

# WHY IS HISTORY REWRITTEN ?

BY LUCY M. SALMON.

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A YOUNG engineer was recently talking with a group of persons who are giving their lives to the study of history, and during the conversation he remarked, "Your work is of course plain sailing; you do not have to contend with such difficult problems as we do." The verdict expressed by a member of a different guild of workers in the field of knowledge possibly reflects the opinion held by many intelligent persons everywhere. The problems of history doubtless do appear simple to those not actively engaged in attempting their solution—do we not all bear with ease the burdens of others, assume with success their responsibilities, expend with wisdom their income, and invest with large profit their capital? But the student of history is not misled by outward appearances; he knows his task is not an easy one, however much so it may appear to others.

Among all the many problems that confront the historian, none is more serious than that of the necessity of constantly rewriting history. Yet to the incredulous this may seem but an imaginary difficulty. Why, they may ask, does the historian feel this pressure to do over again what has once been done? Surely, if history has been once written it ought to stand; history deals with facts, these facts do not change, and the duplication of work already done means wasted, fruitless effort. Moreover, history is an interesting form of literature, and any one who has a mind "of ordinary education and experience," as Alexander Bain has expressed it, and wields a facile pen will have no difficulty in making his contribution to the literature of history. If the facts of history do not change, and if they have been presented in attractive literary form, the historian is condemning himself to a veritable labor of Sisyphus. Why does history need to be rewritten?

The question is not unreasonable. The largest literary output to-day is said to be in the field of history, yet much of this is apparently a duplication of what has already been done. Within the past few years in America, England, France, and Germany there have appeared various general histories of the world, usually written on the co-operative plan, all practically covering the same field. Within recent years the history of England has been written and rewritten and this not simply to afford a choice between an epitome of English history and an exhaustive description of its past, between a constitutional and an ecclesiastical history, between a history of a limited period and one covering the entire field; but in many cases the histories apparently cover practically the same ground, with the same exhaustiveness or the same condensation, and illustrate the same phase of England's past. Nor has America offered the historian a less fertile soil. History after history has come from the press, and these histories have been written by the individual historian, or through the co-operation of many historians; they have been published in one volume or in a dozen; they have dealt with the military or with the literary aspects of our past; they have presented the point of view of different geographical sections or of different political parties; yet fundamentally they are apparently the same. Nor are the conditions at all different in the case of a more remote period. From the time of Herodotus and Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus, to the current year, historian after historian has found his theme in

"the glory that was Greece  
And the grandeur that was Rome."

And yet of all these countless histories few to-day satisfy either the writer or the reader of the past—"the six best sellers" of last year are not more effectively forgotten than are, for the most part, the works of the great historians of the past.

In undertaking to give a partial answer to the question, two great groups of reasons may be presented here; one of these pertains to the questions that deal with the subject-matter of history, and the second group relates to the improvement in methods of work.

The most obvious reasons that compel the rewriting of history concern its subject-matter, and of all of these the

most obvious is the simple fact that new material is being constantly found. The recovery of *The Constitution of Athens*, attributed to Aristotle, "has rendered obsolete any history of the Athenian constitution that was written before the year 1891"; the recovery of the manuscript of Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation* made possible a new history of the Pilgrims; a previously unknown contemporaneous account of the death of Luther found in an old book in Philadelphia, and the marginal notes of a sixteenth-century Bible in the library of an American university, contribute new knowledge of the times of Luther—these are but hints of what prolonged, systematic search, or the chance of a day, may add in the way of new literary material to the stores of the historian.

Yet while the discovery of new literary material makes the rewriting of history from time to time necessary, this is, after all, but a minor element in the rewriting of history. The rewriting of history is made necessary rather because large classes of material previously unknown or neglected have been placed at the service of the historian. To-day the historian of Greece feels that it is almost possible for him to rewrite the history of Greece from its dawn until its twilight, and the history of the individual Greek from the cradle to the grave, from the study of inscriptions alone. Yet so recent and so voluminous a work as Grote's *History of Greece* shows little trace of the use of inscriptions as a source of Greek history. While it is true that Herodotus and Thucydides, as other Greek historians, made use of inscriptions, it was not until Boeckh, in 1825, began the publication of his monumental *Corpus Inscriptionum Græcarum* that their general use became possible. To-day we have available for the study of Greek history at least thirty thousand or forty thousand inscriptions, while Mommsen's great contribution to our knowledge of Rome has not been his own *History of Rome*, but rather his edition of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, which, with its continuation, has placed at the service of historians nearly two hundred thousand inscriptions bearing on the history of Rome prior to the establishment of the Roman Empire.

