

## ON HISTORY.

CLIO was figured by the ancients as the eldest daughter of Memory, and chief of the Muses; which dignity, whether we regard the essential qualities of her art, or its practice and acceptance among men, we shall still find to have been fitly bestowed. History, as it lies at the root of all science, is also the first distinct product of man's spiritual nature; his earliest expression of what can be called Thought. It is a looking both before and after; as, indeed, the coming Time already waits, unseen, yet definitely shaped, predetermined, and inevitable, in the Time come; and only by the combination of both is the meaning of either completed. The Sibylline Books, though old, are not the oldest. Some nations have prophecy, some have not: but, of all mankind, there is no tribe so rude that it has not attempted History, though several have not arithmetic enough to count Five. History has been written with quipo-threads, with feather pictures, with wampum-belts; still oftener with earth-mounds and monumental stone-heaps, whether as pyramid or cairn; for the Celt and the Copt, the Red man as well as the White, lives between two eternities, and, warring against Oblivion, he would fain unite himself in clear conscious relation, as in dim unconscious relation he is already united, with the whole Future and the whole Past.

A talent for History may be said to be born with us, as our chief inheritance. In a certain sense all men are historians. Is not every memory written quite full with Annals, wherein joy and mourning,

conquest and loss, manifoldly alternate; and, with or without philosophy, the whole fortunes of one little inward Kingdom, and all its politics foreign and domestic, stand ineffaceably recorded? Our very speech is curiously historical. Most men, you may observe, speak only  
 5 to narrate; not in imparting what they have thought, which indeed were often a very small matter, but in exhibiting what they have undergone or seen, which is a quite unlimited one, do talkers dilate. Cut us off from Narrative, how would the stream of conversation, even among the wisest, languish into detached handfuls, and among  
 10 the foolish utterly evaporate! Thus, as we do nothing but enact History, we say little but recite it; nay, rather, in that widest sense, our whole spiritual life is built thereon. For, strictly considered, what is all Knowledge too but recorded Experience, and a product of History; of which, therefore, Reasoning and Belief, no less than Action and  
 15 Passion, are essential materials?

Under a limited, and the only practicable shape, History proper, that part of History which treats of remarkable action, has, in all modern as well as ancient times, ranked among the highest arts, and perhaps never stood higher than in these times of ours. For whereas,  
 20 of old, the charm of History lay chiefly in gratifying our common appetite for the wonderful, for the unknown; and her office was but as that of a Minstrel and Story-teller, she has now farther become a Schoolmistress, and professes to instruct in gratifying. Whether, with the stateliness of that venerable character, she may not have taken up something of its austerity and frigidity; whether, in the logical terse-  
 25 ness of a Hume or Robertson, the graceful ease and gay pictorial heartiness of a Herodotus or Froissart may not be wanting, is not the question for us here. Enough that all learners, all inquiring minds of every order, are gathered round her footstool, and reverently pondering her lessons, as the true basis of Wisdom. Poetry, Divinity, Politics, Physics, have each their adherents and adversaries; each little guild supporting a defensive and offensive war for its own special domain; while the domain of History is as a Free Emporium, where all these  
 30 belligerents peaceably meet and furnish themselves; and Sentimentalist and Utilitarian, Sceptic and Theologian, with one voice advise us: Examine History, for it is 'Philosophy teaching by Experience.'

Far be it from us to disparage such teaching, the very attempt at which must be precious. Neither shall we too rigidly inquire, how

much it has hitherto profited? Whether most of what little practical wisdom men have, has come from study of professed History, or from other less boasted sources, whereby, as matters now stand, a Marlborough may become great in the world's business, with no History save what he derives from Shakspeare's Plays? Nay, whether, in that same teaching by Experience, historical Philosophy has yet properly deciphered the first element of all science in this kind? What the aim and significance of that wondrous changeful Life it investigates and paints may be? Whence the course of man's destinies in this Earth originated, and whither they are tending? Or indeed, if they have any course and tendency, are really guided forward by an unseen mysterious Wisdom, or only circle in blind mazes without recognisable guidance? Which questions, altogether fundamental, one might think, in any Philosophy of History, have, since the era when Monkish Annalists were wont to answer them by the long-ago extinguished light of their Missal and Breviary, been by most philosophical Historians only glanced at dubiously, and from afar; by many, not so much as glanced at. 5 10 15

