal, or was the Red King a part of hers, thus making her real? In the midst of this she had to deal with the questions of motivation and value judgment in assessing the characters of the Walrus and the Carpenter while considering their relative guilt in the matter of the eating of the young oysters.

Before she took her final leave of the Tweedle twins, they gave her some inkling of the nature and techniques of social history. They approached her, like true social historians, with their arms full of things—bolsters, blankets, hearthrugs, tablecloths, dishcovers, and coal scuttles. They questioned her on technique: "Hope you're a good hand at pinning and typing strings? . . . Every one of these things has got to go on, somehow or other." Was this not spoken like a true social historian surveying his data? Whereupon, realistic but tactless, Alice commented, "Really, they'll be more like bundles of old clothes than anything else." Perceptive, wasn't she?

Her next step was an essay in economic history. As she entered this phase she was addressed by a new mentor, the White Queen, who started the conversation on a practical economic note, "Bread and butter." Shortly Alice was embarking on the wage theory, when her economist mentor endeavored, as most economists do, to make use of the historian, not as a hod carrier, as is sometimes suggested, but as a ladies' maid, offering her twopence a week, and jam, very good jam, every other day. The intricacy of the wage theory was indicated when the White Queen explained that the jam
part was theoretical. As it was only available on every other day, it could never be had today, as today could never be any other day. She explained Alice's confusion by showing to her that her giddiness came from living backwards. Nevertheless, living backwards had its advantages, because in so doing, one's memory works both ways.

When Alice expressed doubt at that form of intellectual activity, the Queen attempted to indoctrinate her with the idea that it was a poor sort of memory that only worked backward. In other words, as an economic historian, she presumed to predict as well as to recount. Finally, she gave Alice some helpful advice as to how to believe the prophecies. She was to draw a long breath and shut her eyes and then make it a practice to believe impossible things half-an-hour a day. The Queen, in fact, boasted that in her prime she had believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. If one wishes to be a prophet of economic trends, I presume this is good medicine.

Her final lesson in economics was in the field of marketing, studying a complicated theory of prices. This theory was based upon the idea that reduction in prices by the lot could be made to reduce consumption if the vendee were required to consume everything purchased because it was cheaper to buy more than he wanted. It is too bad that this was not formulated in econometric equations.

Having mastered the techniques of economic thinking, Alice entered into a period of training in semantics and the use of words. Here her most valuable lesson was that of the possibility of semantic infallibility. Humpty Dumpty was pontifical in his observation, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." This absolutist pose did not sit well with Alice, who thought Humpty made words mean so many things. However, her mentor "justified" his plan of making the same word mean several things by revealing to Alice that when he made a word do a lot of work like that, he "always paid it extra."

Alice had now reached the point in her research design where she could really approach her main subject, the history of how royal power is achieved. But having reached the desired end, she seemed ill-prepared despite the care with which her project had
been planned. She floundered in a maze of old-fashioned concepts and seemed unable to give her findings much meaning. She dealt with military campaigns and dynastic struggles in most meaningless fashion even though she tried to incorporate the latest findings regarding the manners and customs of the Anglo-Saxons, giving a vivid picture of those characters Taigha and Hatta, with their folkways.

So as a last resort she sought inspiration from intellectual history. The contemplative and inventive White Knight became her guide and she studied his ideas, techniques, utterances, and actions. But despite his contemplative disposition and active mind, his thought and action seemed so irrelevant, impractical, scattered, and unrelated that when she had made careful record of his ideas, she certainly had gained no perception which we can recognize. Yet, strangely enough, by this exercise she achieved her goal. She presumably had ascertained the history of the method of acquiring regal power, because she found herself a queen invested with the emblems of sovereignty and associating intimately with fellow monarchs.

