

PELICAN BOOKS

WHAT IS HISTORY?

IDDH mmn

Edward Hallett Carr was born in 1892 and educated at the Merchant Taylors' School, London, and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was Craven scholar and took a double first in classics. He joined the Foreign Office in 1916 and after numerous jobs in and connected with the F.O. at home and abroad he resigned in 1936 and became Wilson Professor of International Politics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. He was Assistant Editor of *The Times* from 1941 to 1946, Tutor in Politics at Balliol College, Oxford, from 1953 to 1955, and became a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge in 1955 and an Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, in 1966. He received the C.B.E. in 1920.

"As a historian he is best known for his monumental *History of Soviet Russia*, which the *Guardian* referred to as 'among the most important works by a British historian this century' and *The Times* called 'an outstanding historical achievement'. He began his History in 1945 and worked at it for nearly thirty years. It occupies fourteen volumes plus a summary, *The Russian Revolution: Lenin to Stalin*, and a further volume is forthcoming entitled *The Twilight of the Comintern*. Several parts of the History are published in Penguins: *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (in three volumes); *The Interregnum, 1923-1924; Socialism in One Country, 1924-1926* (in three volumes); and *Foundations of a Planned Economy 1926-1929* (in two volumes, volume one co-authored by R. W Davies). His other publications include *The Romantic Exiles* (1933), *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (1939), *Conditions of Peace* (1942), *The Soviet Impact on the Western World* (1946) and *The New Society* (1951). E. H. Carr died in 1982 and in his obituary *The Times* wrote, 'His writings were for the most part as incisive as his manner. With the unimpassioned skill of a surgeon, he laid bare the anatomy of the recent past... beyond doubt he left a strong mark on successive generations of historians and social thinkers.'

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Carr, Edward Hallett, 1892--

What is history?

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B9 0129215 000 001

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E. H. CARR

What is History?

THE GEORGE MACAULAY TREVELYAN
LECTURES DELIVERED IN
THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
JANUARY-MARCH 1961

SECOND EDITION
EDITED BY R. W. DAVIES



1 111'J U UNBOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published by Macmillan 1961
Published in Penguin Books 1964
Reprinted 1965, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975,
1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981 (twice), 1982, 1983, 1984, 1986
Second edition 1987

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New matter set in Linotron Plantin by
Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox and Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berks

Contents

<i>Introductory Note</i>	1
<i>Preface to Second Edition</i>	3
1. <i>The Historian and His Facts</i>	7
2. <i>Society and the Individual</i>	31
3. <i>History, Science and Morality</i>	56
4. <i>Causation in History</i>	87
5. <i>History as Progress</i>	109
6. <i>The Widening Horizon</i>	133
<i>From E. H. Carr's Files: Notes towards a Second Edition of What is History? by R. W. Davies</i>	157
<i>Index</i>	185

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Introductory Note

**I OFTEN THINK IT ODD
THAT IT SHOULD BE SO DULL,
FOR A GREAT DEAL OF IT
MUST BE INVENTION.**

Catherine Morland on History
(Northanger Abbey, ch. xiv)

E. H. CARR collected a great deal of material for the second edition of *What is History?*, but by the time of his death in November 1982 only the preface to this new edition had been written up.

The present posthumous edition begins with this preface, followed by the unrevised text of the first edition. This is then followed by a new chapter, 'From E. H. Carr's Files: Notes towards a Second Edition of *What is History?*', in which I have endeavoured to present some of the material and conclusions contained in Carr's large box of jottings, drafts and notes.

Phrases placed in square brackets within quotations in the new chapter were inserted by myself. I am grateful to Catherine Merridale for carefully checking Carr's references, and to Jonathan Haslam and Tamara Deutscher for their comments. Carr's notes towards the second edition of *What is History?* are to be deposited with the E. H. Carr Papers in the Library of the University of Birmingham.

November 1984

R.W. DAVIES

Preface to the Second Edition

WHEN in 1960 I completed the first draft of my six lectures, *What is History?*, the western world was still reeling from the blows of two world wars and two major revolutions, the Russian and the Chinese. The Victorian age of innocent self-confidence and automatic belief in progress lay far behind. The world was a disturbed, even menacing, place. Nevertheless signs had begun to accumulate that we were beginning to emerge from some of our troubles. The world economic crisis, widely predicted as a sequel to the war, had not occurred. We had quietly dissolved the British Empire, almost without noticing it. The crisis of Hungary and Suez had been surmounted, or lived down. De-Stalinization in the USSR, and de-McCarthyization in the USA, were making laudable progress. Germany and Japan had recovered rapidly from the total ruin of 1945, and were making spectacular economic advances. France under De Gaulle was renewing her strength. In the United States the Eisenhower blight was ending; the Kennedy era of hope was about to dawn. Black spots - South Africa, Ireland, Vietnam - could still be kept at arm's length. Stock exchanges round the world were booming.

