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THE PRACTICE
OF HISTORY

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I

Purpose

1 The Present Debate

The future is dark, the present burdensome; only the past, dead and finished, bears contemplation. Those who look upon it have survived it: they are its product and its victors. No wonder, therefore, that men concern themselves with history. The desire to know what went before, the desire to understand the passage down time, these are common human attributes. Yet one must distinguish. Though creation myths and cosmogonies testify to this universal desire to give meaning to the past, not all civilizations have been equally concerned to know and write human history as it really was. Modern civilization is peculiar rather than ordinary in that it rests upon the two intellectual pillars of natural science and analytical history. Theology and philosophy can both claim to have commanded the minds of men for longer stretches of time and over larger areas than these characteristic thought systems of the twentieth century, thought systems which significantly enough, came jointly to dominance in the seventeenth. Their triumph, now universal, has itself been the outcome of an historical situation, for the political and technological advantages which gave Europe the victory in the struggle of civilizations brought to the top a complex of societies whose thinking had been influenced by the longest traditions of a real concern with the past. There is something

markedly a-historical about the attitudes embedded, for instance, in the classic minds of India and China, and any history of historiography must needs concentrate on the Hellenic and Judaic roots of one major intellectual tree. No other primitive sacred writings are so grimly chronological and historical as is the Old Testament, with its express record of God at work in the fates of generations succeeding each other in time; and the Christian descendant stands alone among the religions in deriving its authority from an historical event. On the other hand, the systematic study of human affairs, past and present, began with the Greeks. Some sort of history has been studied and written everywhere, from the chronicles of Egypt and Peru to the myths of Eskimos and Polynesians, but only in the civilization which looks back to the Jews and Greeks was history ever a main concern, a teacher for the future, a basis of religion, an aid in explaining the existence and purpose of man. And even there, its present-day standing is of quite recent origin.

The study of history as a properly developed discipline is really quite young, younger by far than that of medicine or law, philosophy or theology, even of the natural sciences. *Ante Agamemnona*—before Niebuhr and Ranke—the great men did exist, but the mass of historians was neither large nor remarkable. Herodotus may have been the father of history, but for a good many centuries the child he begot was to enjoy but a restricted and intermittent life. Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, Sallust and Tacitus—great names but, for some 600 years, not a terribly impressive tally; and it is not without significance that the one historian among the ancients for whom no one has a bad word seems to be Asinius Pollio of whose writings nothing survives. Medieval chroniclers occasionally rose above their annals

to reflect and explicate,¹ and by now we have all heard of Ibn Khaldoun. Renaissance history—Bruni, Machiavelli, Guicciardini—has received more applause than readership, and there are those who would call Francis Bacon an historian, on the strength of that quite untrustworthy piece of brilliant journalism, his *Life of Henry VII*. It was, in fact, the seventeenth century that took the first purposeful steps towards serious historical study. Mabillon and the Bollandists founded the science of the criticism of sources; in England, Spelman, Selden and Brady wrote something recognizable to modern professionals; Wanley and Maddox investigated the past from its true relics; a bit later, the Göttingen school weighed in, too, and transferred the initiative to Germany.² Resting on the advance made by the humanists, men like these gave history the right to regard itself as an independent form of enquiry, seeking its own answers to its own problems, and following its own canons of proof and purpose. They looked for causes, for a connecting chain in the seemingly meaningless sequence of events, and if they could be crudely mechanical they also taught that there is secular sense to be made of past, present and future.

However, despite these often remarkable achievements, the scientific, ordered, systematic study of history really began only in the nineteenth century, because only then did historians absorb the lessons of the antiquarians

¹ V. H. Galbraith, *Historical Research in Medieval England* (Creighton Lecture: London, 1951).

² M. D. Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises* (Edinburgh, 1963); F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution* (London, 1962); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, 1957); D. C. Douglas, *English Scholars 1660-1730* (London, 1939); L. Fox, ed., *English Historical Scholarship in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London, 1956); H. Butterfield, *Man on his Past* (Cambridge, 1955).

and develop to the full the techniques which enabled them to answer the common charge that their reconstruction of the past was just a tale, amusing and instructive enough, but without any rigour, certainty or standard of truth. Dr Johnson, though aware that historical facts might be known, could not trust 'the characters we find in history, unless when they are drawn by those who knew the persons': and Catherine Morland could not understand her boredom with history when 'a great deal of it must be invention . . . and invention is what delights me in other books'. Fifty years later, history was being written on the foundation of systematic research. The results would still have seemed morally uninteresting to Samuel Johnson and would still have bored Miss Morland, but for different reasons. The inventions and fancies, the character sketches, were being replaced by tested certainties, and open questions by problems.

There is therefore a very real sense in which good modern historians are superior to greater minds and abler men who in earlier ages concerned themselves with history. There is no arrogance in this: they are so because they have been allowed to become better scholars. To the literary mind, the great English historians may be Clarendon, Gibbon and Macaulay, even though hardly anyone reads them any longer and their readability is their main claim to fame. Surely, they are worth reading and wrote splendid books, but they wrote in the prehistoric age and therefore lacked the opportunities which we markedly lesser men enjoy. To the historian, the great English historians are Maitland and Namier, even though they never wrote long histories: for which reason it must hastily be added that one's admiration for them is not based on, is rather tem-

pered by, this one deficiency. It is not just knowledge or the ability to understand motive which makes the true historians; on those grounds, no doubt, that elderly trinity surpasses many even of the good moderns. The difference lies in the different attitude and purpose brought to the study by a mind trained in history as a scientific and intellectual approach.

It need, then, cause no surprise that with that one civilization's general dominance in matters of standards and beliefs the study of history should in the last 300 years have assumed the appearance of a major intellectual industry. The amount of history that is written to-day (quite apart from the amount that, though studied, never gets written), and the number of people engaged in various ways in the investigation of the past, should frighten or exhilarate, according to temperament and the phase of the moon. Moreover, like every good service industry, history has something for everybody. Individual craftsmen, working for the few, exist side by side with mass-production factories supplying the needs of the many. All the signs are of health. The university departments are full of students; and teachers of history, laid end to end, might even reach from premise to conclusion. Publishers fall over each other in the rush for historians: even academic historians have at last realized that they own a marketable commodity and need not be quite so awed by the publisher's cheque-book. The series multiply. The whole business is beginning to show the marks of a run-away boom: hectic production leading to dilution of quality, price inflation, and ever more insistent warnings from the apprehensive that all good things must come to an end. Indeed, there are signs that we may be reaching that crisis of confidence which can precipitate a slump. At every

turn one encounters visceral investigation; the working historian's life is increasingly beset by the specialists in moral exhortation and the prophets of doom.

