

THE
EVOLUTION OF
BRITISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

From Bacon to Namier

EDITED BY J. R. HALE

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PREFACE

However selective the aims of individual historians may be, their collective aim is to climb to an increasingly comprehensive view of the past. This anthology is designed to show by what feats of imagination and technique the hairpin turns in the road of historical writing have been engineered. The men represented here all possess certain qualities in common: literary ability, intellectual power, broad vision, a reflective, "philosophic" cast of mind, a scholarly and critical attitude toward their material, and a concern for the purpose, as well as the content, of history. None can be removed from the story of the development of historical writing in England without leaving a conspicuous void; all except one were pioneers. The exception is G. M. Trevelyan. I include him as the noblest example of those historians who were content with the straight road.

In the Introduction I attempt to give a brief account of the evolution of English historical writing. Historians use the groundwork of many—philologists, antiquarians, archaeologists—who are fine scholars without being themselves historians. They are moved by influences from abroad—Humanism, Rationalism, Marxism—and by currents of thought in their own society—romanticism, nationalism, the withering of faith in progress. A history book is itself a historical document and means most when most is known about the age in which it was produced. These points should be borne in mind when reading my bald account of the subject's inner laws of growth. The Introduction's purpose is to provide a background to the passages quoted in the anthology. The notes prefaced to each series of extracts are designed merely to give references, explain obscurities, and show how the study of a particular author can be followed up.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern British historical writing begins with a constellation of important works which appeared at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. In addition to Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614), William Camden's *History of Elizabeth* (1615), and Francis Bacon's *History of the Reign of King Henry VII* (1622), extracts from which are included in this book, there was John Stow's *Survey of London* (1598), the first scholarly history of an English town, and John Selden's *History of Tithes* (1621), the first detailed history of a particular institution. As in the growth of the drama from Marlowe to Webster, this sudden burst of activity, seeming as it did to blaze from darkness and die away again, while owing most to the accidental existence of men of genius, owes much to particular social and political conditions, and to the subject's previous development.

Medieval historians were the product of a lively interest in events and a desire to relate them to divine Providence; God played the game, while man watched and learned. The chronicler wrote *à longue haleine*, often going back to the Creation, when the board was first divided and the pieces fashioned. It was a nerve-racking game to watch, for though God wanted white to win, He had given the pieces free will; and while every move was His, He was sometimes forced to concede a piece to black. Having established the divine origin of the game, the chronicler described its progress, to show his readers how they could best collaborate with God's strategy, and as he wrote in

terms of kings, bishops, knights (and their castles) the lessons were all the more dramatic.

That the main function of history was to teach was a commonplace reaching from the preface to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* to North's preface to his translation (1579) of Plutarch's *Lives*; history "is a certain rule and instruction," as North said, "which, by examples past, teacheth us to judge of things present and to foresee things to come, so as we may know what to like of and what to follow, what to mislike and what to eschew." But during the sixteenth century the emphasis on what history taught shifted from morals to wisdom, and in particular, political wisdom. From being a repertory of sins punished, it became a storehouse of historical parallels.

This shift of emphasis was of great importance. It was caused in part by the example of Italian historians, notably by Francesco Guicciardini, whose *History of Italy* was translated into English in 1579, and by Niccolò Machiavelli, whose *History of Florence* was translated in 1595. As Bacon himself said, "We are much beholden to Machiavelli and other writers of that class who openly and unfeignedly declare or describe what men do, and not what they ought to do." And though this was a tribute to the author of *The Prince* rather than the frequently tendentious writer on Florentine history, it expressed a desire to see historical characters as true to life as possible, so that lessons could be learned from their actions that were relevant to life rather than to the hereafter.

This led to a changed attitude toward facts and causation; facts should be more copious and more authentic, and while God remained the first cause of human events, more stress should be laid on secondary causes, the freely willed actions of men. To the medieval chronicler, facts were what he saw and heard about, a few documents that were given wide circulation through copies—like Magna Carta, the charters of his monastery or the privileges of his town, and what he found in the writings of his predecessors. In the sixteenth century, even at its close, historians still reported what they heard from influential friends as though it were fact as well as opinion; they still accepted much that they found in chronicles as fact, but there was a steady tendency to play down the irrational, the "marvel" element in their narratives, and, most important of all, increasing use was made of state papers, the records of the law courts and local archives. Access to state papers depended on the favor of a high official—Camden was licensed to use them by Lord Burghley—or the courtesy of a

great record collector like Sir Robert Cotton, whose papers were a basis of Bacon's *Henry VII*, but however big the gaps, however uncritical the assumption that any document in an archive represented the *truth* rather than a means of getting at the truth, the work of the generation of writers from Stow to Selden established once and for all that documents and not secondary authorities are the essential foundation of reliable history.

While the use of documents was conditioned by the growth of libraries and manuscript collections, the improved organization of the public archives, and a tolerant attitude to their being searched by historians as well as by precedent-seeking lawyers, the appetite for consulting them came from changes in the life of the nation itself. The Reformation isolated Britain from Europe in a way that psychologically went much deeper than the previous losses of her wide territories in France; it stimulated a patriotic interest in the past as well as a desire to justify the break from Rome. And while the Reformation led—as had the violent accession of the Tudor dynasty—to much writing of history as propaganda, by the middle of Elizabeth's reign, when both religious settlement and dynasty seemed reasonably assured, men could at last discuss the astonishing succession of events since the Wars of the Roses without inhibition. Censorship remained, and was vigilant to note any incitement to treason based on past analogy, but by and large historians were able to investigate and celebrate the past as truthfully as they could. They were encouraged, as were the dramatists, by the existence of an enthusiastic audience. Many of this audience still wanted history of the old-fashioned See-the-Mighty-Humbled school, but there was also a wide demand for antiquarian surveys like Camden's *Britannia*, for municipal histories, and as the temper of international politics grew, for history that helped men make quick decisions in the light of similar situations in the past. Distinguished from most of Europe by religion, from all of it by its unique common law, and by a parliament which was regarded with a growing self-consciousness, Englishmen were primarily fascinated by themselves, and though important works on other countries appeared, like Richard Knolles's *General History of the Turks* (1603), historians were encouraged to devote themselves to their own country, and to archives.