History needs to be rewritten because of the growing spirit of democracy in the republic of letters. Once the records of history were practically inaccessible to all except the elect. To-day material that was previously available

only for the few is being made available for all. The growing demand for publicity in the conduct of business, in the enactment of legislation, in the transactions of courts, has made itself felt in the opening up to all of many State records and of secret archives the use of which had previously been reserved to a few or even denied to all. Again, many private and personal records, as diaries, journals, memoirs, letters, and correspondence, are from time to time made available by the expiration of the time limit set by their original authors or owners for their publication. Frequently this material is of too personal or intimate a character to make its publication wise or advisable during the lifetime of any of the persons mentioned, and its publication is prohibited by will prior to a certain fixed date. The memoirs of Talleyrand were not given to the world until fifty-three years from the date of their author's death. The diary of John Quincy Adams remained in manuscript for nearly thirty years after the death of its author. Frequently important papers remain for an indefinite period in the possession of private families, but are ultimately deposited in public libraries or are purchased by the State, and hence their usefulness is multiplied. The papers of Andrew Jackson have but recently been acquired by the Library of Congress, and will soon for the first time be accessible to all. Much material has been unavailable for general use because but a single copy has been known to exist, and the reprinting or duplication of single copies has often made possible new points of view for the historian. Publishers long hesitated to republish works that were out of print, but they are now meeting the recognized demand for inexpensive reprints. Even so indispensable a work for the study of the French Revolution as Arthur Young's *Travels in France* was long to be found only in great libraries, but to-day may be in the hands of every reader and student.

History again needs to be rewritten, in order to prune away the excrescences of tradition—in history, as in nature, “tall oaks from little acorns grow.” Eginhard, for example, in writing in the ninth century his life of Charlemagne, describes the battle of Roncesvalles and enumerates among those who fell “Roland, Governor of the March of Brittany.” This is the only mention in history of the hero who for a thousand years has been a central figure in the literature and the art of every nation in Europe west of

Russia. Here, as in so many instances, an initial kernel of truth has become so surrounded by legend as to be entirely concealed, and thus history must be rewritten to separate this kernel from the worthless husks.

The poet also has laid a burden on the historian. The Duke of Marlborough is credited with saying that all the English history he ever knew he had learned from Shakespeare. This source of his knowledge must have left wide *lacunæ* in his stores of historical knowledge—*King John* gives us no hint of Magna Charta or of the meeting of the barons; *Henry VIII.* cannot be considered an exhaustive account of relations between Church and State; in *Richard III.* the king as an individual occupies the foreground; questions of succession and of rival royal lines rather than statecraft lend themselves to dramatic interest. The purpose of the dramatist and that of the historian are in a sense diametrically opposed to each other—the good dramatist must almost of necessity be found wanting as an historian, and the historian with dramatic tendencies is in danger of being disqualified as an historian. To expect the dramatist to be at the same time an historian is to expect the impossible. Yet the dramatist and the poet often deal with historical events, and not infrequently deal with them in such a manner as to give rise to serious misconceptions that must be corrected by the historian. There is, for example, a somewhat hackneyed phrase to the effect that the sea and the mountains are the natural home of liberty, and this is often taught as an historical truth. Yet Mr. H. B. George has found its source to be, not in history, which, indeed, contradicts it, but in a sonnet of Wordsworth's. Macaulay, in his *Lays of Ancient Rome*, has dealt gently with the probabilities of history, and has not hesitated to use them in such a manner as will produce the best dramatic effect. To the poet laureate must be charged many misstatements that make it necessary for the historian to follow in his wake and correct the excesses of his imagination, that grow out of his official position—Dryden's *Cromwell* and *Ad Astra* may well be interchanged in their eulogies of Cromwell and of Charles II.