These conditions provided, at any rate, a superficial justification for the expression of optimism and belief in the future with which I ended my lectures in 1961. The succeeding twenty years frustrated these hopes and this complacency. The cold war has been resumed with redoubled intensity, bringing with it the threat of nuclear extinction. The delayed economic crisis has set in with a vengeance, ravaging the industrial countries and spreading the cancer of unemployment throughout western society. Scarcely a country is now free from the antagonism of

violence and terrorism. The revolt of the oil-producing states of the Middle East has brought a significant shift in power to the disadvantage of the western industrial nations. The 'third world' has been transformed from a passive into a positive and disturbing factor in world affairs. In these conditions any expression of optimism has come to seem absurd. The prophets of woe have everything on their side. The picture of impending doom, sedulously drawn by sensational writers and journalists and transmitted through the media, has penetrated the vocabulary of everyday speech. Not for centuries has the once popular prediction of the end of the world seemed so apposite.

Yet at this point common sense prompts two important reservations. In the first place, the diagnosis of hopelessness for the future, though it purports to be based on irrefutable facts, is an abstract theoretical construct. The vast majority of people simply do not believe in it; and this disbelief is made evident by their behaviour. People make love, conceive, bear and rear children with great devotion. Immense attention, private and public, is given to health and education in order to promote the well-being of the next generation. New sources of energy are constantly explored. New inventions increase the efficiency of production. Multitudes of 'small savers' invest in national savings bonds, in building societies and in unit trusts. Widespread enthusiasm is shown for the preservation of the national heritage, architectural and artistic, for the benefit of future generations. It is tempting to conclude that belief in early annihilation is confined to a group of disgruntled intellectuals who are responsible for the lion's share of current publicity.

My second reservation relates to the geographical sources of these predictions of universal disaster, which emanate predominantly - I should be tempted to say, exclusively - from western Europe and its overseas offshoots. This is not surprising. For five centuries these countries had been the undisputed masters of the world. They could claim with some plausibility to represent the light of civilization in the midst of an outer world of

barbarian darkness. An age which increasingly challenges and rejects this claim must surely build disaster. It is equally unsurprising that the epicentre of the disturbance, the seat of the most profound intellectual pessimism, is to be found in Britain; for nowhere else is the contrast between nineteenth-century splendour and twentieth-century drabness, between nineteenth-century supremacy and twentieth-century inferiority, so marked and so painful. The mood has spread over western Europe and - perhaps to a lesser degree - north America. All these countries participated actively in the great expansionist era of the nineteenth century. But I have no reason to suspect that this mood prevails elsewhere in the world. The erection of insurmountable barriers to communication on one side, and the incessant flow of cold war propaganda on the other, render difficult any sensible assessment of the situation in the USSR. But one can scarcely believe that, in a country where a vast majority of the population must be aware that, whatever their current complaints, things are far better than they were twenty-five or fifty or a hundred years ago, widespread despair about the future has taken hold. In Asia both Japan and China in their different ways are in a forward-looking position. In the Middle East and Africa, even in areas which are at present in a state of turmoil, emergent nations are struggling towards a future in which, however blindly, they believe.

My conclusion is that the current wave of scepticism and despair, which looks ahead to nothing but destruction and decay, and dismisses as absurd any belief in progress or any prospect of a further advance by the human race, is a form of élitism - the product of élite social groups whose security and whose privileges have been most conspicuously eroded by the crisis, and of élite countries whose once undisputed domination over the rest of the world has been shattered. Of this movement the main standard-bearers are the intellectuals, the purveyors of the ideas of the ruling social group which they serve ('The ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class'). It is irrelevant that

some of the intellectuals in question may have belonged by origin to other social groups; for, in becoming intellectuals, they are automatically assimilated into the intellectual élite. Intellectuals by definition form an élite group.

