THE MEANING OF HISTORY IN THE SPACE AGE

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There probably has been discussion about the meaning of history ever since the telling of history began. Even the earliest examples of oral tradition must have created more questions than answers. It is a law of life that supply produces demand. And this, as far as it is possible to guess, is good.

In any case, it has happened repeatedly in recent hundreds of years that people have asked and historians have attempted to answer the natural question: What is history? Also, there have been inquiries about the purposes, the uses and the effects of history in human affairs.

Currently, certain skeptics want to know what proof there is that study of the past is worthwhile in an era when new conditions obviously are destroying everything old. The present, these modernists affirm, is all that matters.

Other professional iconoclasts are concerned only with clearing the ground for the future. Even if the past is amusing, they insist, it is only an encumbrance. What is desired is an unlimited opportunity to begin anew, in the thorough manner attributed by Edward Fitzgerald to Omar Khayyam. Believers in this theory of a fresh start with the inspiration of compelling necessity are laboring under the challenge of what they call the Space Age, which conceivably is not as novel as they suppose.

But the desperate pessimists, frantically willing to jump out of the jet-pad frying pan into the exploding target of celestial fire, are as yet a minority. The average person is an optimist. Were it otherwise such common standard procedures as developing skills, obtaining jobs, falling in love and having children soon would be abandoned. And consent, if not exuberant enthusiasm, to believe in a future of any sort must derive in part from knowledge of the past. We denizens of

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the Twentieth Christian century, despite numerous temptations to de-
fect, are Christians in that regard. It is our habit to accept progress
as a reasonable potential.

The variety of history to which we are accustomed is responsible.
If people knew nothing of the past, they would not respect it; neither
would they have any interest in the possibilities of a future. It is be-
cause of the long ago that we can and do anticipate a time yet to come.
Thus Sir Walter Raleigh gave it as his faith that: “We may gather
out of history a policy no less wise than eternal,” and Thomas Jeffer-
son was unqualified in his belief that: “History, by apprising [men] of
the past, will enable them to judge of the future.”

Of course, there are so-called “philosophers” who are not agreed
with this cheerful point of view. Georg Wilhelm Hegel, who still is
with us in terms of influence indirect, flatly declared: “What experi-
ence and history teach us is . . . that people and governments never
have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced
from it.”

But Hegel and his followers were not the nihilists which they
pretended to be. They still strive mightily to teach their peculiar
dialectics and if they have not been entirely successful, even behind
the Iron Curtain, it is not the fault of “people and governments”
persistently committed to experimentalism.

The positive attitude toward history was set forth by Cicero in a
“purple passage” reading: “History is the witness of the times, the
torch of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger
of antiquity,” and the same authority, in a calmer mood, insisted: “If
no use is made of the labors of past ages, the world must remain
always in the infancy of knowledge.”

A like conviction was entertained by Shakespeare that: “In-
structed by the antiquary times, he must, he is, he cannot but be
wise.” Parenthetically, Francis Bacon had the same unadorned idea
in mind when he proclaimed: “Histories make men wise.”

Yet the notion long has persisted that history is a punishment.
Some very respectable editorializers have approved Beccaria’s dictum:
“Happy is the nation that has no history” and Thomas Carlyle’s:
“Happy [is] the people whose annals are blank.” But such vacancies
are conspicuously infeasible. Even the Eskimos and the poor savages
at the opposite end of the earth — the Tierra del Fuegans visited by
Charles Darwin in the Beagle — are possessed of traditions not
recent. No “nation” exists without history.
It is truly historical, however, that historians as a class are not joyful about what they work in. Homer thought of himself, at least at one moment, as a chronicler of "my country's woes." A veritable cloud of witnesses endorsed Voltaire's finding, 1757, that: "History is only a picture of crimes and misfortunes." Oliver Goldsmith, 1762, referred to the history of Europe as "a tissue of crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind," while Samuel Johnson, 1784, simply denominated history "a narrative of misery," and Shelley the poet, 1812, dismissed the complete accumulation of preserved historical writing as "that record of crimes and miseries."

Such indignation undoubtedly owed something to Rousseau and the more directly involved architects of the French Revolution and the consequent Empire of Napoleon. Both were expressions of militant pessimism. But an identic wrath is manifest in many later critics, the number including Ambrose Bierce who, as of 1906, announced that history in his judgment was only "an account mostly false, of events unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves and soldiers mostly fools."

The ethical indictment implicit in these pronouncements logically arose from confusion between historical realities and special pleadings considered "propaganda" in those times as well as in ours. When Robert Walpole was lying ill in 1715, his secretary asked what he would like read to him and the sick man replied: "Anything but history, for history must be false."

It would be futile to argue that there is no danger in official histories expediently produced to "educate" the susceptible public. Military leaders especially have complained about deliberate falsifications concerning their trade. Napoleon and Wellington; Grant and Lee; Pershing and Hindenburg objected to slanted chronicles, and Kaiser Wilhelm II, in exile at Doorn, did not need to apologize for remarking: "Lord Northcliffe won the war."

But the problem of criminal manipulation of the materials of history is not exclusively modern. Polybius, in 125 B.C. or thereabouts, warned: "It is natural for a good man to love his country and his friends, and to hate the enemies of both. But when he writes history he must abandon such feelings and be prepared to praise enemies who deserve it and to censure the dearest and most intimate friends . . . The aim of history is to assemble real facts and real speeches."