Another reason for rewriting history is the necessity of correcting the false assumptions of writers of history. History has often been written along the line of least resistance; and thus it has been easier to write history by the deductive

rather than by the inductive method, to assume an hypothesis either through carelessness or ignorance, and to make facts, if any are used, conform to these assumed theses. These assumptions, frequently clothed in language that carries conviction, usually deal with large generalizations and are often extremely difficult to disprove. Many of them are the familiar coin of the pseudo-historian, and many of them have passed current even till to-day. Among the favorite assumptions that have gained currency are those that the western division of the Roman Empire fell in 476, that the belief that the year 1000 was to bring the end of the world was universally accepted, that Peter the Hermit instigated the first crusade, that the fall of Constantinople introduced Greek learning into the west, that taxation without representation caused the American Revolution, that Washington as a boy chopped down his father's cherry-tree, that Jefferson tied his horse to a fence and walked alone to his Inauguration. These assumptions and their kin, whose numbers are legion, crowd the pages of history, and their presence there affords one of the most fruitful reasons why history has to be rewritten.

Next of kin to these false assumptions, on the part of writers of history, are the false and perverted statements of historians. Perhaps no period of history has afforded so inviting a field for these false statements as has that of the French Revolution. The temptation has been strong to write of it in terms of black or white, and the temptation has not always been resisted. Carlyle may not have been the chief of sinners in his treatment of this period—Lamartine preceded him in point of time, and his *The Girondists* set the example for an impassioned, rhapsodical view of the times, while Hillaire Belloc, in his *Ten Lines of Taine*, has shown that the succession has been maintained. But it has been Carlyle that has given us word-pictures that have held up to scorn and ridicule the chief actors of the period—pictures that have clung in the mind and are with difficulty dislodged in spite of the painstaking efforts of accurate historians to set the matter right. The historian of to-day must, indeed, feel that "he is wounded in the house of his friends" when his predecessors have been at little pains to ascertain the truth in regard to the past and have preferred to give a picturesque version of imaginary events rather than a sober, accurate account of what really oc-

curred. It is much to be regretted that the writing of history has always suffered and must always suffer from the inability of historians to know the facts of the past. But it is little less than tragic that so many historians able to reconstruct the past aright are forced to spend a large part of their lives in attempting to correct the errors made by careless, indifferent, ignorant writers who pose as historians.

History must be rewritten to correct the personal equation. All histories written during the supremacy of a strong line of kings, or of a powerful political party, or emanating from an influential church organization, are prone to be affected by the personal elements involved. Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, with the best of intentions, could scarcely fail to be colored by the ultimate success of the Royalist party. For nearly two hundred years after its downfall, all histories of the Commonwealth were written by representatives of the Royalist party, and the publication of Cromwell's *Letters* was necessary to correct the personal equation in the work of previous historians, as it has in turn been necessary to correct the work of Carlyle by that of Firth. Text-books used in the schools of the north and of the south are still far apart in their treatment of our own Civil War, yet ultimately they must approach each other as the personal and sectional element in each is eliminated.

History must, therefore, be rewritten because many questions affect the subject-matter with which it deals—new material is constantly being discovered; material previously inaccessible is made available for the use of all; tradition must be separated into its component parts; poetry must be regarded as poetry, and not interpreted with literal exactness; the unsubstantiated assumptions of historians must be investigated; the false and perverted accounts of pseudo-historians must be set right; and the personal equation of former historians must be corrected. Were no other factors involved in the problem aside from those that affect the material with which history deals, it is not too much to say that the history of every period and of every subject that has ever been written would have to be rewritten.

But weighty as are all these reasons for rewriting history, even more weighty ones are found in that class that relates to improvements in methods of work. These include not

only improvements in technique, but the fundamental ones that are involved in methods of research, those that grow out of the application of the principle of division of labor, and others that come through the development of other branches of knowledge, while increasing precision and growing refinements of classification have affected for the better the methods of the historian, as these have also been affected by the realization of the important part played both by the constructive imagination and by the development of the science of historical criticism, and most of all by the substitution of the inductive for the deductive method.

The activities that are involved in methods of research concern first of all the discovery and location of historical material. As one of the great works of the astronomer of to-day is charting the heavens, so one of the tasks of the historian of the day is charting the location of historical material. Sixty thousand new worlds are reported to have been discovered as a result of the observations of one department of the Carnegie Institution, and the net results of this one department bid fair to be rivaled by the amount of important historical material located through different agencies. In more than one country is found to-day a great center of activity charged with the task of finding out what material exists for the study of definite periods of history. In America the Department of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington has already sent its representatives to England, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Mexico to investigate the location and the condition of manuscript material available for the study of American history in its international relations. In England workers in the Public Record Office are making the treasures of the office available for historians. Conferences of archivists discuss the relative advantages of keeping and of making serviceable the documentary material of every country.