The answer to the question "What is a fact?" is one test of the maturity of a period's historiography. The answer given by that generation, "Something written in a document or an inscription rather than

reported by a secondary source," was a significant advance, and it was to be long before documents themselves came to be treated with the caution we associate with the word "historicism." Another test is the extent to which historians are interested in causation; how seriously they try to trace the cause of an effect before throwing in their hands and invoking God, Fortune, or the Spirit of the Times.

It is interesting that one of the first works to call for attention to causes was the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559). This was an extremely popular collection of stories from English history told in verse, each of which described the catastrophe that overcame some great man because of excessive pride, ambition, or downright wickedness. It held a moralist's mirror to the past so that the present could learn from the succession of images revealed in it. Yet it is in this most conservative work that the following comment on the early Tudor chronicler Fabian occurs:

Unfruitful Fabian followed the face
Of time and deeds, but let the causes slip . . .
But seeing causes are the chiefest things
That should be noted of the story writers
That men may learn what ends all causes brings
They be unworthy of the name of Chroniclers
That leave these clean out of their registers
Or doubtfully report them.¹

The same point is made in a more sophisticated manner by Robert Bolton in his *Hypercritica, or a rule of judgement for writing or reading our Historians*, an essay of about 1618 which sums up the attitudes to historical writing of his day. "Christian authors," he noted, "while for their ease they shuffled up the reasons of events, in briefly referring all causes immediately to the Will of God, have generally neglected to inform their readers in the ordinary means of carriage in human affairs, and thereby maimed their narrations."

This passage gives another clue to the relish with which historical studies were pursued in the late Tudor and early Stuart age. Just as the early humanists in Italy were encouraged by scorn for their benighted forefathers, so Elizabethan historians felt impelled to correct the faults of their predecessors, and to show how history really should be written. Bolton goes on to emphasize that histories should not be

¹ Quoted in H. Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History*, 1944, pp. 15-16.

mere rag bags of miscellaneous information, however accurate, but should be methodically planned without the author exploiting his manner of selection in order to force his own point of view on the reader, and that the style should be appropriate to the subject matter, so that "the majesty of handling our history might once equal the majesty of the argument," and he singles out "Sir Francis Bacon's writings, which have the freshest and most savoury form and aptest utterance that (as I suppose) our tongue can bear." It was probably fortunate that English historians were not influenced by Italian humanist history in the fifteenth century, but by the more vigorous and less didactic vernacular historians of the sixteenth. The Italian voice spoke once directly to English ears in Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia* (1534-55), but they paid little heed to it; and the native tradition was brought through Hall and Holinshed into the late sixteenth century, where the influence of Italian and French theory and practice could refine without emasculating it.

Raleigh's *History of the World* represents a transitional stage between the old history and the new. He did not have time to carry out his plan of following up the history of the Jews, Greeks, and Romans with that of Britain, but it is not likely that, writing from the Tower and relying on copyists and the loan of materials, he intended to depend on documents. He is intent on displaying God's providence, and therefore begins with the Creation; he is blatantly patriotic ("If it be demanded, whether the Macedonian or the Roman were the best warrior, I will answer: the Englishman."); he digresses in terms of his own experience of war or voyaging, interrupting the narrative in defiance of Bolton's rules, and by constantly juxtaposing ancient and modern situations is prevented from feeling the essential distance in time of his Jews and Romans; he follows the See-the-Mighty-Humbled attitude of the *Mirror for Magistrates*. Talking of adversity, in the Preface, he wrote:

For seeing God, who is the author of all our tragedies, hath written out for us and appointed us all the parts we are to play, and hath not in their distribution been partial to the most mighty princes of the world; that gave unto Darius the part of the greatest emperor and the part of the most miserable beggar, a beggar begging water of an enemy to quench the great drought of death; that appointed Bajazet to play the Grand Signor of the Turks in the morning and in the same day the footstool of Tamerlane . . . why should other

men, who are but as the least worms, complain of wrongs? Certainly there is no other account to be made of this ridiculous world than to resolve that the change of fortune on the great theatre is but as the change of garments on the less. For when on the one and the other every man wears but his own skin, the players are all alike.

The appeal of history to Raleigh was essentially poetic: it raised men from the grave, it enabled men to visualize the earth when it was created, "how it was covered with waters, and again repopled. How kings and kingdoms have flourished and fallen, and for what virtue and piety God made prosperous, and for what vice and deformity he made wretched, both the one and the other." And besides, "it is not the least debt which we owe unto History that it both made us acquainted with our dead ancestors and out of the depth and darkness of the earth delivered us their memory and fame." The old and the new are both present here, the old in the harping on vice and virtue, the new in the emphasis on bringing men, real men, to life, described with a verve and an interest in character that made them in practice far more than exemplars of wretchedness and prosperity. And though no exact scholar, he compared sources where he could, and took from them what best aided the human credibility of his story. His precepts looked back, his practice looked forward. In precept he stressed the role of God as a cause, but in practice he pursued the secondary causes of accident and motive; on the title page we meet an allegory of history with the eye of *Providentia* watching over all, but we close the book with the feeling that man's destiny is largely in his own hands. Indeed "he contributed," as a modern historian has put it, "perhaps more than has been recognized, to that segregation of the spiritual from the secular which was the achievement of the seventeenth century."² It was his ability to express a new mood while retaining traditional formulae that gave the *History* its long hold over the public imagination. It went through ten editions (apart from abridgments) by 1687, it was commended by Oliver Cromwell to his son and was praised by the political philosopher John Locke. It outsold Spenser and Shakespeare; it remains, like the career of its author, one of the most enthralling witnesses to the contradictions, as well as the achievements, of the age.

² Christopher Hill, "Sir Walter Raleigh and History," in *The Listener*, June 7, 1962.

William Camden had no career at all, by the standards of a Raleigh: born in 1551, a schoolmaster, prebendary of Salisbury, Clarenceux King of Arms, a quiet old man's death in 1623. But few men have so well conveyed in their works the joys of research, of arranging material, and finally of re-creating in a work of literature ages felt to be of deep significance to scholar and patriot alike.