In some sense, this unsystematic debate is itself a sign of life, though it cannot be denied that life, as usual, involves occasional touches of disease or malformation. Nor is there a great deal that is new in all these doubts and warnings. A good many critics demand that historians should leave the shelter of their muniment rooms and libraries in order to play their part in creating a general intellectual climate; but do they know that they are only repeating the arguments of Voltaire and the eighteenth-century philosophical historians against the antiquarians whose researches they despised?³ Those who preach the virtues of statistical, sociological or other 'scientific' methods are only reviving, after an interval so short as not quite to excuse their ignorance of the fact, the weary argument whether history is an art or science.⁴ Because its materials are necessarily partial, and the products emerging from individual minds more partial still, history always has posed and always will pose the sort of problems which give rise to dispute, acrimony, and the writing of hostile reviews. Why, at the very beginning of our science stands the prototype of all these arguments: history had barely begun when Thucydides attacked the methods and purposes of Herodotus. Debates among historians are

³ Cf. A. D. Momigliano, *Studies in Historiography* (London, 1966), *iff*. It may be unkind to remember that the claims of those philosophic historians collapsed when they were found to be sadly wanting in scholarship.

⁴ Whether history is an art or a science is a dead issue. It is both. But it has always been an art; the addition of science, which is the work of the last 150 years, has turned it into something new, something appropriate to the highest abilities of the human reason

coeval with the writing of history, and like the heresies of Christianity all the possible positions were worked out quite early, to be repeated in resounding counterpoint through ages of controversy.

Above all, historians have always wondered just why they do this thing—why they study history. It may be true that a concern with the past is a widely found human characteristic, but that does not dispose of the question. It only puts it one stage back: why should people be interested in the past, and especially why should they be sufficiently interested either to devote an intellectual existence to it or to support the lives of those who do? The question why society should wish to nourish historians leads to its corollary: what should historians do to justify their existence to their society? The simple answer that to study and write history is a pleasant occupation, that it satisfies the practitioners and does no harm to anyone else, is not only too obviously narrow and selfish but may not even be true. Historical writings can do harm; they have done so; and any thoughtful historian must at times ask himself whether he has a purpose beyond his own satisfaction.

The questions may be eternal; the answers tend to go in waves of fashion, cannoning off each other in often predictable reactions to the predominant theory of the moment. Since historians are naturally given to sharpness of tongue, the debate is likely to look savage to the outsider: it is not only in intellectual ascendancy that historical studies prove themselves to have supplanted medieval theology. Nevertheless, a little bit of perspective can fairly be demanded of men who claim to be concerned with the development of things and ideas through time. Thus when we are told, by an historian now in his early thirties, that in the first half of the present century English historians had 'temporarily lost their

bearings' because the political and constitutional preoccupations proper when Britain ruled the world had ceased to be valid while nothing else had taken their place,⁵ we should point out to him, gently, that he has merely failed to consider the question in a proper historical light. The many good historians whom he thus relegates to confusion and intellectual poverty did not, it is true, happen to hold certain beliefs that are fashionable now. They did not necessarily suppose that only social analysis has value in the study of history, and they did not, on the whole, suppose that they must justify their labours by reference to some non-intellectual effect upon society. But this does not mean that they were not possessed of principles and creeds as definite, and as potentially limiting, as those proclaimed by their critics. The first half of this century was dominated among English historians by a conviction that the principles of respectable historiography could be reduced to one main precept: to study history for its own sake. Though this austere rule could and did produce a fair amount of narrow tedium, it also resulted in some most remarkable monuments of the historian's craft. It is, so far, by no means clear that those who react against it are likely to write history anything like so well founded, so careful in its pursuit of the truth, or so uninfluenced by preconceived ideas and ready-made answers. Their chances of doing so are at present hard to judge because after quite a few years of manifestoes and occasional

⁵ Keith Thomas in *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, 275. The whole of that article, and indeed of the issue of which it formed part (called 'New Ways in History'), is shot through with an engaging arrogance and historically invalid assertions. But it raises serious questions, and I shall recur to it throughout this chapter.

learned articles they have notched up a still surprisingly small amount of identifiable achievement.

Neither the fact that the debates can become otiose, nor their zeal in so often simply echoing the points made in the past, need, however, lead one to suppose that the proper cure is silence. The debates are necessary and, even at their most jejune, not totally without worth. Like all those who practise the concrete sciences, historians are always in danger of contenting themselves with the daily grind. An age of debate is an age of stock-taking; it leads to a necessary reformulation of purpose and principle; and though the answers are never going to be really new they may yet throw new light and accumulate new insights which will assist in the real purpose, in the study and writing of history. The recent and continuing outburst of self-doubt, lavish criticism, and prescription of panaceas has been accompanied by much superficial shouting, much whoring after false gods, much petulant assertion of doubtful tastes and standards. But these defects do not rob it of its fundamental justification: it attacks a complacency which could become mindless. However, it does seem to me that the time has come to restate some of the truths of practice and experience, to rescue history from its candid friends, and to remind the historical world that there is work to be done rather than to be called for, that that work must be carried out in a cage set by certain inescapable conditions, and that bright ideas, however seemingly new, are not everything.

In this chapter I shall concern myself with three main issues. It is first of all necessary to ask once again whether history has an identity independent of other forms of study: does history exist as an intellectual pursuit, can it claim to possess its own rules and principles, or is it merely a hold-all for various other 'social sciences'?

Secondly, arising from this, its proper relation to cognate disciplines must be looked at. Lastly I shall offer my answer to the question: why should we study history?