Certainly now with all this Crocean experience of living the past, with all this practice in dealing with relativism and presentism, with these lessons in logic, value judgments, and semantics, and with her experience in the techniques of social, economic, and intellectual history, Alice could come forth with a perceptive exposition of her own project in political history. But no! We are all acquainted with the unhappy result. When she reviewed the results of her researches, she cried, "I can't stand this any longer." She seized the cloth on her study table on which her data and her results were spread in such, to her, meaningless confusion, gave it one good pull, and all went crashing down together in a heap on the floor—and Alice fled.

How different is this disastrous result from the triumphant end which I prophesied for Alice's efforts eighteen years ago!

Of course, this is a fable and a rather far-fetched one at that, but it illustrates the point I wish to make. These eighteen years of historical effort and the work of historians and archivists alike have been disappointing. This does not mean that I am claiming that no good work has been done—far from it—for this has been a very productive period. But it has been a period of confusion
of intellectual process and objective. We have made all too few methodological advances. We are too often applying old methods which are not adequate to deal with new types and new quantities of data. We need new manuals for the graduate students, more modern seminar techniques. The whole Ph.D. training needs overhauling. Our training programs need some better and more systematic focuses. Our students do not conserve their energies, nor do we instructors conserve ours, and they and we use methods which are wasteful. At this juncture, however, there are various types of focus, which, if applied, may help the situation. I shall suggest but one, but I do not imply it is the only one.

Too many historians, like Alice, have become confused because idle curiosity is still their main motivation; they have too often lost sight of the historian's principal objective. In passing, as they so often do, from article to article or from monograph to monograph, they fail to realize that the historian's main purpose should be the perfection of his art, the developing of his capacity to be an ever more perceptive historian. What history lacks most is synthesis, i.e., meaning. To the world in general, and to many historians in particular, history is merely a never-cumulating narrative that will get longer and longer and more and more detailed. Its excellence is often judged by the research-indefatigibility of the writer, and the sumnum bonum is the capacity to tell a rattling good tale. Some historians, like Alice, who run after talkative rabbits or take kittens behind looking glasses just to see what's in the half-hidden passage, often have surprisingly interesting adventures and are widely read and vociferously acclaimed. But are we much further along the road to human understanding than we are after we have had many another pleasant experience? Intellectually, we are perhaps still just as confused as Alice was, and we have contributed a minimum to freeing our fellows from similar confusion.

What mankind needs from historians is what Alice never found—either in Wonderland or behind the looking glass—namely, synthesis, meaning.

History must have synthesis to have meaning—that quality of perception which makes complexity comprehensible. Now complexity is not made comprehensible by a tremendous accumulation of various facts, even when given some form of classification. The
history of any people is not the sum total of their activities; to attain that would make the historians’ task impossible by its very definition. The history of an individual is not a meticulous account of all of his actions, his going to bed and his getting up, the menus of all his meals, all his business affairs, all his reading, all his conversations. In the first place, such a history couldn’t be compiled, and in the second, if it were, it could not be studied and comprehended. If it can’t be done for an individual, how much less can it be done for a nation?

What is needed are some sound principles for avoiding insignificant knowledge, for running away from cluttering fact. The principal need is a concentration upon the significant interests in any society which awaken the greatest response and have the most influence on the behavior which conditions the culture. We need to discover popular concepts or definitions of social motivation, for whether or not people do things for the reasons they announce, they think they do, and as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. To be sure, later on the historian may conclude that there were forces at work that society did not, at a given time, understand, but he can never have any real grasp of reality until he can first accurately ascertain the concepts which a people had of their own motivation. The truth is determined by a combination of the external and the internal forces. Everyone at bottom is the result of the relationship of his organism and his culture.