The truth is, two difficulties, never wholly surmountable, lie in the way. Before Philosophy can teach by Experience, the Philosophy has to be in readiness, the Experience must be gathered and intelligibly recorded. Now, overlooking the former consideration, and with regard only to the latter, let any one who has examined the current of human affairs, and how intricate, perplexed, unfathomable, even when seen into with our own eyes, are their thousandfold, blending movements, say whether the true representing of it is easy or impossible. Social Life is the aggregate of all the individual men's Lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies. But if one Biography, nay our own Biography, study and recapitulate it as we may, remains in so many points unintelligible to us, how much more must these million, the very facts of which, to say nothing of the purport of them, we know not, and cannot know! 20 25 30

Neither will it adequately avail us to assert that the general inward condition of Life is the same in all ages; and that only the remarkable deviations from the common endowment, and common lot, and the more important variations which the outward figure of Life has from time to time undergone, deserve memory and record. The inward condition of Life, it may rather be affirmed, the conscious or half-conscious aim of mankind, so far as men are not mere digesting 35

machines, is the same in no two ages; neither are the more important  
 outward variations easy to fix on, or always well capable of represen-  
 tation. Which was the greater innovator, which was the more important  
 personage in man's history, he who first led armies over the Alps, and  
 5 gained the victories of Cannæ and Thrasymene; or the nameless boor  
 who first hammered out for himself an iron spade? When the oak tree  
 is felled, the whole forest echoes with it; but a hundred acorns are  
 planted silently by some unnoticed breeze. Battles and war-tumults,  
 which for the time din every ear, and with joy or terror intoxicate  
 10 every heart, pass away like tavern-brawls; and, except some few Mar-  
 athons and Morgartens, are remembered by accident, not by desert.  
 Laws themselves, political Constitutions, are not our Life, but only  
 the house wherein our Life is led: nay, they are but the bare walls of  
 the house; all whose essential furniture, the inventions and traditions,  
 15 and daily habits that regulate and support our existence, are the work  
 not of Dracos and Hampdens, but of Phœnician mariners, of Italian  
 masons and Saxon metallurgists, of philosophers, alchemists, proph-  
 ets, and all the long forgotten train of artists and artisans; who from  
 the first have been jointly teaching us how to think and how to act,  
 20 how to rule over spiritual and over physical Nature. Well may we say  
 that of our History the more important part is lost without recovery,  
 and—as thanksgivings were once wont to be offered 'for unrecog-  
 nised mercies'—look with reverence into the dark, untenanted places  
 of the Past, where, in formless oblivion, our chief benefactors, with  
 25 all their sedulous endeavours, but not with the fruit of these, lie  
 entombed.

So imperfect is that same Experience, by which Philosophy is to  
 teach. Nay, even with regard to those occurrences which do stand  
 recorded, which, at their origin, have seemed worthy of record, and  
 30 the summary of which constitutes what we now call History, is not  
 our understanding of them altogether incomplete; is it even possible  
 to represent them as they were? The old story of Sir Walter Raleigh's  
 looking from his prison window, on some street tumult, which after-  
 wards three witnesses reported in three different ways, himself differing  
 35 from them all, is still a true lesson for us. Consider how it is that  
 historical documents and records originate; even honest records, where  
 the reporters were unbiassed by personal regard; a case which, were  
 nothing more wanted, must ever be among the rarest. The real lead-

ing features of a historical Transaction, those movements that essentially characterise it, and alone deserve to be recorded, are nowise the foremost to be noted: At first, among the various witnesses, who are also parties interested, there is only vague wonder, and fear or hope, and the noise of Rumour's thousand tongues; till, after a season, the conflict of testimonies has subsided into some general issue; and then it is settled, by majority of votes, that such and such a 'Crossing of the Rubicon,' an 'Impeachment of Strafford,' a 'Convocation of the Notables,' are epochs in the world's history, cardinal points on which grand world-revolutions have hinged. Suppose, however, that the majority of votes was all wrong; that the real cardinal points lay far deeper, and had been passed over unnoticed because no Seer, but only mere Onlookers, chanced to be there! Our clock strikes when there is a change from hour to hour; but no hammer in the Horologe of Time peals through the universe, when there is a change from Era to Era. Men understand not what is among their hands: as calmness is the characteristic of strength, so the weightiest causes may be most silent. It is, in no case, the real historical Transaction, but only some more or less plausible scheme and theory of the Transaction, or the harmonized result of many such schemes, each varying from the other, and all varying from Truth, that we can ever hope to behold.