2 *Autonomy*

The study of history comprehends everything that men have said, thought, done or suffered. That much is commonplace, but also not quite true; some reservations have to be made. In the first place, not all the past is recoverable, and the study of history is necessarily confined to that part of it of which evidence either survives or can be reconstructed in the mind. That is to say, while history may commonly be thought of as the whole of mankind's past life, it is in truth equal only to the surviving past. Historical study is not the study of the past but the study of present traces of the past; if men have said, thought, done or suffered anything of which nothing any longer exists, those things are as though they had never been. The crucial element is the present evidence, not the fact of past existence; and questions for whose answer no material exists are strictly non-questions. True, this is a less limiting reservation than may be thought because the surviving traces of the past are not confined to material survivals; evidence can to some extent be discovered where it appeared not to exist, and the historian's techniques at times enable him to reconstruct that which is lost from that which is still around. Yet the limitation remains important, especially in practice. Lively minds of little knowledge like to charge historians with asking the wrong questions or with treating uninteresting problems. The history of princes and politics, of war and diplomacy, is often called dull and insufficient; why do we not hear more about

'ordinary people', the lives of the poor, the whole of 'society'? The charge can be true, but only if in fact the evidence for the study of such problems exists. If it does not, they have no place on the historian's table. The past is over and done with: it cannot be relived. It can be reconstructed—seen and understood again—only if it has left present matter behind.

Secondly, the definition given is in a way too wide because history is not the only form of enquiry which deals with man's past life. All the so-called social sciences—archaeology, anthropology, economics, social psychology, sociology—attend to man, and all of them can concern themselves with his past as well as his present. This is quite apart from the fact that strictly they can never consider the present: at the moment of being considered it becomes the past. These sciences are clearly autonomous; they deal in methods, questions and results which are peculiar to themselves. Is history autonomous in this sense—is it indeed a specialized form of enquiry or merely an attitude of mind employable in these other sciences? Sociologists, in particular, are capable of asserting such a claim; I once heard one of them say that the study of the past is superfluous because a true understanding of the present, arrived at by sociological analysis, enables one to extrapolate and explain the past. (He did not appear to be joking.) However, the arrogance to which sociologists are prone does not preclude the possibility that occasionally they may arrive at some not entirely obvious truth not discoverable by historical enquiry alone. We must therefore ask how history differs from other studies of man if that difference is not found in its concern with the past. The answer lies in three habits peculiar to history: its concern with events, its concern with change, and its concern with the particular.

History deals in events, not states; it investigates things that happen and not things that are. As against this, archaeology, for instance, can only uncover and describe states, conditions and circumstances symptomatic of a particular way of life; it is unable to handle the fact of life, which is movement. Archaeological states follow jerkily one upon another, without description or explanation of the movement, and it matters nothing whether the transformation is gradual (undatable), as it usually is, or catastrophic. When the archaeologist attempts to incorporate events in his analysis, he either has to confine himself to the bare fact essentially equal to the description of a state ('this site was destroyed by fire') or to resort to historical statements that do not arise from his archaeological evidence and methods, and which, if he is studying a period for which no historical account is possible, may have to be purely imaginary. Anthropology or sociology, on the other hand, may well display interest in the event—in a circumcision ceremony or a wedding, in the building of a school or the formation of an opinion—but this will not be for the sake of the event but for the sake of extracting static conclusions from moving elements. The historian may well interest himself in the state of things, the condition of society, the principles underlying a system of government or a system of thought. But if he is to understand historically and practise historical writing, he will have to think of such analyses as steps in a chain of events, as matters explanatory of a sequence of happenings. He will have to concentrate on understanding change, which is the essential content of historical analysis and description. History treats fundamentally of the transformation of things (people, institutions, ideas, and so on) from one state into another, and the event is its concern as well as

its instrument. To suppose that causal relationships are the main content of history is an error, for they form but a particular case of the general principle that history deals in movement from state *a* to state *b*. If *a* can be said to have caused *b* the relationship happens to be causal; but it is none the less properly historical if *a* and *b* are linked by coincidence, coexistence, or mere temporal sequence, all relations very often encountered in history, however less intellectually satisfying they may be.

As for history's preoccupation with the particular, that must be seen in its proper light. It is often asserted that the special distinction of the historical method is to treat the fact or event as unique. But frequent assertion does not create truth, and this statement is not true. No historian really treats all facts as unique; he treats them as particular. He cannot—no one can—deal in the unique fact, because facts and events require reference to common experience, to conventional frameworks, to (in short) the general before they acquire meaning. The unique event is a freak and a frustration; if it is really unique—can never recur in meaning or implication—it lacks every measurable dimension and cannot be assessed. But to the historian, facts and events (and people) must be individual and particular: *like* other entities of a similar kind, but never entirely identical with them. That is to say, they are to be treated as peculiar to themselves and not as indistinguishable statistical units or elements in an equation; but they are linked and rendered comprehensible by kinship, by common possessions, by universal qualities present in differing proportions and arrangements. The historical event is like the modern physicist's atom, composed of analysable and repeatable ingredients but so composed as to be itself complex and in a measure unpredictable; and not like Newton's

atom or Leibniz's monad, a basic and identical unit of matter. This is what is meant by the false assertion that the historical fact is unique, and one can see that for practical purposes the error can seem very like the truth. But the distinction is vital because reasoned analysis of the complexities of the past and avoidance of the standardizing mistakes of the social sciences are not possible unless the true definition is grasped.

We can now rephrase the earlier definition of history. It is concerned with all those human sayings, thoughts, deeds and sufferings which occurred in the past and have left present deposit; and it deals with them from the point of view of happening, change, and the particular. Since no other treatment of man's experience answers to this definition, the autonomy of history—its right to be distinguished from cognate sciences—is established.

3 *Kinds*

Within this comprehensive definition of history, we ought perhaps to distinguish different kinds. The writing of history and the understanding of the past take many forms, and no one, probably, who has ever thought about these matters, can avoid believing in some hierarchy among them. Thucydides, for instance, opened the story of debates among historians by questioning the possibility of any history except contemporary history. To him this was the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the fact which has been mentioned: that history is only equal to its evidence. He thought that only personal experience and observation could guarantee knowledge and accuracy. 2500 years later, that argument is still sufficiently alive for an American historian to ask the ironical question whether the past should concern

the historian at all.⁶ In giving a warning against an excessive preoccupation with the contemporary, he adopted a position probably more common to-day than that of Thucydides, if only because developing techniques have given us a better control over the evidence for more distant ages and left us aware of the exceptional difficulties involved in discovering and assimilating the evidence for our own times. One also meets the opinion that special virtues adhere to this or that period of history, as it might be the European middle ages, or the nineteenth century, or some great age of Cathay. Such arguments may sometimes be valid when the purpose of study is in question; some well-worked or well-documented pieces of history may have advantages in teaching others, as some obscure or little known bits may assist the historian in marking out his claim to recognition. But no argument exists which successfully establishes a hierarchy of worth among historical periods or regions as such.