What is, however, more important in the present context is that all groups in a society, however cohesive (and the historian is often justified in treating them as such), throw up a certain number of freaks or dissidents. This is particularly liable to happen among intellectuals. I do not refer to the routine arguments between intellectuals conducted on the basis of common acceptance of main presuppositions of the society, but of challenges to these presuppositions. In western democratic societies such challenges, so long as they are confined to a handful of dissidents, are tolerated, and those who present them can find readers and an audience. The cynic might say that they are tolerated because they are neither numerous nor influential enough to be dangerous. For more than forty years I have carried the label of an 'intellectual'; and in recent years I have increasingly come to see myself, and to be seen, as an intellectual dissident. An explanation is ready to hand. I must be one of the very few intellectuals still writing who grew up, not in the high noon, but in the afterglow of the great Victorian age of faith and optimism, and it is difficult for me even today to think in terms of a world in permanent and irretrievable decline. In the following pages I shall try to distance myself from prevailing trends among western intellectuals, and especially those of this country today, to show how and why I think they have gone astray and to strike out a claim, if not for an optimistic, at any rate for a saner and more balanced outlook on the future.

E. H. CARR

I *The Historian and His Facts*

WHAT is history? Lest anyone think the question meaningless or superfluous, I will take as my text two passages relating respectively to the first and second incarnations of the *Cambridge Modern History*. Here is Acton in his report of October 1896 to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press on the work which he had undertaken to edit:

It is a unique opportunity of recording, in the way most useful to the greatest number, the fullness of the knowledge which the nineteenth century is about to bequeath. . . . By the judicious division of labour we should be able to do it, and to bring home to every man the last document, and the ripest conclusions of international research.

Ultimate history we cannot have in this generation; but we can dispose of conventional history, and show the point we have reached on the road from one to the other, now that all information is within reach, and every problem has become capable of solution.¹

And almost exactly sixty years later Professor Sir George Clark, in his general introduction to the second *Cambridge Modern History*, commented on this belief of Acton and his collaborators that it would one day be possible to produce 'ultimate history', and went on:

Historians of a later generation do not look forward to any such prospect. They expect their work to be superseded again and again. They consider that knowledge of the past has come down through one or more human minds, has been 'processed' by them, and therefore cannot consist of elemental and

I. *The Cambridge Modern History: Its Origin, Authorship and Production* (1907), pp. 10-12.

impersonal atoms which nothing can alter—The exploration seems to be endless, and some impatient scholars take refuge in scepticism, or at least in the doctrine that, since all historical judgements involve persons and points of view, one is as good as another and there is no 'objective' historical truth.¹

Where the pundits contradict each other so flagrantly, the field is open to inquiry. I hope that I am sufficiently up-to-date to recognize that anything written in the 1890s must be nonsense. But I am not yet advanced enough to be committed to the view that anything written in the 1950s necessarily makes sense. Indeed, it may already have occurred to you that this inquiry is liable to stray into something even broader than the nature of history. The clash between Acton and Sir George Clark is a reflection of the change in our total outlook on society over the interval between these two pronouncements. Acton speaks out of the positive belief, the dear-eyed self-confidence, of the later Victorian age; Sir George Clark echoes the bewilderment and distracted scepticism of the beat generation. When we attempt to answer the question 'What is history?' our answer, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question what view we take of the society in which we live. I have no fear that my subject may, on closer inspection, seem trivial. I am afraid only that I may seem presumptuous to have broached a question so vast and so important.

The nineteenth century was a great age for facts. 'What I want', said Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, 'is Facts.... Facts alone are wanted in life.' Nineteenth-century historians on the whole agreed with him. When Ranke in the 1830s, in legitimate protest against moralizing history, remarked that the task of the historian was 'simply to show how it really was (*wie es eigentlich gezoesen*)', this not very profound aphorism had an astonishing

1. *The New Cambridge Modern History*, i (1957). PP- xxiv-xxv.

success. Three generations of German, British, and even French historians marched into battle intoning the magic words '*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*'* like an incantation - designed, like most incantations, to save them from the tiresome obligation to think for themselves. The Positivists, anxious to stake out their claim for history as a science, contributed the weight of their influence to this cult of facts. First ascertain the facts, said the Positivists, then draw your conclusions from them. In Great Britain, this view of history fitted in perfectly with the empiricist tradition which was the dominant strain in British philosophy from Locke to Bertrand Russell. The empirical theory of knowledge presupposes a complete separation between subject and object. Facts, like sense-impressions, impinge on the observer from outside and are independent of his consciousness. The process of reception is passive: having received the data, he then acts on them. The Oxford Shorter English Dictionary, a useful but tendentious work of the empirical school, clearly marks the separateness of the two processes by defining a fact as 'a datum of experience as distinct from conclusions'. This is what may be called the commonsense view of history. History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish on the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him. Acton, whose culinary tastes were austere, wanted them served plain. In his letter of instructions to contributors to the first *Cambridge Modern History* he announced the requirement 'that our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen, and whether Fairbairn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison took it up'.¹ Even Sir George Clark, critical as he was of Acton's attitude, himself contrasted the 'hard core of facts' in history with the 'surrounding pulp of disputable