Let me repeat: history has real meaning only if the historians of any society deal with that which is most significant in its social evolution and general experience. The historian must discover what its principal interests have been and what its criteria of self-definition are, what the members of the society think they mean in relation to the world’s behavior. Therefore, in dealing with the history of the United States, we can readily see that the discovery of these keys to meaning is not difficult. Our principal category of definition is our pride in the capacity of a people, so large and distributed so widely, to create and maintain satisfactory institutions of self-government. We are the great American democracy, builders of a highly ingenious system of self-government. Over the centuries the construction and the operation of this system have been our great interest and the object
our great devotion. Its only competitor for popular interest has been the building of our great economic structure. But this latter has been the work of the few and has never invited the proprietorial attention of the mass. But every man, and more recently, every woman, is a voter in a variety of elections, local, state, and federal, and can have a sense of constructive participation in the process of self-government. This game of American politics has been more nearly a national preoccupation than any other of our institutional patterns.

This control was recognized and accepted for many years by our historians; they just took it for granted. But when the age of specialization set in, a reaction against the wooden, highly formalized, non-perceptive constitutional and political history gripped the American universities, and economic, social, and intellectual specialization developed. In these fields the motivation was to seek a frame of reference and a synthesis which should bring a greater air of reality to history. But each, in my estimation, failed because it proceeded by ruling out any meaningful consideration of the chief interest and preoccupation of the American people. Now, however, because of the growing use of a new concept of history, the development of cultural history, we can regain a true perspective. Alice can come back on the right side of the looking glass, and we can achieve a real sense of meaning for our history.

One way in which this can be done is by reinstating political history, particularly in the history of the United States. The true cultural history of the United States should be written in terms of this principal interest of its people and thus be given real meaning. As a republic, we are dedicated to self-government. But over the years of self-government, we have become ever greater and more powerful, ever more wealth and more elaborately organized, and therefore, the stakes of power have become greater. But at the beginning, through some most intriguing turn of fate, probably because of a peculiar quality of the eighteenth-century mind, our fathers decided to submit the question of who was to exercise power to various groups of citizens every two or four years. At first this did not amount to much since executives were not accorded much power and the federal executive for a while in the nearly nineteenth century was not a figure of particular national interest.
But as the nation grew in population, wealth, and power, the federal executive and the manner of his choice became increasingly significant. By the 1830's it was apparent that all unwittingly the founding fathers had created a great instrument for recording national evolution. Every four years, the entire nation focused its attention upon the choice of a new President and law-making body. Every executive who wishes re-election had to submit his record to the voters, and the two major parties had to conduct either defensive or offensive campaigns. These great concentrations of attention, these great inventories of policy, these claims of progress or charges of retrogression were diligently recorded, widely considered and discussed, and their nature placed on paper in a fashion made to order for the historian.

Furthermore, to aid in the study of the evolution of this great society, our politically-minded publicists created a tremendous series of indices: the decennial census, the annual reports of the executive officers, the constant reports of the legislative committees, the annual tables of the law. These were the first accumulation. Then as the nation grew greater, power began to be used more, the era of subsidy and social control dawned, followed by the Square, New, and Fair Deals and the present Liberal Compromise. In all of this, government has assumed or been charged with new functions. And there has been compiled and docketed a tremendous amount of documentation connected with governmental administration and legislation—federal and state—a record far transcending mere political implications.

This is in the archivists' hands, and every year finds it better housed and better controlled. These administrators of our public records are every year greater in wisdom, more advanced in training, more effectively equipped with their new science. They are the ones to take Alice by the hand, if she'll let them, or at least offer her their advice. If she wants to get lost in a maze of business records which she doesn't understand, or to collect a miscellaneous hodge-podge of artifacts and scraps about the maze of social behavior, or to read thousands of the products of the pamphleteers whose scrivening binds not even the minds which spawned them and who were never known to the millions who have behaved in this great society, no one can stop her. But the political historian and the archivist who, together, can com-
mand this series of neat, regular, and perceptive inventories of national progress, are, in my opinion, in a better position to discover the meaning of our great adventure, to give it orderly synthesis, and to explain it to the world than are any of our fragmented specialists.

If Alice will really explore her wonderland as she has not in these eighteen years, with the help of the archivists she can find out what is behind the looking glass without turning herself upside down and inside out and then in her confusion, throwing her efforts into the discard and waking exhausted from a bad dream.