Yet though we need no longer think in those terms, we are still inclined to make distinctions supposedly based on differences of intellectual content. To some commentators, no history that does not tell a story deserves the name at all, while others object to anything but pure analysis as below the highest aspirations of the historian. Most people do not admit to such clear-cut prejudices, but the prejudices are there all the same. In truth, historians, like other people, tend to judge their world from their own experiences and practice, and it is distressing to see how narrow in their sympathies even eminent men can be. E. H. Carr, for instance, has spent a great part of his life writing the history of Russia in

⁶ Charles E. Nowell, 'Has the Past a Place in History?', *Journal of Modern History*, xxiv (1952), 331ff.

the twentieth century; fundamentally, he has worked on a narrative account in very recent history. But does this entitle him to judge the state of our knowledge of fifth-century Greece from the fifty-year-old memories of a Cambridge undergraduate, or to write off a great part of medieval studies because he mistakenly thinks that the bulk of evidence surviving from the middle ages was produced by monastic chroniclers?⁷ These are errors based on ignorance; another derives from his limited understanding of the historian's range of tasks. 'I have no patience,' he says, 'with the fashion . . . of pretending that Mommsen's greatness rests not on his *History of Rome* but on his corpus of inscriptions and his work on Roman constitutional law; this is to reduce history to the level of compilation.'⁸ If the last sentence were true one might no doubt agree with him. But his exasperated complaint shows no sign that he grasps what Mommsen achieved when he laid the solid foundations of Latin epigraphy, or of the kind of organizing and analysing genius required in the writing of the three large volumes of the *Staatsrecht*. The sheer learning and expository skill displayed in these works exemplify historical insight and achievement of the highest order; to recognize this, which need not induce one to deprecate the sweep and grandeur of the *History of Rome*, should, in the working historian, call forth an awed admiration for greatness in his own line of work. By comparison, narrative history might almost be called easy, though Mommsen's practice of it, even if intellectually less mountainous than those other works, remains marvellously impressive in itself. But both types of writing are history.

The reason for Mr Carr's somewhat philistine judg-

⁷ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Penguin edition, 1964), 13-14, 149.

⁸ *Ibid.* 37.

ment is obvious enough: he himself has specialized in the production of narrative history on the grand scale. Historians naturally praise in their fellows those enterprises and distinctions which come closest to their own mode of thought and work. It is difficult to appreciate anything that one does not know from personal experience, easy to lapse in catholic sympathy. And this is the more understandable because too universal a sympathy, too ready an acceptance of all treatments of history, would constitute an abdication of the judgment which all historians must, as a duty, preserve. Occasional grumpy disapproval is much to be preferred to that general and tepid approval which pervades, for instance, most professional reviewing of historical books in America. The motives may be creditable (not to slay the defenceless) or very dubious (not to call down similar treatment upon oneself), but in any case a real duty is neglected when no standards are set for the intellectual and artistic treatment of serious historical problems. Sympathy for a variety of concerns and manners of approach does not preclude the existence of some severe discrimination in the judgment.

However, the more obvious and more common danger is that exemplified by Mr Carr: to write off certain forms of historical study and to reserve approval for those to which one happens to incline oneself. Behind such harsh judgments lies the multifariousness of history itself. Since the whole of history—the whole of a person, a period, or a problem—can never be got between the covers of one book, some means of rendering the material manageable must be found. The commonest is to adhere to the notoriously artificial divisions into which the study of the past breaks up at the approach of a teaching syllabus or an examination system. We write political history or economic history, constitutional or administra-

the twentieth century; fundamentally, he has worked on a narrative account in very recent history. But does this entitle him to judge the state of our knowledge of fifth-century Greece from the fifty-year-old memories of a Cambridge undergraduate, or to write off a great part of medieval studies because he mistakenly thinks that the bulk of evidence surviving from the middle ages was produced by monastic chroniclers?⁷ These are errors based on ignorance; another derives from his limited understanding of the historian's range of tasks. 'I have no patience,' he says, 'with the fashion . . . of pretending that Mommsen's greatness rests not on his *History of Rome* but on his corpus of inscriptions and his work on Roman constitutional law; this is to reduce history to the level of compilation.'⁸ If the last sentence were true one might no doubt agree with him. But his exasperated complaint shows no sign that he grasps what Mommsen achieved when he laid the solid foundations of Latin epigraphy, or of the kind of organizing and analysing genius required in the writing of the three large volumes of the *Staatsrecht*. The sheer learning and expository skill displayed in these works exemplify historical insight and achievement of the highest order; to recognize this, which need not induce one to deprecate the sweep and grandeur of the *History of Rome*, should, in the working historian, call forth an awed admiration for greatness in his own line of work. By comparison, narrative history might almost be called easy, though Mommsen's practice of it, even if intellectually less mountainous than those other works, remains marvellously impressive in itself. But both types of writing are history.

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tive history, history of ideas or history of science. J. H. Hexter has called this 'tunnel history' and has castigated it with his own brand of engaging savagery.⁹ That he has much right on his side cannot be denied. Tunnels do circumscribe the vision. But what is one to do? To transfer the universality of life on to paper, or even to comprehend it in the mind, is rarely possible, and without a main line of thought nothing results except the jumble which in fact is nearest to the common experience of life. This would be neither art, nor understanding, nor use. Issues and problems demand some sort of tunnel for their clarification; the past must be sorted into 'aspects' to become not only manageable but meaningful. There is really nothing wrong with thinking in tunnels, provided one remembers that there is earth above and around the tunnel, and that the shape and direction of the tunnel are governed by the constitution of the substance about it. 'Aspects' are just that: not separate entities, but forms extracted from the mass with the tool provided by the method of approach selected. All good historical writing is universal history in the sense that it remembers the universal while dealing with part of it.

There are, therefore, no ways of dealing with history which are *intrinsically* superior to others. Political history—the analysis and description of the way in which men have conducted affairs—is not necessarily more jejune than social history, the analysis and description of the arrangements by which they have lived together in ordered groups. The writer on wars and armies need not feel inferior to the student of markets, price fluctuations and methods of production. Administrative history concentrates on the manner in which institutions and instruments of government are organized and work;

⁹ *Reappraisals in History* (London, 1961), 194ff.

constitutional history, which concerns itself with the principles and conflicts embodied in the development of governmental organization, is not by that token any more distinguished. In particular, the historian of thought and ideas, secular or religious, need not think (as he is inclined to) that he is somehow more elevated or significant than he who wrestles with the intricacies of law courts or strives to understand the problems involved in the edition of charters. In these matters there are no hierarchies, and mutual respect is the only proper attitude.