In 1586 Camden published his *Britannia*, a historical reconstruction of the topography of Roman and Anglo-Saxon Britain, though he went further than this and carried his investigations through the Danish and Norman conquests. The intellectual equipment required for this pioneer task was formidable, and we are lucky to have his own account, in the Preface, of how he set to work. "I got myself some insight into the old British [i.e., Welsh] and Saxon tongues for my assistance. I have travelled almost all over England, and have consulted in each county the persons of best skill and knowledge in these matters. I have diligently perused our own writers, as well as the Greek and Latin, who mentioned the least tittle of Britain. I have examined the public records of the kingdom, ecclesiastical registers and libraries, and the acts, monuments and memorials of churches and cities. These I have built upon as infallible testimonies, and have cited them as I had occasion in their own words, tho' never so barbarous, that by such unquestioned evidences justice might be done to truth." And to guide himself in his ordering of the material, and to avoid unnecessary digressions: "I took Pliny's advice and often read the title of my book, and at the same time put the question to myself: what it was I had undertaken?" This is the secret of Camden's greatness as an antiquary: he was not only constantly asking questions of his material—What does it mean? Is it true?—but of himself.

Such scholarship and such maturity of approach gave him an international reputation. In addition he had wit and charm and a refreshing scorn for those who thought antiquarian studies a waste of time. "If there are any who desire to be strangers in their own country, foreigners in their own cities and always children in knowledge, let them please themselves: I write not for such humours." Can a medievalist defend himself better? And he was no mere medievalist; with the *Annals* he became the first of historians—and the numbers are still not many—to be an acknowledged master of both early and recent times.

The project of writing a history of Elizabeth's reign was proposed by Burghley, who gave him access to state correspondence for the

purpose, but it was not concluded until 1617, some twenty years later. Again he describes his materials in a Preface: Burghley "set open unto me, first his own, and then the Queen's rolls, memorials, records," and after Burghley's death, "from all places I procured all the helps I could to write: charters and letters patentes of kings and great personages, letters, consultations in the council chamber, ambassadors' instructions and epistles. I carefully turned over and over the parliamentary diaries, acts and statutes. I ran through and read over every edict, or proclamation." In addition he had a journal in which he noted what he saw himself, or was told by "credible persons which have been present at the handling of matters, and such as have been addicted to the parties on both sides in this contrariety of religion." He has, he claims, avoided one-sidedness and prejudice in controversial matters, he has told the truth—though with caution. "Things manifest I have not concealed; things doubtful I have interpreted more favourably; things more secret I have not pried into." He goes on to say that he has avoided trivial matters (and in the text he goes out of his way to apologize for the occasional mention of monstrous whales and other wonders) unless they were necessary "that not only the events of matters, but the reasons and causes might be understood." He claims that he has avoided both digressions and invented speeches and kept the expression of his own opinions to a minimum. And as in writing the *Britannia* he has kept certain questions constantly in mind as he reviewed events; in this case the Polybian Why? How? and To what end?

For all the Englishry of his subject matter, Camden wrote both the *Britannia* and the *Annals* in Latin: he felt part of the international commonwealth of learning and wanted to be understood there. (The books were soon translated, and readily, for his Latin was of an easy, homely style.) It may seem that in writing annals Camden took a step backward, rejecting the more topical arrangement of humanist history and identifying himself with the methods of the chroniclers. But Tacitus, the acutest of Roman, and Guicciardini, the shrewdest of Renaissance, historians, had both used the annal form, and to contrast the *Annals* with Bacon's more topically arranged *Henry VII* is to realize that if Lord Verulam is the greatest theorist of the new history in England, Camden is its greatest practitioner.

Bacon was not an *érudit*: he had little sympathy with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. He looked around at the scattered blocks of scholarship that littered the different fields of learning and

longed to bring them together into a rationally planned structure; knowledge, if consciously pursued and properly systematized, would help man understand his world and improve it. It would promote both happiness and utility. The brilliantly imaginative synthesis which Bacon provided in the *Advancement of Learning* provides the best source for his attitude toward history. He surveyed the whole subject, trouncing its inadequacies and inventing new, and useful, categories. He wanted a systematic history of learning, for instance, "without which the history of the world seemeth to me to be as the statue of Polyphemus with his eye out, that part being wanting which doth most show the spirit and life of the person." He wanted a history of mechanical inventions and scientific experiment, a treatment of natural philosophy such "as shall not vanish in the fume of subtle, sublime or delectable speculation [how he knew where to hit the pedant!], but such as shall be operative to the endowment and benefit of man's life." And he continues in a way that represents his attitude toward history as a whole: "for it will not only minister and suggest to the present many ingenious practices in all trades, by a connexion and transferring of the observations of one art to the use of another, when the experiences of several mysteries shall fall under the consideration of one man's mind; but farther, it will give a more true and real illumination concerning causes and axioms than is hitherto attained."

For the majority of men, it was not speculation but history that brought wisdom, "for it is not St Augustine's nor St Ambrose's works that will make so wise a divine as ecclesiastical history, thoroughly read and observed." But if history is to fulfill its proper purpose of showing how actions flow from men's character, and serving as a guide to men's actions in the present, it must obey certain rules. It must be as full as possible, and as true to life as possible, not like those histories that "do rather set forth the pomp of business than the true and inward resorts thereof." An author ought not to deal with too long a period, as he "cannot but meet with many blanks and spaces, which he must be forced to fill up out of his own wit and conjecture," and he ought to select a period which had some logical shape, such as the history of England "from the uniting of the roses to the uniting of the kingdoms."

The dogmatic tone of the *Advancement* conceals some inconsistency in Bacon's attitude toward history. While he wished it to be based on inductive principles, like the natural sciences, he admitted that it

lacked an adequate certainty. While he wished it to teach in terms of what other men had done, he admitted the dependence of men's actions on a providential First Cause. Above all, he wrote, "I wish events to be coupled with their causes," but he had no clear theory of causation, and confused cause with origin, as though to describe the beginning of a course of action, or an event, was in fact to explain it. He insisted on the need for reliable detail, but scorned the business of acquiring it. "I hold it to be somewhat beneath the dignity of an undertaking like mine," he wrote crushingly, "that I should spend my own time in a matter which is open to almost every man's industry."³ But if the historian relies on the research of others, how can he be sure that he has the facts he needs for his work of explanation? Without personal acquaintance with the materials, how can the historian realize another of Bacon's aims, "to carry the mind in writing back into the past and bring it into sympathy with antiquity"?