But the locating of material implies the succeeding step of preparing it for the use of the historian, and this involves first of all, as far as it has to do with literary material, the question of editing manuscripts. The time is not beyond the reach of memory when any writer or teacher who was broken in health or had made a partial failure in his profession was believed to be abundantly qualified to act as an editor. Happily for historical research those days are past. The principles of correct, reasonable editing



have been worked out from both theory and experience, and they have been incorporated in such perfect illustrations of ideal editing as is seen in Stevens's *Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America*, Thwaites's *Jesuit Relations*, and Paltsits's *Minutes of the Executive Council*. The editor no longer corrects the spelling, the grammar, the phraseology, and the moral sentiments of the authority he is editing in order to make them conform to the standards of his own day, but he gives the original manuscript or printed page in precisely the same form as when it came from the hands of the author. It is a far call from Jared Sparks, with his pious emendations of the language and morals of Washington, as is shown by a comparison of the original manuscripts with the form they assume in the *Works* as edited by Sparks, to the later edition of Washington's *Works* as given by Mr. Worthington C. Ford. The work of the editor has been facilitated, as well as in a sense made more difficult, by the increasing demands made upon the copyist and the transcriber. Formerly any one could act as a copyist. Now so exacting are the demands made by editors on the copyist that copying and transcribing are professions in themselves. With the increasing demands made by historians on the editor, and by the editor on the transcriber, a perfection well-nigh impossible to attain has come to be expected. The aid of photography has been evoked, and the editor is content with nothing short of the facsimile of the manuscript or the rare printed page to put before his readers as the text for his editorial work. International congresses, as those at Liège and Brussels, are called to consider the question of the best methods of reproducing manuscripts, coins, and seals so as to make them generally available for scholars. The work of representatives of the Department of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington in connection with photographing manuscripts in European archives shows how rapid has been the progress in meeting the demand for the absolutely perfect reproduction of historical material.

But beyond the locating and the editing of manuscript material lies the question of the selection of material from the standpoint both of authenticity and of authoritativeness. Time was when everything that was in print "went," but in recent years the reputation of more than one so-called

history has been shipwrecked on the rock of taking everything in print at its face value. The work of every historian is to-day discredited unless it carries with it indisputable proof of the reliability of the sources on which it is based, and it is because of ignorance of this fundamental principle, indifference to it, or disregard of it in the past that the burden is now laid on the historian of doing over again a large part of the work once considered final.

History needs to be rewritten because into the work of the historian, as into every other field of human activity, has entered the principle of division of labor. Once the historian was like the man who decides to build a house and then himself digs the cellar, lays the foundation walls, does the carpenter work, and decorates the interior. Oliver Wendell Holmes comments on the house that its owner boasted he had built entirely by his own hands, "It is better to be built in that way than not to be built at all." The historian was long forced to be "jack of all trades"—he collected his material, he examined its authenticity, passed upon its authoritativeness, and combined the results of his work into an historical narrative. To the result not even Dr. Holmes's phrase could be applied—the history was written, but it had better not have been written at all, since it has been necessary to do over again the work, beginning at the very foundation. If a history is tainted with inaccuracy, if its conclusions rest on insecure premises, if its foundations are on shifting sands, then it must be rewritten, and it is inevitable that this must be the case when the historian attempts to perform the work of the historical architect, builder, mason, plumber, and decorator. But to-day division of labor comes to his relief. Great editors have mastered the art, the science, and the technique of editing manuscript material, and the historian can avail himself of the expert knowledge of the editor. The bibliographer also has relieved the historian of a part of his necessary work. The great work done for the historian of England by the late Charles Gross, for France by Charles Langlois, and for America by the group of scholars whose evaluations of the literature of American history have been edited by J. N. Larned has all been of the greatest assistance to the historian. The historian also shares in the advantages that come to all from the extraordinary development of the library. It is the age of great librarians, and their stores of

knowledge and their facilities for placing this knowledge at the service of all have smoothed the path of the historian, while a similar service has been rendered him by the curator of the historical museum.

The development of other branches of knowledge has made it necessary to rewrite history. In law the formulation of the laws of evidence has clarified for the historian many troublesome questions connected with the acceptance of testimony. The impetus given by science to the training of the observation has sharpened the eye of the historian, and he sees innumerable records of the past that once escaped him. The increasing study of language and of linguistics has not only opened the doors to new fields of knowledge, but it has given the historian greater precision in the use of historical terminology. The enormous strides made by the subject of psychology have profited the historian and enabled him "to go behind the face of returns" and to understand the mental processes of the actors in the drama of the past.