This does not mean that there are no distinctions to be made, but only that the distinctions do not depend on the dominant interest or the main line chosen. The differences to which the critical mind should address itself lie solely in the manner of execution. They are not confined to the degree of art displayed, to competence in explanation or skill in description. The writing of history requires powers not universally available, but the name of historian need not always be denied to the man who cannot write well. What matters are the differences shown in the intellectual treatment of the questions asked. And here the fundamental distinction is that between the amateur and the professional. This is not always an easy distinction to make, for it is not identical with that between men who earn their living by the study of history and those who engage in it by the side of other occupations. The distinction I have in mind rests between the man who has learned his job and the man who, sometimes with touches of genius, comes to it in a happy spirit of untrained enterprise: crudely, the distinction between those who think that research means reading a lot of books and those who have grasped that research means assimilating into oneself the various and often very tiresome relics of the past. Examples of both

are found inside as well as outside the academic profession.

The hallmark of the amateur is a failure of instinctive understanding. This expresses itself most clearly in a readiness to see the exceptional in the commonplace and to find the unusual ordinary. The amateur shows a tendency to find the past, or parts of it, quaint; the professional is totally incapable of this. On the other hand, the professional, truly understanding an age from the inside—living with its attitudes and prejudices—can also judge it; refusal to judge is quite as amateurish a characteristic as willingness to judge by the wrong, because anachronistic, standards. By all these criteria, Lord Acton was an amateur, and so he was, a prince of amateurs. Very wide reading and self-consciously deep thinking may have attended him; but he was for ever expressing distress or surprise at some turn in the story, was alternately censorious and uncomprehending, suspected conspiracies and deep plots everywhere. In short, he lived in history as a stranger, a visitor from Mars. The professional lives in it as a contemporary, though a contemporary equipped with immunity, hindsight and arrogant superiority—a visitor from the Inquisition. How is such professionalism created? G. M. Young once offered celebrated advice: read in a period until you hear its people speak. But this is amateurishness of a drastic kind because it is superficially professional. Who ever knew or understood people just because he heard them speak? The truth is that one must read them, study their creations and think about them until one knows what they are going to say next.

I do not mean to deny that what I have called amateur history can be very good, not only entertaining but useful and stimulating. Still less do I mean to doubt that professional history can be very bad, sterile and

stultifying in the extreme. But the emotional criterion, which measures the response evoked by the historian, is a partial guide and provides no firm standard. The criterion I have offered here has about it a quality of precision. The best amateur history, however entertaining, cannot enlarge the understanding or deepen the participation because it is written from outside, through a veil woven out of strangeness and wonderment. At its best it achieves sympathy and romantic love, but it cannot penetrate to fundamental explanation; at its common bad, it is sentimental, ignorant, and an insult to the intelligence. That really fine amateur historian, G. M. Trevelyan, achieved both.

The purpose and ambition of professional history is to understand a given problem from the inside. This may well involve tedium, pettiness and pedantry, the main faults of the professional. He lacks the amateur's saving grace, for he is not doing the thing just for the love of the thing and cannot rescue himself from depression by romance and sentiment. He is struggling, sometimes grimly, with the often repulsive reality of life, and if he is a petty man or a pedant he will soon convince the reader of that. But even at his worst he cannot fail to add to learning, understanding and knowledge; he contributes truth. Thus, good or bad, he feeds the mind, while the amateur satisfies the senses. In so far as historical study is an intellectual enterprise—and that is its highest form—the professional has it every time. He is doing a job and producing results; the amateur is having fun. But there is no need to be puritanical about this. The good professional, too, has a good deal of fun in doing the job; the sad thing is to read so many professional historians who convey nothing but an agony of the spirit.

Professionalism is the product of a certain aptitude

worked upon by a specific course of training. Good historians may be born, but true historians are made. The principles and details of their training shall be touched on later; here I am concerned with the mark which that training sets upon the practitioner. In the first place, he knows his evidence. He knows the range of it, how it came into existence, what people or institutions produced it, what it can tell and what can never be got from it. In consequence he knows the 'right' questions—those capable of being answered and those that lead to further questions. His instinctive familiarity with the evidence results in a useful and necessary sense which extends his range beyond the strict confines of the evidence; even his guesses bear the stamp of truth because they fit the reality of the situation. Sir John Neale used frequently to speak of his 'hunches', and he played them very successfully. This professional hunch is based on an expert understanding of what can, what must, have happened; more than a guess, it is in the nature of an inspired forecast which often leads to the discovery of evidence supporting it. Those unaware of how the professional historian's mind works are liable to suppose that this amounts to no more than the convenient adjusting of the evidence to the preconceived idea; but though this can happen, it is rare with the properly trained professional. When the answer comes out as expected, it is because the expectation rested on profound knowledge, a knowledge which beyond the facts comprehends setting, atmosphere, possibility, probability—all those tenuous compounds in the lives of men which we call the spirit of an age. This is not to say that historians are allowed to use 'the spirit of the age' to explain things in the absence of evidence; only the amateur falls back on such vapours as the *Zeitgeist* or a national character. The professional uses his real aware-

ness of what is 'right' in a given context in order to fight his way through to an explanation grounded on evidence. It is a tool of selection and divination, not an end to the process of reasoning and discovery. This solid kind of familiarity lies behind everything that is professional about historians; from it flows the ability to understand an age in its own terms, to judge it by the criteria appropriate to itself, to avoid the error—the 'whig' error—of looking only for what has significance in a later age, and to distinguish between the commonplace and the exceptional.

This distinction between the amateur and the professional deserves so much emphasis because it is really fundamental. Both kinds of historian require other capacities, such as ability to judge evidence, ability to construct an argument or a narrative, ability to write. The final product will owe much to these further qualities which may be found equally present or absent among amateurs and professionals alike. But the difference in the foundations will always show through. However much we may prefer to read the amusing amateur rather than the tedious professional (admitting that the adjectives may well at times be changed round), we shall trust the second when we really want to know.