The choice of Henry VII's reign as his single excursion into the writing of history suited most of Bacon's criteria for a satisfactory subject. The records were full, Henry was a politician whose career was pregnant with lessons for others, and as Bacon said in his dedication to the young Prince Charles, Henry was "that king to whom both unions may in a sort refer: that of the roses being in him consummate, and that of the kingdoms by him begun."

The book was written when Bacon was out of favor, and indeed excluded, save for a few weeks, from London, so copious original research was out of the question. He relied on chroniclers—Fabian, Hall, and Holinshed among them—on manuscripts loaned by Sir Robert Cotton, and on downright guesswork and invention. He alone gives us, as his severest critic, Wilhelm Busch, pointed out,⁴ the names of the 1496 and 1506 commercial treaties with the Netherlands as *Magnus Intercursus* and *Malus Intercursus*; the account of the fortune left by Henry on his death; the anecdotes about Morton's Fork and Henry's ape, who tore up the account book—to mention only the legends most familiar from textbook repetition. But for all the book's errors, Bacon's style and intelligence produced a historical classic. Who will ever forget that Henry VII was the king who "could not endure to have trade sick"? What other historian had written of unimportant men as Bacon wrote of two of the Cornish rebels: "The

³ Quoted in F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution*, 1962, p. 259.

⁴ In *England under the Tudors*, English trans., 1895, vol. I, pp. 416–23.

one was Michael Joseph, a blacksmith or farrier of Bodmin, a notable talking fellow, and no less desirous to be talked of. The other was Thomas Flammock, a lawyer, who, by telling his neighbours commonly upon any occasion that the law was on their side, had gotten great sway amongst them. This man talked learnedly, and as if he could tell how to make a rebellion and never break the peace." It was the freedom, the intimacy, and the wit of Bacon, rather than the earnest caution of Camden or the fitful splendor of Raleigh, that reappeared in the work of Clarendon, the first great successor to that triumvirate.

Clarendon is an exception in the list of great English historians, because none of the others, except Camden and Namier, wrote contemporary history, and Clarendon not only wrote about his own times, but included the important role he had played in them himself. His *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England Begun in the Year 1641* was a conflation of a historical narrative (written in 1646–48) and an autobiography (written in 1668–70). His determination to be strictly impartial, however, and his desire "that posterity should not be deceived" by party versions justified the decision to write history rather than memoirs, and the importance of his own role was a further justification, for "there was never yet a grand history written but by men conversant with business." Nor did he think it necessary, for history's sake, to go back to a time he himself did not remember. He determined to start with the beginning of Charles I's reign when he himself was a young man: "I am not so sharp-sighted as those, who have discerned this rebellion contriving from (if not before) the death of Queen Elizabeth." He saw the Rebellion not as the product of long-term causes but of the passions of men coming quickly to the boil.

Edward Hyde, later the Earl of Clarendon, while never an out-and-out royalist, was pushed by the parliamentary extremists into a close personal relationship with the King which lasted until Charles's death. The moment that swung Hyde from being a moderate and critical royalist to becoming the spokesman of the crown was the debate over the Grand Remonstrance,⁵ when the Long Parliament in 1641 presented its list of grievances against the crown. Thereafter, though Hyde joined the King's council and became responsible for writing his state papers, and continued writing them from Jersey even when

⁵ See pp. 130–38, below.

the King was in custody, and though it was he who drew up in 1660 the Declaration of Breda, which enabled Charles II to return to England, he remembered the principles and the friends of his more radical days; he wrote in the tone of his youth, as a supporter of King and Church well on this side of idolatry.

If Clarendon was cool about his own church, he was sickened by enthusiasm in the cause of a rival creed, and the greatest criticism that can be made against his *History* is its lack of sympathy for the puritan temperament. He could not see puritanism as a force which could link men together in steady opposition to church and state any more than he could see any economic common denominator among the rival parties. His offhand gesture toward a theory of causation put the rebellion down to "the same natural causes and means, which have usually attended kingdoms swoln with long plenty," that is, a growing irresponsibility and factiousness among individuals, as though a party had suddenly got out of hand and the gorged guests had become first querulous then violent. No longer-term view was necessary; all could be explained by watching the last hours of that fabled party, the period of Charles I's personal rule without parliament, as the tempers rose. So "by viewing the temper, disposition, and habit of that time, of the court and of the country, we may discern the minds of men prepared, of some to do, and of others to suffer, all that hath since happened; the pride of this man, and the popularity of that; the levity of one, and the morosity of another; the excess of the court in the greatest want, and the parsimony and retention of the country in the greatest plenty; the spirit of craft and subtlety in some, and the rude and unpolished integrity of others, too much despising craft or art; like so many atoms contributing jointly to this mass of confusion now before us." It is the presentation of these atoms in a series of brilliant character sketches that saves Clarendon's narrative from being a mass of inert information. When he looked at puritanism he saw an incomprehensible fanatic blur, but when he looked at individual puritans he saw courage and fixity of purpose and the appeal of a grave simplicity of manner. Without the "characters" his *History* would still be a remarkable achievement. The complex negotiations between court and parliament, and then between the factions among the royalists and the parties into which their opponents divided and subdivided, are described with a lawyerlike clarity and grasp of detail; long as the work is, his intelligence never slumbers while his pen moves on; it is present, as it is with Gibbon, in every paragraph, and he demands the

same close attention in the reader. From time to time he breaks off the narrative to look about and discuss the implications of some constitutional innovation, or some dramatic change of fortune, and shows himself in these digressions to be wiser than Raleigh and subtler than Bacon. But it is his portraits that raise his chronicle-memoir into a great history, by providing for the first time a story that is really credible in terms of its actors.