Nay, were our faculty of insight into passing things never so complete, there is still a fatal discrepancy between our manner of observing these, and their manner of occurring. The most gifted man can observe, still more can record, only the *series* of his own impressions: his observation, therefore, to say nothing of its other imperfections, must be *successive*, while the things done were often *simultaneous*; the things done were not a series, but a group. It is not in acted, as it is in written History: actual events are nowise so simply related to each other as parent and offspring are; every single event is the offspring not of one, but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements. And this Chaos, boundless as the habitation and duration of man, unfathomable as the soul and destiny of man, is what the historian will depict, and scientifically gauge, we may say, by threading it with single lines of a few ells in length! For as all Action is, by its nature, to be figured as extended

in breadth, and in depth, as well as in length; that is to say, is based on Passion and Mystery, if we investigate its origin; and spreads abroad on all hands, modifying and modified; as well as advances towards completion,—so all Narrative is, by its nature, of only one dimension; only travels forward towards one, or towards successive points: Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*. Alas, for our ‘chains,’ or chainlets, of ‘causes and effects,’ which we so assiduously track through certain hand-breadths of years and square miles, when the whole is a broad, deep Immensity, and each atom is ‘chained’ and complected with all! Truly, if History is Philosophy teaching by Experience, the writer fitted to compose History is hitherto an unknown man. The Experience itself would require All-knowledge to record it,—were the All-wisdom needful for such Philosophy as would interpret it, to be had for asking. Better were it that mere earthly Historians should lower such pretensions, more suitable for Omniscience than for human science; and aiming only at some picture of the things acted, which picture itself will at best be a poor approximation, leave the inscrutable purport of them an acknowledged secret; or, at most, in reverent Faith, far different from that teaching of Philosophy, pause over the mysterious vestiges of Him, whose path is in the great deep of Time, whom History indeed reveals, but only all History, and in Eternity, will clearly reveal.

Such considerations truly were of small profit, did they, instead of teaching us vigilance and reverent humility in our inquiries into History, abate our esteem for them, or discourage us from unweariedly prosecuting them. Let us search more and more into the Past; let all men explore it, as the true fountain of knowledge; by whose light alone, consciously or unconsciously employed, can the Present and the Future be interpreted or guessed at. For though the whole meaning lies far beyond our ken; yet in that complex Manuscript, covered over with formless, inextricably entangled, unknown characters,—nay, which is a *Palimpsest*, and had once prophetic writing, still dimly legible there,—some letters, some words, may be deciphered; and if no complete Philosophy, here and there an intelligible precept, available in practice, be gathered, well understanding, in the mean while, that it is only a little portion we have deciphered, that much still remains to be interpreted; that History is a real Prophetic Manuscript, and can be fully interpreted by no man.

But the Artist in History may be distinguished from the Artisan in History; for here, as in all other provinces, there are Artists and Artisans; men who labour mechanically in a department, without eye for the Whole, not feeling that there is a Whole; and men who inform and ennoble the humblest department with an Idea of the Whole, and habitually know that only in the Whole is the Partial to be truly discerned. The proceedings, and the duties of these two, in regard to History, must be altogether different. Not, indeed, that each has not a real worth, in his several degree. The simple Husbandman can till his field, and by knowledge he has gained of its soil, sow it with the fit grain, though the deep rocks and central fires are unknown to him: his little crop hangs under and over the firmament of stars, and sails through whole untracked celestial spaces, between Aries and Libra; nevertheless, it ripens for him in due season, and he gathers it safe into his barn. As a Husbandman he is blameless in disregarding those higher wonders; but as a Thinker, and faithful inquirer into Nature, he were wrong. So likewise is it with the Historian, who examines some special aspect of History, and from this or that combination of circumstances, political, moral, economical, and the issues it has led to, infers that such and such properties belong to human society, and that the like circumstances will produce the like issue; which inference, if other trials confirm it, must be held true and practically valuable. He is wrong only, and an Artisan, when he fancies that these properties, discovered or discoverable, exhaust the matter, and sees not at every step that it is inexhaustible.