It may be objected that in confining distinctions between historians to this single point I have ignored too much, and in particular that I have wilfully misunderstood the distinction between history and compilation which Mr Carr made in his comment on Mommsen. Is all work in history to be judged only by the amateur or professional status of the historian? Are there no basic differences in the kind of work attempted? Is the editing of a chronicle on a level with the writing of an imaginative narrative, the analysis of an institution equal to the unravelling of social relationships? Answers

to these questions will depend on the ground upon which the enquirer takes his stand. This present enquiry turns on the intellectual worth of historical studies, and from that point of view there are no differences that do not arise from the historian's basic attitude to his materials. An honest professional job of any kind deserves equal respect; an honest amateur job merits a different and less searching appraisal. We hear to-day a good deal about the absurdities of minute research, especially in Ph.D. theses. An eminent scientist has condemned those who crawl upon the frontiers of knowledge with a magnifying glass. But what is wrong with taking a magnifying glass to the frontiers of knowledge? Surely that is precisely where it is needed. Perhaps one may want some man at times to stand up, gaze around, and look beyond; but unless they have taken an active part in the painful mapping of the advancing frontier, the visionaries are nothing but a menace. I have no patience (to quote Mr Carr) with the common attitude of contempt for the young student who labours on what may seem a narrow or petty subject and attempts to master the techniques of study which it can teach, though I would agree that the mature scholar who still seems to be at that stage of interest raises one's doubts and hackles. Except for examiners, who are paid for it, no one needs to read Ph.D. dissertations, but those who flatter themselves that they can make a valid distinction between what is important and what merely superfluous in such enterprises, elevate personal taste to the level of a critical standard. Judging thus, they have no answer to those who sniff at their own splendid and ranging edifices because they think them unsound or (this can happen) tedious. Research work of this journeyman kind deserves to be judged by the only tests it seeks to satisfy: is it honest and exhaustive, has it asked questions that are

right and adequate in the context of the problem, has it found reasonable answers, does it prove the author to have learned his trade? And much the same point applies beyond the stage of the Ph.D. dissertation. Good and bad work can be done at all stages of historical enterprise; and the standard of quality to apply must be defined as intellectual honesty and intellectual penetration within the compass of the problem investigated.

The historian's ability and knowledge are as much called upon in the editing of a text as they are in writing the history of the Russian Revolution, though the result will attract different sorts of readers. There are also matters of degree and intensity to be allowed for, but none of kind. Mommsen displayed genius in his *History of Rome*; but he also displayed genius, as well as greater skill and greater knowledge, in his *Römisches Staatsrecht*. In the hand of some Professor X, neither would no doubt have been successful, though both would have been as legitimate—and as properly called history—as they were in Mommsen's hands. Naturally no one denies that historians differ in quality of mind and personal capacity. Mr A's excellence and Mr B's stupidity may mean that Mr A writes history and Mr B something else. But the point must be judged by reference to the manner in which each discharged his task, not on the grounds that Mr A's great gifts enabled him to write a history of China while Mr B confined himself to the editing of a medieval chronicle. Compilation does exist, but only rarely does it not require, embody and reflect a learned understanding of history, quite as much as it provides means for enlarging^f that understanding. One need not go so high as Mommsen's *Corpus Inscriptionum*: let Mr Carr try his hand at compiling trade statistics for English cloth exports in the sixteenth century and see how far he can get without a full use

of a true professional equipment. And in applying that equipment to the establishing and recording of reliable figures, he would be writing *history*.

This last example makes plain that the argument is in danger of becoming absurd. Common sense forbids one accepting the view that no distinction can be made in essence between the compiling of trade statistics and the treatise on the history of trade which rests on such statistics. Yet if my premise be allowed—that judgment must depend on the question whether the work flows from adequate knowledge and is honestly executed—the deduction follows; and I certainly stand by my premise to the extent of regarding it as legitimate and important. But I agree that other premises can be found, premises which others may treat as more meaningful and fruitful, though I should hesitate to do so. In particular, Mr Carr, and others who think like him, would judge by the purpose which a piece of historical writing is meant to serve. They wish to see history justified from outside itself, and to rank its products by standards derived from that desire. It is often felt that the subject cannot claim the status, either as a science or as a useful art, which belongs to other disciplines that deal with man: it should therefore both learn from them and approximate to them. Before we can consider the purpose of studying history, we must therefore look at its relations with the mentors and rivals that have been set over against it.

4 Rivals

Autonomy is not the same thing as exclusiveness or self-sufficiency. There are things to be learned. Archaeology can assist history by recovering evidence and thus help

to recreate the historical event which archaeology itself is incapable of analysing or describing; inserted into the framework of history, it can also contribute expansions of the time-scale (as in the history of ancient Egypt) or add areas of historical study by making historians ask new questions, as in the reconstruction of Roman military organization or the exploration of medieval farming habits. This asking of new questions is the chief lesson which sociologists have taught to historians who have learned to consider the 'structural' problems of society—the analysis of social hierarchies, relationship of classes, mobility among them, the importance of common assumptions and social myths. Anthropology has opened historians' eyes to the significance of social habits, the mixture of the universal and relative which goes to make up the ways in which people accustom themselves to living in groups. The obvious importance of economics and social psychology—the manner in which they enable the historian to construct wholes out of patchy evidence by teaching the general rules governing the behaviour of forces, crowds and individuals—needs no stressing. Since men's experience in the past, as at all times, was clearly influenced by what happened inside them, between them, and around them, every form of enquiry which touches on these circumstances is of use to the historian; and this may include not only the sciences of man but also the sciences of nature. Provided the instruction received is turned to historical use, provided it is used to consider and explain change in the human past, these borrowings can be nothing but fruitful.

All this is so patent that every generation produces a loud demand for more borrowing, more humility on the historian's part, more worship at the shrines of practitioners whose self-confidence springs from their

claim to be scientists. They, we understand, produce certainty, where the historian is at best able to produce dialectical argument. The prophets of each generation rather touchingly believe themselves to be the first innovators, and in old age they are often found among the most bitter opponents of the next wave of prophecy. However, enthusiasm is not perhaps the best state of mind in which to contemplate questions of method and procedure. The German historicism of the nineteenth century, now so much under a cloud, took its first inspiration from two sources: the textual criticism of the philologist, and the mechanics of physical science. In consequence it was inclined to a rather mechanical view of history; it dealt too readily in plain chains of cause and effect. The attack upon it certainly came in part because the progress of historical research itself called in question many of its confident conclusions, but once again too many historians looked to other studies for instruction. Towards the end of the last century, the dominant sciences of physics and philology were replaced by biology, anthropology and sociology, with the result that history became both subtler and less certain, more relativist and more aware of the variety of circumstances that make up any given situation. Despite the conviction of some English scholars to-day that they are the first to bring the social sciences into the working habits of English historians, that trinity of mentors has remained virtually unchanged since; all that has happened is that new and often more rigorous techniques used by them have come to the attention of the historian looking for 'new methods'.