These "characters" have become literary anthology pieces, but their greatest merit is psychological. Clarendon drew on a tradition of character writing that started with the Elizabethan fascination with the "humours," and brought it to a refinement which has hardly yet been excelled. By the time of Hume the "character" had degenerated into a mechanical balancing of virtues against vices; Clarendon is at once more casual and more inward, and the range of his sympathies is wide. He employs a tone of musing retrospect, a rapid informality that presents the man and explains his actions and his influence with an effect of far greater realism than any measured obituary could achieve. His account of Hampden's debating technique adds life to the long descriptions of discussions in the Commons, his explanation of the power and the limitations of Pym illuminates much of the restlessness among the puritans, as his portrait of Charles explains much about the difficulties of the royalists. The *History* is a supreme example of how far a historian can be saved from bias and externality by an understanding of human nature.

History can be written, and written vigorously, within the experience of a single nation, but to advance in technique and purpose it must look outside, outside in time—as the Italian humanists looked back to the ancients—or in place, as the Jacobean triumvirate looked across to Italy and France. In the middle of the eighteenth century English historians once more looked over the Channel with the curiosity of Bacon and Camden, and the result was the creation of another "new history," and its first exponents formed a new triumvirate: Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. Like their predecessors, they did not stand alone, and the company that surrounded them can be studied in T. P. Peardon's excellent *The Transition in English Historical Writing* (1933), but they do stand out, with qualities of mind and style that speak to anyone interested in history, and not merely to the collectors of historiographical curiosities.

The continuity with Bacon was not broken. They too believed that history taught, and taught best through a detailed study of men which

avoided the miraculous; they too sighed at the thought of original research and preferred to systematize and generalize; they too equated "fact" with a statement in an approved authority and wished to study advanced societies rather than groping or barbarous ones; they too believed that history should deal with learning and science as well as politics, with the deeds of peace as well as of war, and by contributing to man's knowledge of himself help him to change his environment for the better. . . . But it is, after all, naive to expect revolutionary changes in attitudes toward history once the secular has come to predominate over the spiritual approach; history is not like a science that can transform itself with each new accretion of knowledge; it is tied too closely to human nature for that. The subject matter of history expands, the definition of a fact becomes more sophisticated, the problem of causation becomes complicated by the idea of impersonal forces: climatic, economic, social, but the motives for writing and reading it remain the same: curiosity, a delight in order, the hope of learning something about ourselves. We may discover a genuinely "new history" among the Martians; our own will always remain intelligible to a Bacon or a Camden.

This is not to say that Gibbon is simply Bacon in a peruke, but to suggest that the second triumvirate were nearer to their predecessors than to their immediate successors—to Macaulay, for instance. Between Gibbon and Macaulay lay the influence of Romanticism, not the romanticism that responded to the exotic—Gibbon thrilled to that—but the romanticism that brought with it an emotional sympathy with people in the past in terms of the ages in which they lived. Gibbon felt close to his Romans, as Machiavelli in his Tuscan farmhouse felt that he could converse with the shades of the ancients; but in each case there was an intellectual sympathy, not an imaginative understanding of their different backgrounds or of the crowded time-space that separated them.

The first volume of Hume's *History of England* appeared in 1754, of Robertson's *History of Scotland* in 1759, of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* in 1776. In France, Montesquieu's *Considérations sur la Grandeur et la Décadence des Romains* appeared in 1734 and his *Esprit des Lois* in 1748; Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV* was published in 1751, his *Essai sur l'histoire générale* in 1756. These were the works that brought the ideals of the French Enlightenment to England with an almost manifesto-like clarity: History should be secular, nonpartisan, instructive, and philosophical. As a secular study it should expose

superstition and treat men as permanent residents of the world, not as passengers in transit to a better one; it should not serve the interest of party—save the "forward" party, to which all reflective men should belong; it should show that man is happiest when he is politically free and spiritually independent. The "philosophical" criterion is the most elusive, but broadly it meant that the historian should arrange the letters of fact into sentences that had a reassuring or illuminating message. He should enter a significant (i.e., civilized) age in the past, and should explain its significance by careful presentation and, where necessary, by comment. Referring to the praise lavished by Dr. Johnson on Knolles's *History of the Turks*, Gibbon remarked, "I much doubt whether a partial and verbose compilation from Latin writers, thirteen hundred folio pages of speeches and battles, can either instruct or amuse an enlightened age which requires from the historian some tincture of philosophy and criticism."

To English historians, brought up in a narrative tradition, however rambling, the philosophical element in enlightenment history presented a problem: Where did you put it? The yearning to expatiate on the facts, to pursue analogies outside the time sequence, and to bring in social and economic facts were already present in Bolingbroke's *Remarks on the History of England* (1730–31), but he was professedly commenting on a very few facts: it was different when you were trying to find room in a crowded political narrative. The problem was put well by Dugald Stewart in his *Life of Robertson* (1801). "It became fashionable," he noted, "after the example of Voltaire, to connect with the view of political transactions, an examination of their effects on the manners and condition of mankind, and to blend the lights of philosophy with the appropriate beauties of historical composition. In consequence of this innovation, while the province of the historian has been enlarged and dignified, the difficulty of his task has increased in the same proportion: reduced, as he must frequently be, to the alternative either of interrupting unseasonably the chain of events, or, by interweaving disquisition and narrative together, of sacrificing clearness to brevity." The fact that this aspect of the French Enlightenment did not come easily to the descendants of Camden can be seen in the rash of introductions and appendices which appeared in their works, and in the raising of footnotes, as in Gibbon, to the level of table talk. And we should not take the word "philosophical," as applied to Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, too ponderously. Only Hume wrote as a philosopher with a theory about

man's psychology and his relation to society; with the others it seldom implies more than a thoughtful discursiveness, and sometimes less; when Edmund Burke congratulated Robertson by writing, "You have employed philosophy to judge manners, and from manners you have drawn new resources for philosophy," he only meant that Robertson had included more social history than was customary.