Another improvement in the method of work grows out of the refinements of classification that are being developed. The different ways of classifying the subject-matter of a novel are quickly discerned; its plot, descriptions, dialogue, analysis of character, development of character, local color, language, solution of ethical questions—all appeal to different classes of readers. But the composite nature of the material with which the historian deals, and the consequent necessity of determining with precision its classification, are less apparent. The historian finds an important record in inscriptions, and to him the inscription means its subject-matter. But the geologist is concerned solely with the nature and probable original location of the stone on which it is carved, the philologist studies its language, the artist is interested in the form of the letters, the archæologist considers mainly its age, while to the epigraphist "epigraphy is just epigraphy." In the study of coins, the metallurgist considers their substance, the artist their form, the philologist their language, the financier their intrinsic value, the archæologist their location, and the historian their inscriptions. Libraries have hitherto classified coins in as many different ways as there are libraries, with corresponding confusion in the minds of all who use coins as historical records. The admirable work of Miss A. R. Hasse in pre-

senting schemes for classifying Government publications and all public documents, and for classifying coins and the literature pertaining to them, has shown how much has been done for the historian in simplifying and also clarifying the classes of materials with which he works, as it also shows how much still remains to be done. The obscurity and uncertainty of the past that has led to the classification, for example, of historical museums under the head of "amusements" must disappear as orderly, simple, and natural classifications are developed. But every new refinement in the classification of historical material makes it necessary to rewrite history that has been based on an obscure, confused classification.

History must be rewritten because historians are learning to distinguish between different forms of the imagination and to appreciate the value of some of its phases in all historical productions. The term imagination has often connoted literary imagination—that form that has given rise to the highest types of literature found in poetry and romance. It is self-evident that this variety of imagination must bring discredit on every work of history where it is used—poetry soars aloft while history penetrates below the surface. The occasional attempt to use literary imagination in historical literature has led to the hasty condemnation of every form of the imagination. At times even the use of the historical imagination has been condemned. The great narrative histories, like those of Macaulay and Motley, have succeeded, through the use of the historical imagination, in reanimating men and making them again actors in the theater of life. It is in large part due to this form of imagination that the historical novel owes its success. But histories written with the aid of the historical imagination have been, after all, but histories written "in the flat." They must be rewritten "in the round" through the use of the critical imagination. It is this imagination that makes alive not simply men, but abstractions: it is the imagination that enables the historian to understand allusions and suggestions; to look below the surface and to see the records of history in everything about him; to see in the marriage ceremony, in funeral customs, in the oath of office, in *viva voce* voting, in all institutions and customs, the records of what men have done since the world began. The attempt to write history with the aid of the literary

imagination has produced a hybrid that has been neither literature nor history, as is illustrated in Gayarré's *Flowers of History*; the use of the historical imagination has given us a panorama of the past; but, while the pictures drawn have been vivid and even truthful, they have been but pictures and have lacked the reality of life itself. History must be rewritten through the aid of the constructive imagination if the past is to live again.

We have recently celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of Niebuhr's call to a professorship in the University of Berlin. It is difficult to realize that within this comparatively brief period of a single century, largely owing to forces set in motion by Niebuhr, there has been developed the science of historical criticism that has almost revolutionized the writing of history, that has made it necessary to reconstruct our views of the past with reference to the principles enunciated by him, that probably more than any other single cause is responsible for the constant necessity of rewriting history.

Another great change in methods of work that has affected the writing of history is found in the substitution of inductive for deductive reasoning. It is not necessary to accept literally Macaulay's famous apotheosis of the inductive method to appreciate the revolution that has been made in the writing of history since historians have substituted conclusions derived from the study of facts for the assumption of a thesis and the selection of facts to prove the thesis. Many histories that represent preconceived ideas, rather than conclusions deduced from a study of facts, must be rewritten in accordance with the reversal of these two principles.

To the end of time, as far as the human eye can see, history will need to be rewritten, and in that very fact lies one of its chief interests. Progress is made not by advance on a plane, but by an ever-ascending spiral where the road doubles and redoubles on itself and at every turn presents a wider outlook than was afforded from the lower level, yet the summit of the highest peak is never reached, for un-scaled heights always lie beyond. Clio holds in her hand a half-opened scroll, and we shall never read its unopened part.

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