Cicero conformed to a similar ideal about 80 B.C., when he said: "The first law is that the historian shall never dare to set down what
is false; the second, that he shall never dare to conceal the truth; the third, that there shall be no suspicion in his work of either favoritism or prejudice.” And Lucian, *circum* 170 A.D., was as explicit and uncompromising in his essay on “How History Should Be Written,” wherein he declares: “The historian should be fearless and incorruptible; a man of independence, loving frankness and truth; one who, as the poet says, calls a fig a fig and a spade a spade. He should yield to neither hatred nor affection, but should be unsparing and unpitying. He should be neither shy nor depreciating, but an impartial judge, giving each side all it deserves but no more. He should know in his writings no country and no city; he should bow to no authority and acknowledge no king. He should never consider what this or that man will think, but should state the facts as they really occurred.”

Such freedom for historians, admittedly, represents an infeasible degree of liberty from interference on the part of mobs as well as masters. No writer can be so detached from his environment as to be totally neutral. But voluntary surrender to coercion cancels the most impressive reason for attempting a chronicle deserving to be read. A definite honesty, in the very nature of things, is required of any historian worthy of the name.

Lamartine was only one of many individuals who faced and struggled with the problems of historical composition “to order.” He understood that “the impartiality of history is not that of the mirror which merely reflects objects, but of the judge, who sees, listens and decides.”

Facts alone, then, are not enough. If history is to teach, it must explain. Perhaps the model for honorable historians should be Julius Caesar, who modestly thought of himself as a mere “commentator.” But not even the best writers in that category have been above sharp criticism. Edward Gibbon was as opinionated as Buckle, Froude and Oswald Spengler. Macaulay tried to analyze the compelling difficulty in this fashion: “Facts are the mere dross of history. It is from the abstract truth which interpenetrates them and lies latent among them like gold in the ore, that the mass derives its whole value; and the precious particles are generally combined with the baser in such a manner that the separation is a task of the utmost difficulty.”

Only yesterday (1961) Edward Hallett Carr, in “What Is History?”, neatly contended that: “History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents,
inscriptions and so on, like fish on the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him."

If that is not the end of the performance, it is anyway about as far as the historian can go. The guests at his table may prefer his fish with a few additional grains of salt.

The genuinely serious peril is that which develops when the historian attempts to "fit" facts to match theories basically adventurous in character. Harry Elmer Barnes, usually cautious, blundered into serious error, indeed, when he decided: "It is impossible for a historian to understand the behavior patterns of men in the past without a knowledge of the general psychology of human behavior." Here, particularly if we add: "in the present," we have a convincing example of "rationalizing" such as Barnes himself repeatedly deplored in some of his doctrinaire contemporaries.

Dialectics, in common with other generalities (including this one, of course), are tricky. Marx and Freud — and probably their most militant critics, likewise — were in grievous trouble when they did not bother to question their dogmas. Barnes summarized their mistake in these words: "It is demanded that the historian start with an avowed bias toward the facts of history . . . History without a Fascist or a Marxist slant is simply history without a backbone."

And Carr added: "Since Marx and Freud wrote, the historian has no excuse to think of himself as a detached individual, standing outside society and outside history. This is the age of self-consciousness: the historian can and should know what he is doing."

But the present era also is an age of egocentricity, violent individualism, is it not? And the campaigns to persuade everybody to join a "pressure group" add up eventually, do they not, to recognition of the principle of action and counter-action? If there is anything in the fields bearing the names of Freud and Marx upon which a majority of people seem to be in agreement it is this: Expressing one's emotions and making a lot of money are not satisfactory targets for all the effort involved in living.

Freud did not solve his problems any more than Marx solved his problems. Both certainly influenced the picture — the pattern — of human life on earth. But not enough. The changes of modern times trace back to countless men and women, long forgotten. They are explained or not explained in hundreds of different ways, including communism and psychoanalysis at the one extreme and anti-
communism and anti-psychoanalysis at the other. Even television cannot capture the total population, and, according to Madison Avenue reports, "large numbers" of watchers and listeners who were caught for a while have escaped.

But this does not mean that we citizens of the second half of the Twentieth Christian century have no need for an honorable conformity to which honest historians might contribute constructively. We need a practical, working ethic — an unwritten law of civilized life based on facts acceptable to the great majority of people who are neither Haves nor Have-Nots, but merely average, middle-of-the-road folks.

James A. Garfield, soldier, teacher and martyred President of the United States, once said: "The world's history is a divine poem of which the history of every nation is a canto and every man a word. Its strains have been pealing along down the centuries and though there have mingled the discords of warring cannon and dying men, yet to the Christian philosopher and historian — the humble listener — there has been a divine melody running through the song which speaks of hope."

The language is old-fashioned, but it carries the melody well enough to have survived about a century — and to be worth reading now in the Space Age where the race between education and catastrophe, as H. G. Wells called it, continues.

President Garfield had a vision of what history might be: a dynamic power for rational optimism among men of good will. The great makers of history were inspired by ardent belief in moral progress. One of them labored and hoped for "the Kingdom of God upon Earth"; another for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" among the inhabitants of the earth, yet another for "government of the people, by the people, for the people," not in America alone but everywhere on earth.

Without progress toward those goals, both in and through history, humanity is lost even if it does outlast the prevalent conflict.