The "philosophical" element was both good and bad for the development of historical writing. It led to confidence; eighteenth-century historians looked on facts and authorities as rocks and sprang buoyantly from one to another. Their belief that history helped men to fuller and freer self-consciousness made them take the greatest pains with their style, so that they would be widely read. Their belief that they should write the history of civilization, not simply of politics, enabled the miscellaneous information about food and clothes and prices and social habits that Bolingbroke put in postscripts—and Hume in short appendices and Robertson in long ones—to become an essential ingredient in any general history and even to emerge in our own time as a rather dubious variety of history in its own right. On the other hand, it led to an impatience with exact scholarship, especially the criticism of sources, and with detail ("*ces malheureux détails*," as Voltaire called them), while the interpretation of the past in the light of modern needs prevented the English Enlightenment historians from remembering how past the past really was.

They were still caught in the Renaissance dilemma: they wanted certainty but they neither cared for detail nor defined the nature of a fact; they wanted, passionately, to *explain*, and they had no adequate theory of causation. So they stuck to a mainly one-thing-after-another political narrative, and there was as wide a divergence between their theory and practice as between the *Advancement of Learning* and *Henry VII*. But their work was instinct with Enlightenment aspiration, even if they did not express it, and the aspiration turned Robertson from a worthy into an adventurous historian, encouraged Gibbon's wit to play through his erudition, and allowed Hume to move from philosophy to history without feeling that he was turning traitor on his first and deepest passion.

David Hume published the earlier part of his *Treatise of Human Nature* in 1739, his *Essays, Moral and Political* in 1741, and continued to write philosophy until the seventeen fifties, when he turned to history and published his *History of England*, between 1754 and 1761. Why did the foremost English philosopher of the eighteenth

century change his subject, and what happened to history in a philosopher's hands? His main interest as a philosopher was in human nature and the psychological laws that lay behind men's actions, but after a decade of reflection he had run out of material. As a none-too-well-off Scot, he found the opportunities for observing exceptional men were limited and, in any case, like many professed students of human nature, preferred to find his material in books. History was a means of extending his field of observation, and he had already used a desultory reading of the classical historians this way. It may have been, too, that ambition supported the change. His philosophical works had not been widely acclaimed and the public's appetite for indifferent histories suggested that they would offer an enthusiastic welcome to a good one. "There is no post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of history," he wrote to a friend. He was reflecting a common opinion. The partisan bias of Whig-Tory history was notorious. In 1711 a correspondent to the *Spectator* proposed forming a society for men with "a strong passion toward falsehood. . . . We might be called the *historians*, for *liar* is become a very harsh word." The negative qualities of history in England, its bias, its haphazard or mechanical arrangement, its carelessness of style were widely lamented, and in Edinburgh, as nowhere else in the British Isles, there was an awareness of the positive qualities in the history of the French Enlightenment. From 1752 Hume was keeper of the library of the faculty of Advocates there; it was the finest library in Scotland and contained the materials he needed for his design to restore history to the English Parnassus by combining the impartial scholarship of Camden (the last great historian, in his eyes) with the synthesizing energy of Voltaire.

Not, however, with the rationalism of Voltaire. Hume did not believe that man behaved in terms of reason alone. He was dominated by his passions, he was affected by the customs of society. The utility of history did not lie in castigating past errors and providing blueprints for the future, but in establishing psychological laws that would explain men's actions. It was an advantage to Hume as a philosopher, but a disadvantage to his history, that he thought men were at all times the same. "The same motives always produce the same actions," he wrote in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*; "the same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees and distributed through society, have been, from the

beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises which have ever been observed among mankind. Would you know the sentiments, inclinations and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: you cannot be mistaken in transferring to the former *most* of the observations which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind is so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular." And again, of history: "Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour."

This concentration upon human nature led him to neglect periods like the Middle Ages, when human beings seemed two-dimensional and uninteresting, to play down any materialistic element in causation—climate, race, etc.—and to try to explain away, rather than to accept, religious conviction as a motive for men's actions. Luther, for instance, was an exception, and the historian is not interested in freaks. Hume did not collect spiritual phenomena any more than an entomologist chases after rabbits.

"Style, judgement, impartiality, care" were the qualities he aimed at. (The care did not extend to what he called "the dark industry" of original research, but it embraced novel subject matter—in the "social history" appendices—as well as handling printed materials with what was, for that time, a surprising caution and fairness.) They were qualities that brought him, at last, a wide public recognition. The Stuart volumes (1754 and '57) sold slowly, but as he went back to the Tudors (1759) and back further yet, with the volumes from Julius Caesar to Henry VII (1762), the demand grew, bringing him fame and a modest fortune. Edition followed edition; the *History* was continued by Smollett, it was continued again in 1834–35 by Thomas Hughes; it was bowdlerized for religious households and it was published in shortened forms for students. The editor of an edition in 1884 was the tough and erudite Tudor historian J. S. Brewer, and it is interesting to read his comment on the first modern history of England: "wherever there was *fair* evidence for Hume's statements, I have retained them, and still more frequently Hume's estimate of motives and characters, *when he had the facts* before him, because, though not

entirely free from prejudice, he had excellent good sense and sound judgement."

A measure of his freedom from partisan prejudice was the criticism he met from both sides, Whig and Tory. Whig history had been written to praise the constitution of 1688 and to blame the Stuarts for introducing a tyrannous parenthesis between liberty's infancy under the Tudors and its coming of age with the Glorious Revolution. The Tories denied that the Stuarts had perverted any legally consecrated freedoms inherent in the Tudor constitution; they believed that the "constitution" was no more than the way in which the country was governed at any one time under the leadership of a strong and divinely appointed king. This Whig point of view was not what has usefully come to be called "the Whig view of History," a tendency to stress in the past features still felt to be important in the present; it was rather the product of a specific attitude to the constitution. An extreme version was provided by Bolingbroke, who practiced Toryism in politics and Whiggery in his *Remarks on the History of England*. "The principles of the Saxon commonwealth," he asserted there, "were . . . very democratical; and these principles prevailed through all subsequent change." When these principles were changed it was the fault of the monarch and his court, "from whence it will follow that the great calamities which befell our country in the middle of the last century are unjustly charged on the spirit of Liberty, or on the nature of the British constitution of government."

