

Telling the tale

by A. J. P. TAYLOR

THE EVOLUTION OF BRITISH HISTORIOGRAPHY: From Bacon to Namier, edited by J. R. Hale (Macmillan 35s)

MOST European languages have the same word for 'history' and 'story.' Few historians, however, are content merely to tell tales, more or less true, drawn from the past. The historian cannot escape an individual attitude towards events, and every great work of history is stamped with its own character.

Professor Hale has made a fascinating anthology, drawn from 21 British historians. Each one gives an interpretation of the past, even though nearly all write in narrative form. A professional historian must also record, with some discouragement, that these great writers were, for the most part, literary gentlemen, not trained scholars. Even the few with academic positions were irregular in their allegiance. Stubbs became a bishop; Maitland was a professor of law, not of history; Namier devoted more energy to getting out of academic life than to getting in—and incidentally Mr Hale is wrong in suggesting that he ever had a Fellowship at Balliol to resign.

Mr Hale provides a long introduction, which is both wise and instructive. The underlying theme is curiously old-fashioned, implying, as the title does also, that there has been a steady process of improvement from Bacon to Namier. Each historian, it seems, learnt something from his predecessor and added his own piece of technique or understanding.



THE development of history-writing can also be presented in revolutionary terms. This revolution was the discovery that the past was different from the present. Earlier historians regarded the past as the present happening at some other time. Gibbon, for instance, clearly thought that there was no difference between Julius Caesar and the Earl of Chatham, except that one wore a toga and the other a wig. Ancient history was a school of practical politics, with lessons in statecraft drawn from Pericles and in oratory from Cicero. It needed the Romantic movement to discover the past for its own sake, and Mr Hale does well to include Sir Walter Scott among the great British historians. No less a man than Ranke proclaimed his debt to Scott, and the 'historicism' of the nineteenth century was an expanded version of the Waverley novels.

It is possible that history-writing is now experiencing a second revolution. Facts, once sacred, are increasingly discredited, and figures have become sacred in their place. History has become a study of past statistics, and the more inadequate the statistics, the more ingenious are the deductions drawn from them. Mr Hale blames the professional historians for making history duller, with a special slap at the extension of women's higher education 'with its intemperate admiration for accuracy at the expense of imagination.'

Historians now make fewer claims

for their subject or, to put it more charitably, are less pompous about their mission. Historians, particularly in the nineteenth century, imagined that they could deduce the future from the past, and all of them, except Carlyle, asserted that the course of mankind was set firmly for improvement. E. H. Carr still claims that historians should be high-grade tipsters, backing the winners and consigning the defeated to oblivion. Others are content to say that the study of history increases our understanding of the past—no more and no less.

We must confess one inferiority to our optimistic predecessors: they wrote better. Even Stubbs, who was very much the devoted scholar, had a surprising lightness of touch, and Maitland made the statistics of Domesday Book as exciting as a detective story by Dashiell Hammett. He was, I suppose, the historians' historian: the one whom we should put first as a model of the historical spirit at work. But all the great men on whom Mr Hale has drawn combined learning and literature.

Historians show their full quality only when they are read at length, and this book is admirable as a form of intellectual wine-tasting. Those who get pleasure from it can go on to more prolonged debauches. The intoxication of history is one from which you never recover, and it leaves no headache behind. People sometimes ask what use history is to society. We should answer that society exists in order to promote the study of history.