1. Acton, *Lectures on Modern History* (1906), p. 318.

interpretation¹ - forgetting perhaps that the pulpy part of the fruit is more rewarding than the hard core. First get your facts straight, then plunge at your peril into the shifting sands of interpretation - that is the ultimate wisdom of the empirical, commonsense school of history. It recalls the favourite dictum of the great liberal journalist C. P. Scott: 'Facts are sacred, opinion is free.'

Now this clearly will not do. I shall not embark on a philosophical discussion of the nature of our knowledge of the past. Let us assume for present purposes that the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon and the fact there is a table in the middle of the room are facts of the same or of a comparable order, that both these facts enter our consciousness in the same or in a comparable manner, and that both have the same objective character in relation to the person who knows them. But, even on this bold and not very plausible assumption, our argument at once runs into the difficulty that not all facts about the past are historical facts, or are treated as such by the historian. What is the criterion which distinguishes the facts of history from other facts about the past ?

What is a historical fact ? This is a crucial question into which we must look a little more closely. According to the commonsense view, there are certain basic facts which are the same for all historians and which form, so to speak, the backbone of history - the fact, for example, that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066. But this view calls for two observations. In the first place, it is not with facts like these that the historian is primarily concerned. It is no doubt important to know that the great battle was fought in 1066 and not in 1065 or 1067, and that it was fought at Hastings and not at Eastbourne or Brighton. The historian must not get these things wrong. But when points of this kind are raised, I am reminded of Housman's remark that 'accuracy is a duty, not a virtue'.² To praise a historian for his

1. Quoted in the *Listener*, 19 June 1952, p. 992.

2. *M. Manilii Astronomicon: Liber Primus* (2nd ed., 1937) p. 87.

accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building. It is a necessary condition of his work, but not his essential function. It is precisely for matters of this kind that the historian is entitled to rely on what have been called the 'auxiliary sciences' of history - archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, chronology, and so forth. The historian is not required to have the special skills which enable the expert to determine the origin and period of a fragment of pottery or marble, to decipher an obscure inscription, or to make the elaborate astronomical calculations necessary to establish a precise date. These so-called basic facts, which are the same for all historians, commonly belong to the category of the raw materials of the historian rather than of history itself. The second observation is that the necessity to establish these basic facts rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an *a priori* decision of the historian. In spite of C. P. Scott's motto, every journalist knows today that the most effective way to influence opinion is by the selection and arrangement of the appropriate facts. It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. It was, I think, one of Pirandello's characters who said that a fact is like a sack - it won't stand up till you've put something in it. The only reason why we are interested to know that the battle was fought at Hastings in 1066 is that historians regard it as a major historical event. It is the historian who has decided for his own reasons that Caesar's crossing of that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of the Rubicon by millions of other people before or since interests nobody at all. The fact that you arrived in this building half an hour ago on foot, or on a bicycle, or in a car, is just as much a fact about the past as the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. But it will probably be ignored by historians. Professor Talcott Parsons once called science 'a selective system of cognitive orientations

to reality'.¹ It might perhaps have been put more simply. But history is, among other things, that. The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate.

Let us take a look at the process by which a mere fact about the past is transformed into a fact of history. At Stalybridge Wakes in 1850, a vendor of gingerbread, as the result of some petty dispute, was deliberately kicked to death by an angry mob. Is this a fact of history? A year ago I should unhesitatingly have said 'no'. It was recorded by an eye-witness in some little-known memoirs²; but I had never seen it judged worthy of mention by any historian. A year ago Dr Kitson Clark cited it in his Ford lectures in Oxford.³ Does this make it into a historical fact? Not, I think, yet. Its present status, I suggest, is that it has been proposed for membership of the select club of historical facts. It now awaits a seconder and sponsors. It may be that in the course of the next few years we shall see this fact appearing first in footnotes, then in the text, of articles and books about nineteenth-century England, and that in twenty or thirty years' time it may be a well-established historical fact. Alternatively, nobody may take it up, in which case it will relapse into the limbo of unhistorical facts about the past from which Dr Kitson Clark has gallantly attempted to rescue it. What will decide which of these two things will happen? It will depend, I think, on whether the thesis or interpretation in support of which Dr Kitson Clark cited this incident is accepted by other historians as valid and significant. Its status as a historical fact will turn on

a question of interpretation. This element of interpretation enters into every part of history.