Hume, as a man of the Enlightenment, was anticlerical, and the clerics in Scotland (as opposed to the parsons of England) were associated with Whiggery. This helped sustain his reluctance, as a historian, to accept the Whig thesis that parliament at the accession of James I represented something sacrosanct. For him constitutional "right" was based not on theory, especially not on legal archaeology which jumped from one favorable precedent to another—from Saxon "democracy" to the last parliaments of Elizabeth, via Magna Carta—but on what worked at a particular time and had the sanction of custom and authority. He saw the later Stuarts in an unfavorable light because they misused authority to flout custom, but as the constitution had been less settled in the reign of James I and Charles I they were not to be blamed too severely for trying to manipulate it. His natural skepticism about the probability of progress, and his interest in indi-

viduals rather than causes, led him to be a neutral. "Hume is really of both parties and of neither," as an acute critic has put it. "Toryism is evident in the defense of the Stuarts, the exaltation of tradition, the distrust of popular movements, the attack on the 'social contract.' Whiggism is evident in the reverence for liberty and toleration, the ridicule of the 'divine right of kings' and of 'passive obedience,' the distrust of oligarchy, the praise of the 'Glorious Revolution,' and the approbation of the commercial and industrial classes as the rulers of the state."⁶ For all this six of one and half dozen of the other, Hume's history looked like Tory history, and he Toryized English historical attitudes until Macaulay's attempt to rebut his "vast mass of sophistry" nearly a century later.

His friend and fellow Scotsman, William Robertson, was neither a philosopher nor a historian who chose to find fame where controversy was hottest. A minister and the son of a minister, he lived a tranquil life of study and became Principal of Edinburgh University and Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Yet, partly because he did not share the extrahistorical interests of Hume and was less volatile intellectually, he wrote better history and allowed French Enlightenment ideas to nourish his work more fruitfully. Englishmen, however, read English history, and Hume's work was read and debated long after his friend's histories of Scotland, Charles V, and America had been forgotten.

Robertson's view of history's proper subject matter was stated at the beginning of his *History of Scotland* (1759). Dividing Scottish history up to 1603 into four periods, he wrote:

The first period is the region of pure fable and conjecture, and ought to be totally neglected, or abandoned to the industry and credulity of antiquarians. Truth begins to dawn in the second period, with a light, feeble at first, but gradually increasing, and the events which then happened may be slightly touched, but with no particular or laborious inquiry. In the third period, the history of Scotland, chiefly by means of records preserved in England, becomes more authentic: not only are events related, but their causes and effects explained; the characters of the actors are displayed; the manners of the age described; the revolution in the constitution pointed out: and here every Scotsman should begin not to read only, but to study

⁶ E. C. Mossner. See introductory note, p. 142.

the history of his country. During the fourth period, the affairs of Scotland were so mingled with those of other nations . . . that its history becomes an object of attention to foreigners.

And later in the same work, he wrote that "to relate real occurrences, and to explain their real causes and effects is the historian's peculiar and only province."

When to this dislike of uncharted territory and this apparently unphilosophic aim, is added a shrinking from the "unpleasant task" of original research, one expects a series of pedestrian excursions along well-beaten tracks. But, in fact, Robertson had a thirst for out-of-the-way information akin to Gibbon's, and he is to be found sending to Vienna for copies of Mexican paintings, theorizing about the first settlement of America via the Bering Straits, and writing the first English contribution to the history of civilization in his stout introductory section *Charles V*: "A view of the progress of society in Europe from the subversion of the Roman Empire to the beginning of the sixteenth century." And all this in a prose which, for those who find Hume too colloquial, and Gibbon too exacting, is the supreme expression of eighteenth-century urbanity. "How could I suspect," wrote Horace Walpole to Robertson, on the publication of the *History of Scotland*, "that a man under forty, whose dialect I scarce understood . . . and who, I was told, had passed his life in a small living near Edinburgh—how could I suspect that he had not only written what all the world now allows to be the best modern history, but that he had written it in the purest English and with as much seeming knowledge of men and courts as if he had passed all his life in important embassies?" An even more striking compliment was Gibbon's comment on the same work. "The perfect composition, the nervous language, the well-turned periods of Dr Robertson, inflamed me to the ambitious hope that I might one day tread in his foot-steps."

There were two schools of historical writing in the eighteenth century: one of erudition, the other of interpretation. The *érudits* collected and published source materials and, especially in France, began to develop the art—by means of philology, palaeography, and archaeology—of cross-examining a document in order to check the reliability of its evidence. They were motivated by pure intellectual curiosity, though their choice of materials was influenced by religious controversy; it was, above all, the sources of early Christianity that were

studied. The interpreters, on the other hand, were interested in periods of achievement, not in origins, and were thus isolated from the *érudits* both in method and the periods studied. Only Gibbon, in studying the decline of Rome and the early Middle Ages, brought the two strands together. In his remarks about the relative importance of the various periods of Scottish history, Robertson had been following very closely the argument of the *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752), where Bolingbroke had said that it was mere antiquarianism to study a period before the political conditions in Europe were similar enough to contemporary times to be relevant to them. It was this argument that made him choose for his second work the age singled out by Bolingbroke as the beginning of modern times, the age of Charles V, when the politics of Europe were conducted in terms of a balance of power; and it was the consciousness of the utility of his subject that justified the medieval researches necessary for its prelude, the "View of the State of Europe."

The variety of subject matter in the "View," including religion, war, trade, law, customs, and government, and the care with which their interactions were examined, owed much to Voltaire. Referring to Voltaire's *Essai sur l'histoire générale*, Robertson acknowledged in the "Proofs and Illustrations," which supplemented the "View," that "I have often followed him as my guide in these researches; and he has not only pointed out the facts with respect to which it was important to inquire, but the conclusion which it was proper to draw from them." But he deplored Voltaire's failure to give references. Robertson wanted to contribute to literature, and to be easily read, but he combined this aim with a vision of research as a continuing process, and believed that it was his duty to enable others to carry on where he left off. So he became the pioneer of scholarly apparatus, providing bare references to his text and discussing problems of evidence and interpretation in the "Proofs and Illustrations," which equaled the "View" itself in bulk and amounted to the first English treatise on practical historical method.