There are two chief reasons for these iterated invitations to use tools borrowed from elsewhere. One is the natural desire of young men to find new things in fields much tilled by their predecessors. Some minds

most readily formulate new questions under the influence of some theory that has caught their attention. The much advertised social questions—structure, habits and ambitions—have in fact been asked by historians since Herodotus, which is not to deny that we have refined our techniques and occasionally enlarged our interests, often under the stimulus of some other discipline. But the notion that only direct borrowing from very recent sociology or anthropology has drawn historians' attention to 'such matters as harvests and food-supply, epidemics, and medicine, the age of marriage and the size of families',¹⁰ is an illusion quickly dispelled by a little study of earlier writers. The famous antiquarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were mainly interested in these and similar questions, and if they may now be despised for their preoccupation with collecting data and their failure to produce analytical conclusions, it is not at all clear that their present-day successors have advanced all that much further in this respect.

Too careful an ear cocked for the pronouncements of non-historians is liable to produce disconcerting results. Anthropology and sociology do not stand still; there are probably few disciplines in which the differences among the learned are more ineradicable and more ferocious. The humble historian may only too readily find himself listening to the wrong party or catch on to views already abandoned by the *avant garde*. Thus we are still enjoined on occasions to call in Freud when studying people in history, at the very time when psychologists are poised for a mass-flight from Freud.¹¹

¹⁰ Keith Thomas, *T.L.S.* 1966, 276.

¹¹ I cannot feel that the much-praised Freudian effort of E. H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (London, 1959), contributes anything of value to an

The anthropology which influences the most modern historians is still too often at the Malinowski and Margaret Murray stage.¹² Marxist sociology, long since overtaken by more accurate and more subtle analyses, remains powerful among historians, and its influence is by no means confined to those aware of it; fragments of class-struggle theories and economic determinism are found curiously embedded in the work of scholars who at the conscious level do not believe in them but need them to satisfy their wish to be thought 'deep'. 'Lonely crowd' and 'affluent society' theories are swallowed trustingly by the alert historian who then proves less able to disgorge them again than are his sociological instructors themselves. Admittedly, the historian is not always ill-advised to be so backward; in the social sciences fashions come and go with disconcerting speed, and by sticking to his point on the wheel the historian may as quickly come to the top of the turn again as by clambering about the wheel while it revolves. Nevertheless, one is justified in asking those propagandists for more social science in history just which kind, school or doctrine they are recommending. My own experience of these debates includes several occasions on which the most fervent advocates of the use of sociology by historians were told by the priests of their golden calf that clearly they neither knew what sociology was nor had any understanding of its recent developments.

understanding of either Luther or his age. In so far as it has been responsible for John Osborne's play, it may even need condemnation.

¹² Mr Christopher Hill accepts 'the validity of the main thesis of Dr Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*', though he boggles 'at some of her illustrations of it' (*Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, London, 1964, 187, n. 4). For this he is gently but justly criticized by Professor G. E. Aylmer (*Eng. Hist. Rev.* lxxxi, 1966, 785-6).

However, the desire to open up new lines of enquiry (even when they are not all that new) is a reputable one, and if this endeavour finds stimulus in the methods and conclusions of others it should by all means seek it there.¹³ The other main reason for this constant looking over the fence is rather more dangerous in its effects, for it stems from historians' dissatisfaction with one of the essences of their calling, which is that it can never on its own terms establish scientific laws concerning the history of mankind. To use terms current among modern philosophers, history is 'idiographic', that is, it particularizes, and not 'nomothetic', that is, designed to establish general laws. An idiographic science can, it seems to me, become nomothetic only if the particulars it studies become numerous enough for statistical generalization from them to be valid, and here history is likely to be forever handicapped by the smallness of the sample. Even allowing four generations to a century, we have information about only some two hundred generations, and for the vast majority of them our information is extremely patchy. I doubt if any statistician would find this an adequate sample from which to extract the sort of general laws (the fates of civilizations, tidal movements of nations, and that sort of thing) which some historians wish to discover. Of course, the historian should generalize—that is, express larger conclusions based on his particulars. But to some types of mind that activity lacks reality unless the limited generalizations proper to the historian ('in certain circumstances men are liable to do this or that') turn into laws ('in stated conditions, the following results will predictably ensue').

¹³ The time may just about be upon us when literature and language are once more promoted to the task of inspiration—even if we have nowadays to call them semantics. The signs are multiplying and the prospect is attractive.

Hence the laws of economic determinism, or the biologically based determinism of Spengler and Toynbee, with their powerful attraction for those to whom the tentative and particularizing 'idiography' of history is emotionally unsatisfying. The kind of science which history can be has nothing to do with 'nomothetic orientation'—does not demand the creation of a framework of laws—for such a framework is always essentially *a priori*; but that is not to deny it scientific status in its own terms, namely the function of a descriptive and analytical science, producing a series of experimental truths.¹⁴

Few practising historians would probably nowadays fall victim to the search for laws; the experience of research is enough to cure such ambitions. But a good many hanker after a certainty and precision which they believe to be proper to a science and which, in their view, traditional historical methods lack. They go to sociology and the like not only for inspiration but especially for method and can speak with hope of an 'age of the historical factory' with its cooperative and organized scholarship calling upon arithmetic for aid.¹⁵ I am less frightened by the thought of cooperative research or 'quantification' than unimpressed, so far, by its results, and I believe that these supposedly sophisticated innovators are guilty of a little naïvety. They cry for the sun of reason and learning in ways familiar down the ages, but they have mistaken the heavenly body before their eyes: in fact they are crying for the moon. There are three good reasons for this. Historical materials

¹⁴ For a useful discussion of these and similar points see Louis O. Mink, 'The Autonomy of Historical Understanding', *History and Theory*, v. 24ff.

¹⁵ Thomas, *T.L.S.* 1966, 276. To the best of my knowledge, Mr Thomas, a fellow of St John's College, Oxford, and the author of some excellent articles, has never worked even within sight of one of these 'factories'.

are nearly always unsuitable for the kind of studies envisaged; the comparative method conceals within itself a self-destructive error; and sociological results in history are as a rule remarkably jejune.