However, that class of cause-and-effect speculators, with whom no wonder would remain wonderful, but all things in Heaven and Earth must be ‘computed and accounted for;’ and even the Unknown, the Infinite, in man’s Life, had, under the words *enthusiasm*, *superstition*, *spirit of the age*, and so forth, obtained, as it were, an algebraical symbol and given value,—have now well-nigh played their part in European culture; and may be considered, as in most countries, even in England itself, where they linger the latest, verging towards extinction. He who reads the inscrutable Book of Nature, as if it were a Merchant’s Ledger, is justly suspected of having never seen that Book, but only some school Synopsis thereof; from which, if taken for the real Book, more error than insight is to be derived.

Doubtless also, it is with a growing feeling of the infinite nature  
 of History, that in these times, the old principle, Division of Labour,  
 has been so widely applied to it. The Political Historian, once almost  
 the sole cultivator of History, has now found various associates, who  
 5 strive to elucidate other phases of human Life; of which, as hinted  
 above, the political conditions it is passed under, are but one; and  
 though the primary, perhaps not the most important, of the many  
 outward arrangements. Of this Historian himself, moreover, in his  
 own special department, new and higher things are beginning to be  
 10 expected. From of old, it was too often to be reproachfully observed  
 of him, that he dwelt with disproportionate fondness in Senate-houses,  
 in Battle-fields, nay, even in Kings' Ante-chambers; forgetting, that  
 far away from such scenes, the mighty tide of Thought and Action  
 was still rolling on its wondrous course, in gloom and brightness; and  
 15 in its thousand remote valleys, a whole world of Existence, with or  
 without an earthly sun of Happiness to warm it, with or without a  
 heavenly sun of Holiness to purify and sanctify it, was blossoming and  
 fading, whether the 'famous victory' were won or lost. The time  
 seems coming when much of this must be amended; and he who sees  
 20 no world but that of courts and camps; and writes only how soldiers  
 were drilled and shot, and how this ministerial conjuror out-conjured  
 that other, and then guided, or at least held, something which he  
 called the rudder of Government, but which was rather the spigot of  
 Taxation, wherewith, in place of steering, he could tap, and the more  
 25 cunningly the nearer the lees—will pass for a more or less instructive  
 Gazetteer, but will no longer be called a Historian.

However, the Political Historian, were his work performed with all  
 conceivable perfection, can accomplish but a part, and still leaves  
 room for numerous fellow-labourers. Foremost among these comes  
 30 the Ecclesiastical Historian; endeavouring, with catholic or sectarian  
 view, to trace the progress of the Church, of that portion of the social  
 establishments, which respects our religious condition, as the other  
 portion does our civil, or rather, in the long run, our economical  
 condition. Rightly conducted, this department were undoubtedly the  
 35 more important of the two; inasmuch as it concerns us more to  
 understand how man's moral well-being had been and might be pro-  
 moted, than to understand in the like sort his physical well-being;  
 which latter is ultimately the aim of all Political arrangements. For the

physically happiest is simply the safest, the strongest; and, in all conditions of Government, Power (whether of wealth as in these days, or of arms and adherents as in old days) is the only outward emblem and purchase-money of Good. True Good, however, unless we reckon Pleasure synonymous with it, is said to be rarely, or rather never, offered for sale in the market where that coin passes current. So that, for man's true advantage, not the outward condition of his life, but the inward and spiritual, is of prime influence; not the form of Government he lives under, and the power he can accumulate there, but the Church he is a member of, and the degree of moral Elevation he can acquire by means of its instruction. Church History, then, did it speak wisely, would have momentous secrets to teach us: nay, in its highest degree, it were a sort of continued Holy Writ; our Sacred Books being, indeed, only a History of the primeval Church, as it first arose in man's soul, and symbolically embodied itself in his external life. How far our actual Church Historians fall below such unattainable standards, nay, below quite attainable approximations thereto, we need not point out. Of the Ecclesiastical Historian we have to complain, as we did of his Political fellow-craftsman, that his inquiries turn rather on the outward mechanism, the mere hulls and superficial accidents of the object, than on the object itself; as if the Church lay in Bishops' Chapter-houses, and Ecumenic Council Halls, and Cardinals' Conclaves, and not far more in the hearts of Believing Men, in whose walk and conversation as influenced thereby, its chief manifestations were to be looked for, and its progress or decline ascertained. The History of the Church is a History of the Invisible as well as of the Visible Church; which latter, if disjoined from the former, is but a vacant edifice; gilded, it may be, and overhung with old votive gifts, yet useless, nay, pestilentially unclean; to write whose history is less important than to forward its downfall.