It is not to be expected that Robertson should show much actual sympathy for his thousand-year prelude to modern times. He gives a remarkably solid and consistent explanation of how Europe groped its way back to respectability from barbarism, but he was Whiggish in the modern sense in his scorn of the blind alleys it explored en route. He deplored the wasted energies of scholars; "instead of cultivating those

arts which embellish human life, and render it comfortable, they were fettered by authority, they were led astray by example, and wasted the whole force of their genius in speculations as unavailing as they were difficult." However, he acknowledged the refining and progressive element in medieval religious life (including the development of canon law) more handsomely than other Enlightenment historians, and when he came to the Reformation he recognized that it was not just a question of more than half the world coming to its senses through a series of happy accidents.

In this way he outdistanced Voltaire and Hume, extending the techniques of synthesis and explanation he had learned in writing the "View" in a close analysis of the consequences of Spanish rule in the American colonies. For the charm and authority of its narrative, for the constant pressure of inquiry, and for its pioneering emphasis on the influence of geography, the *History of America* is the most interesting of all English Enlightenment contributions to modern history. It is not surprising that when Prescott was working on the same subject he noted in his journal: "Beware of Robertson. Never glance at him till after subject moulded in my mind and thrown into language."

At the present time there is a growing nostalgia among historians for the confidence and sense of purpose of Enlightenment history. More and more openly it is asked: "Why shouldn't we write history that is relevant to our age, selecting what time has shown to favor progress, and leaving blind alleys to the blind, with their specialized but restricted senses?" For such an attitude Robertson is the best and most reassuring model, but he also demonstrates one of its dangers. He had planned to include the history of British settlement in America. Then came the war of Independence. "I long flattered myself," he wrote, "that the war might terminate so favourably for Great Britain that I might go on with my work. But alas! America is now lost to the Empire and to me, and what would have been a good introduction to the settlement of British Colonies, will suit very ill the establishment of independent states." If history is planned exclusively to suit the present, it must run the risk of being overtaken by events.

While Robertson's books ranged the periphery of Englishmen's interest in history, Gibbon, like Hume, spoke to its center. The English were insular and patriotic, but they were educated through a classical curriculum. Nor did Gibbon ask for a suspension of disbelief; human nature was the same at all times, and no imaginative effort was re-

quired to understand the behavior of the Romans, no new set of values was needed to estimate the sorry history of Byzantium. And if Gibbon did not share the Enlightenment urge to explain events through the synthesizing of a great variety of subject matter, he gave the illusion that he did. There were enough asides and reflections in the course of his narrative to give it a "philosophic" cast.

The greatness of Gibbon's achievement depends on his choice of a subject that enabled him to deploy every one of his qualities of mind to the top of its bent; he could immerse himself in the past for long years without looking back to the present. He would have had no peace in writing as Hume did, "where every character is a problem, and every reader a friend or an enemy; where a writer is supposed to hang out a badge of party, and is devoted to the destruction of the opposite faction." But his achievement was due, too, to his method, and the way he set to work is a subject of perennial interest to any historian contemplating more than a slice of easy professionalism.

When—after considering and rejecting others—Gibbon had fixed on his subject, he conducted what G. M. Young has called "a reconnaissance in force, through the Imperial centuries and the Dark Ages up to the walls of Renaissance Rome." The whole was in his mind before he started to write, and every chapter, and every paragraph in every chapter, was considered with reference to the grand sweep of his theme. He was careful, however, not to complete his plan "prematurely," or to subordinate his reading too rigidly to it. "We must be careful," he noted, "not to make the order of our thoughts subservient to that of our subjects; this would be to sacrifice the principle to the accessory. The use of our reading is to aid us in thinking. The perusal of a particular work gives birth, perhaps, to ideas unconnected with the subject of which it treats. I wish to pursue these ideas; they withdraw me from my proposed plan of reading, and throw me into a new track, and from thence, perhaps, into a second, and a third. At length I begin to perceive whither my researches tend." Again, he describes in his *Autobiography* how before reading a book he called to mind the state of the subject with which it dealt and, as he went through it, constantly watched how it was supplementing his knowledge of the subject as a whole. In this way he was enabled to judge the value of a book and use it not merely to fill a notebook but to keep his mental horizon steadily expanding.

It was method that strengthened an already tenacious memory, but

he did make notes and, again, he tells to what use he put the cards on which they were written. He reviewed as many as would ballast a paragraph, and then, walking up and down his study (lined, thanks to a modest fortune, with nearly all the books he needed), he blocked the paragraph in his imagination, and only when its factual content had been absorbed in a general euphony would he write it down. It was some time before this method enabled him to compose fluently. He rewrote the first chapter twice, and the second and third once, before he could work steadily from paragraph to paragraph with little revision. As a result, though the *Decline and Fall* contains a staggering amount of factual information, it is expressed in the authentic tone of Gibbon's conversations with himself. In such circumstances, a man sets a high standard for his talk, and Gibbon's periods have an artifice missing from the speech which Robertson and Hume addressed more directly to the audience of their readers.

The *Decline and Fall* follows a straight narrative course for five centuries, then, after the reign of Heraclius, Gibbon turns his attention to Byzantium, Asia, and Africa in a series of long studies before he brings the threads together with the Crusades and the march of events to the fall of Constantinople. Finally, he surveys the fortunes of Rome through the Middle Ages. As far as originality of subject matter is concerned, the post-Heraclian period is the most impressive. This is the part of the work that led Carlyle to describe the work as "a kind of bridge that connects the ancient with the modern ages. And how gorgeously does it swing across the gloomy and tumultuous chasm of these barbarous centuries."

Gibbon, like his Scottish colleagues, had no taste for original research. He used only printed sources, and he did not scrutinize his authorities with the critical spirit of the French *érudits*. But he used *all* the sources and he read *all* the authorities. Where he can be faulted actually, it is for no sin of omission, but because little work had as yet been done by others; this is particularly true of his Asiatic and Byzantine sections. He could, it is true, be unfair. His refusal to see anything of value in the Byzantine Empire has been called "one of the most untrue, and most effective, judgements ever uttered by a thoughtful historian"; he did not appreciate the spiritual ferment that underlay the extension of Christianity; he can be accused of burking an exercise of the imagination for the sake of a good phrase when he writes of the Crusades, "I shall abridge the tedious and uniform narrative of