Sociological enquiry is distinguished by its object and its method, the object being the analysis of social relationships and the method the counting of heads in categories. History may fairly concern itself with past social relationships, and the historian may often be well advised to count heads; but it should always be recognized that, since history must analyse and relate the story of past change and must concern itself with particular people as well as categories, historical studies derived from sociological influence can never be more than a small part of the whole enterprise. In addition, they are the part least well provided for by the evidence the past has left behind. These scientific investigations of family, class, occupations, mobility and all the rest happen to excite present-day interest and began systematically little more than a century ago; since before that time interest in them was rare and unscientific, it is useless to expect to find really exhaustive materials from which now to satisfy it. Every historian encounters immense difficulties as soon as he tries to collect worth while statistics for any problem before the year 1800 or so. Too often, the figures just do not exist, and even a trained acquaintance with statistical techniques can never quite get over the problems set by samples that are not so much random as obscurely weighted both by the accident of survival and, more importantly, by the lack of concern felt for them by those who preserved them for reasons quite different from those which now motivate their study. The endeavour is not, of course, entirely hopeless, and the results of enquiry may be interesting; the trouble is that they can never be any more certain

than results arrived at without these aids in method. Demographic studies, in particular, have very important uses and can sometimes rest on reasonably reliable figures; but I have never yet seen a work of this kind which did not firmly proclaim the insufficiencies of the evidence, warn against excessive reliance on its statistical tables, and then proceed to treat the explicitly doubtful conclusions as safe ground for further confident inference. Historical evidence only very rarely resolves any sizeable question for good, and it is unfortunate if particular tricks of method lead either their exponents or the reader to suppose that certainty has been at last created.

A recent and most impressive product of this sociological school of history, Lawrence Stone's *Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), provides some useful lessons. The vast work contains many sections in which the fashionable method plays no part, and it may be only a conventional historian's prejudice that I find these more conventional chapters the most persuasive in the book. However, the author himself clearly loves best the massive evidence of his tables on which he rests his striking major conclusions. The aristocracy, he argues, underwent a general economic decline which so reduced its social influence that on the eve of the English Civil War it had ceased to be an effective agent for hierarchic government in the members of the realm. This important generalization depends entirely on the reliability of the statistics, and very slight shifts in percentages would demolish the structure. Only one of Mr Stone's reviewers has, so far, had the necessary knowledge to reconsider both the materials from which the tables are constructed and the tables themselves, and he felt compelled to call some crucial figures in question. The acrimonious correspondence which followed showed beyond doubt that there was quite enough uncertainty

about them to permit a range of inference stretching from a mild improvement in position to a rather drastic deterioration.¹⁶ I myself have methodological doubts concerning the figures produced in the chapter on education. Not only do I find some of the 'constructed' totals, put in where the evidence fails, unconvincing, but I wonder how one takes the step from mere figures of matriculation or even graduation to an assessment of educational standards. Questions of this sort soon rattle the bones of table-making, carefully locked in private drawers.

The trouble is that such things as the wealth of the aristocracy have to be calculated from figures very hard to systematize. Before the figures can even be added up and the percentages worked out, all sorts of questions have to be solved: who comes within the categories studied, how is wealth defined (for instance, the problem of debts owed and owing), what kind of wealth can be measured, what is the real meaning of the figures in the record, how far can statistical method fill gaps in a series, what can be done about changing values of money, and a great many more. Mr Stone, of course, considers questions of this kind, but he himself very rarely claims to have arrived at certainty in his answers. Even if agreement on all these questions were possible, and there is little enough sign of this, the real meaning of the further inferences would remain troubled by the tentative uncertainty—the roughness of the estimates conceded by Mr Stone—which the nature of the evidence imposes. Yet the landed wealth of the seventeenth-century aristocracy is relatively well documented, by comparison, for instance, with the profits or losses of

¹⁶ *T.L.S.* 1966, 285f., 347, 407. The review was anonymous. But see also G. E. Aylmer in *Past and Present*, no. 32, 113ff.

court office or the familial history of the whole group; and everything about the aristocracy is well documented by comparison with other layers of society. Historians who put all their money on this kind of study and their trust in the guiding hand of sociology come to believe in certainties they have not demonstrated; they are likely to inflict many ill-established generalizations on the history books unless they show themselves more consistently aware of the deficiencies of both materials and methods than they would appear to be. There are some questions, however interesting, that cannot be answered, and attempts to force answers to them in the teeth of the historical evidence produces at best hypothesis, at worst false dogma. By all means let us have more studies of this kind, but let them be a little more modest in their claims; above all, let their proponents realize that these are neither the only nor necessarily the best ways of studying the past.

In any case, investigations on the scale attempted by Mr Stone are rare, and too many of his fellow-prophets seem content with a much more dangerous practice. They in effect accept the 'models' produced by their admired preceptors and use a form of analogical argument to apply them to history. In an earlier generation, the influence of biology, and especially of the theory of evolution, on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century historians provided a notorious example. Here historians found a doctrine in natural science which took account of their own cherished preoccupation with change, and which seemed to make undoctinaire sense of it. Death and decay, survival and renewal, are obvious facts of human history: it seemed reasonable to see them rationalized by the theory which explained similar events in the history of species. The result was an eruption of, or perhaps only a greater authority for, conventional

metaphors speaking of youth, maturity, decline, progress, survival of the fittest, and so on. The effects have sunk into conventional thinking on history and into its vocabulary; they are very hard to eradicate. The mistake may appear obvious when it leads to the biological determinism found in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, or in the sort of history which uses theories of national or racial superiority to explain success and failure as part of a large plan. The evolutionary theory of history has a good deal in common with that which sees the hand of God in history; after all, evolution was thought to explain the facts of natural creation in default of the existence of a creator. Such sweeping surveys, embodying the notion that what happened was bound to happen, attract by their simplicity but are among good historians readily undermined by the habits of caution and particular study to which they are trained. Less easily detected and eradicated is the biological error *in parvo*, the sort of metaphorical explanation which, for instance, treats the English Parliament at some stage as 'mature' and thinks in terms of an earlier childhood and adolescence, as though that institution—that congregation of identifiable and always adult men—had a biological history of its own, comparable to that of the individual. (When did it reach senility?)

The devotees of anthropology are particularly prone to this kind of analogical error, as when nineteenth-century Bantus and Polynesians are called in to explain things about supposedly primitive societies of the past like pre-Columbian America or German forest tribes. Study of a more strictly historical kind at once reveals such enormous differences in circumstances and situations that the value of such comparisons—even their capacity to suggest new questions and insights—becomes very problematical. In the article already quoted several