May I be allowed a personal reminiscence? When I studied ancient history in this university many years ago, I had as a special subject 'Greece in the period of the Persian Wars'. I collected fifteen or twenty volumes on my shelves and took it for granted that there, recorded in these volumes, I had all the facts relating to my subject. Let us assume - it was very nearly true - that those volumes contained all the facts about it that were then known, or could be known. It never occurred to me to inquire by what accident or process of attrition that minute selection of facts, out of all the myriad facts that must once have been known to somebody, had survived to become *the* facts of history. I suspect that even today one of the fascinations of ancient and medieval history is that it gives us the illusion of having all the facts at our disposal within a manageable compass: the nagging distinction between the facts of history and other facts about the past vanishes, because the few known facts are all facts of history. As Bury, who had worked in both periods, said, 'the records of ancient and medieval history are starred with lacunae.' History has been called an enormous jig-saw with a lot of missing parts. But the main trouble does not consist in the lacunae. Our picture of Greece in the fifth century B.C. is defective not primarily because so many of the bits have been accidentally lost, but because it is, by and large, the picture formed by a tiny group of people in the city of Athens. We know a lot about what fifth-century Greece looked like to an Athenian citizen; but hardly anything about what it looked like to a Spartan, a Corinthian, or a Theban - not to mention a Persian, or a slave or other non-citizen resident in Athens. Our picture has been preselected and predetermined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving. In the same way, when I read in a modern history of the Middle

1. J. B. Bury, *Selected Essays* (1930), p. 52.

1. T. Parsons and E. Shils, *Towards a General Theory of Action* (3rd ed., 1954), p. 167.

2. Lord George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman* (2nd ed., 1926), pp. 188-9.

3. Dr. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (1962).

Ages that the people of the Middle Ages were deeply concerned with religion, I wonder how we know this, and whether it is true. What we know as the facts of medieval history have almost all been selected for us by generations of chroniclers who were professionally occupied in the theory and practice of religion, and who therefore thought it supremely important, and recorded everything relating to it, and not much else. The picture of the Russian peasant as devoutly religious was destroyed by the revolution of 1917. The picture of medieval man as devoutly religious, whether true or not, is indestructible, because nearly all the known facts about him were preselected for us by people who believed it, and wanted others to believe it, and a mass of other facts, in which we might possibly have found evidence to the contrary, has been lost beyond recall. The dead hand of vanished generations of historians, scribes, and chroniclers has determined beyond the possibility of appeal the pattern of the past. 'The history we read,' writes Professor Barraclough, himself trained as a medievalist, 'though based on facts, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements.'¹

But let us turn to the different, but equally grave, plight of the modern historian. The ancient or medieval historian may be grateful for the vast winnowing process which, over the years, has put at his disposal a manageable corpus of historical facts. As Lytton Strachey said, in his mischievous way, 'ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits.'² When I am tempted, as I sometimes am, to envy the extreme competence of colleagues engaged in writing ancient or medieval history, I find consolation in the reflexion that they are so competent mainly because they are so ignorant of their subject. The modern historian enjoys none of the advantages of this built-in ignorance. He must cultivate this necessary ignorance for himself - the more so the nearer he comes to his own times. He has the dual task of

1. G. Barraclough, *History in a Changing World* (1955) p. 14.
2. Lytton Strachey, Preface to *Eminent Victorians*.

discovering the few significant facts and turning them into facts of history, and of discarding the many insignificant facts as unhistorical. But this is the very converse of the nineteenth-century heresy that history consists of the compilation of a maximum number of irrefutable and objective facts. Anyone who succumbs to this heresy will either have to give up history as a bad job, and take to stamp-collecting or some other form of antiquarianism, or end in a madhouse. It is this heresy which during the past hundred years has had such devastating effects on the modern historian, producing in Germany, in Great Britain, and in the United States, a vast and growing mass of dry-as-dust factual histories, of minutely specialized monographs of would-be historians knowing more and more about less and less, sunk without trace in an ocean of facts. It was, I suspect, this heresy - rather than the alleged conflict between liberal and Catholic loyalties - which frustrated Acton as a historian. In an early essay he said of his teacher Döllinger: 'He would not write with imperfect materials, and to him the materials were always imperfect.'¹ Acton was surely here pronouncing an anticipatory verdict on himself, on that strange phenomenon of a historian whom many would regard as the most distinguished occupant the Regius Chair of Modern History in this university has ever had - but who wrote no history. And Acton wrote his own epitaph, in the introductory note to the first volume of the *Cambridge Modern History* published just after his death, when he lamented that the requirements pressing on the historian 'threaten to turn him from a man of letters into the compiler of an encyclopedia'.² Something had gone wrong. What had gone wrong was the belief in this untiring and unending accumulation of hard facts as the foundation of