Of a less ambitious character are the Histories that relate to special separate provinces of human Action; to Sciences, Practical Arts, Institutions, and the like; matters which do not imply an epitome of man's whole interest and form of life; but wherein, though each is still connected with all, the spirit of each, at least its material results, may be in some degree evolved without so strict a reference to that of the others. Highest in dignity and difficulty, under this head, would be our histories of Philosophy, of man's opinions and theories re-

specting the nature of his Being, and relations to the Universe Visible and Invisible; which History, indeed, were it fitly treated, or fit for right treatment, would be a province of Church History; the logical or dogmatical province thereof; for Philosophy, in its true sense, is or should be the soul, of which Religion, Worship, is the body; in the healthy state of things the Philosopher and Priest were one and the same. But Philosophy itself is far enough from wearing this character; neither have its Historians been men, generally speaking, that could in the smallest degree approximate it thereto. Scarcely since the rude era of the Magi and Druids has that same healthy identification of Priest and Philosopher had place in any country: but rather the worship of divine things and the scientific investigation of divine things have been in quite different hands, their relations not friendly but hostile. Neither have the Brückers and Bühles, to say nothing of the many unhappy Enfields who have treated of that latter department, been more than barren reporters, often unintelligent and unintelligible reporters, of the doctrine uttered, without force to discover how the doctrine originated, or what reference it bore to its time and country, to the spiritual position of mankind there and then. Nay, such a task did not perhaps lie before them, as a thing to be attempted.

Art also, and Literature are intimately blended with Religion; as it were outworks and abutments, by which that highest pinnacle in our inward world gradually connects itself with the general level, and becomes accessible therefrom. He who should write a proper History of Poetry, would depict for us the successive Revelations which man had obtained of the Spirit of Nature; under what aspects he had caught and endeavoured to body forth some glimpse of that unspeakable Beauty, which in its highest clearness is Religion, is the inspiration of a Prophet, yet in one or the other degree must inspire every true Singer, were his theme never so humble. We should see by what steps men had ascended to the Temple; how near they had approached; by what ill hap they had, for long periods, turned away from it, and grovelled on the plain with no music in the air, or blindly struggled towards other heights. That among all our Eichhorns and Wartons there is no such Historian, must be too clear to every one. Nevertheless let us not despair of far nearer approaches to that excellence. Above all let us keep the Ideal of it ever in our eye; for thereby alone have we even a chance to reach it.

Our histories of Laws and Constitutions, wherein many a Montesquieu and Hallam has laboured with acceptance, are of a much simpler nature, yet deep enough if thoroughly investigated; and useful, when authentic, even with little depth. Then we have Histories of Medicine, of Mathematics, of Astronomy, Commerce, Chivalry, Monkeny; and Goguets and Beckmanns have come forward with what might be the most bountiful contribution of all, a History of Inventions. Of all which sorts, and many more not here enumerated, not yet devised and put in practice, the merit and the proper scheme may require no exposition.

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In this manner, though, as above remarked, all Action is extended three ways, and the general sum of human Action is a whole Universe, with all limits of it unknown, does History strive by running path after path, through the Impassable, in manifold directions and intersections, to secure for us some oversight of the Whole; in which endeavour, if each Historian look well around him from his path, tracking it out with the *eye*, not, as is more common, with the *nose*, she may at last prove not altogether unsuccessful. Praying only that increased division of labour do not here as elsewhere, aggravate our already strong Mechanical tendencies, so that in the manual dexterity for parts we lose all command over the whole; and the hope of any Philosophy of History be farther off than ever, let us all wish her great, and greater success.

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