1. Quoted in G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 385; later Acton said of Dollinger that 'it was given him to form his philosophy of history on the largest induction ever available to man' (*History of Freedom and Other Essays*, 1907, p. 435).

2. *Cambridge Modern History*, i (1902), p. 4.

history, the belief that facts speak for themselves and that we cannot have too many facts, a belief at that time - so unquestioning that few historians then thought it necessary - and some still think it unnecessary today - to ask themselves the question 'What is history?'

The nineteenth-century fetishism of facts was completed and justified by a fetishism of documents. The documents were the Ark of the Covenant in the temple of facts. The reverent historian approached them with bowed head and spoke of them in awed tones. If you find it in the documents, it is so. But what, when we get down to it, do these documents - the decrees, the treaties, the rent-rolls, the blue books, the official correspondence, the private letters and diaries - tell us? No document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought - what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought. None of this means anything until the historian has got to work on it and deciphered it. The facts, whether found in documents or not, have still to be processed by the historian before he can make any use of them: the use he makes of them is, if I may put it that way, the processing process.

Let me illustrate what I am trying to say by an example which I happen to know well. When Gustav Stresemann, the Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic, died in 1929, he left behind him an enormous mass - 300 boxes full - of papers, official, semi-official, and private, nearly all relating to the six years of his tenure of office as Foreign Minister. His friends and relatives naturally thought that a monument should be raised to the memory of so great a man. His faithful secretary Bernhard got to work; and within three years there appeared three massive volumes, of some 600 pages each, of selected documents from the 300 boxes, with the impressive title *Stresemanns Vermächtnis*. In the ordinary way the documents themselves would have mouldered away in some cellar or attic and disappeared for

ever; or perhaps in a hundred years or so some curious scholar would have come upon them and set out to compare them with Bernhard's text. What happened was far more dramatic. In 1945 the documents fell into the hands of the British and American Governments, who photographed the lot and put the photostats at the disposal of scholars in the Public Record Office in London and in the National Archives in Washington, so that, if we have sufficient patience and curiosity, we can discover exactly what Bernhard did. What he did was neither very unusual nor very shocking. When Stresemann died, his western policy seemed to have been crowned with a series of brilliant successes - Locarno, the admission of Germany to the League of Nations, the Dawes and Young plans and the American loans, the withdrawal of allied occupation armies from the Rhineland. This seemed the important and rewarding part of Stresemann's foreign policy; and it was not unnatural that it should have been over-represented in Bernhard's selection of documents. Stresemann's eastern policy, on the other hand, his relations with the Soviet Union, seemed to have led nowhere in particular; and, since masses of documents about negotiations which yielded only trivial results were not very interesting and added nothing to Stresemann's reputation, the process of selection could be more rigorous. Stresemann in fact devoted a far more constant and anxious attention to relations with the Soviet Union, and they played a far larger part in his foreign policy as a whole, than the reader of the Bernhard selection would surmise. But the Bernhard volumes compare favourably, I suspect, with many published collections of documents on which the ordinary historian implicitly relies.

This is not the end of my story. Shortly after the publication of Bernhard's volumes, Hitler came into power. Stresemann's name was consigned to oblivion in Germany, and the volumes disappeared from circulation: many, perhaps most, of the copies must have been destroyed. Today *Stresemanns Vermächtnis* is a rather rare book. But in the west Stresemann's reputation stood

high. In 1935 an English publisher brought out an abbreviated translation of Bernhard's work - a selection from Bernhard's selection; perhaps one-third of the original was omitted. Sutton, a well-known translator from the German, did his job competently and well. The English version, he explained in the preface, was 'slightly condensed, but only by the omission of a certain amount of what, it was felt, was more ephemeral matter... of little interest to English readers or students'.¹ This again is natural enough. But the result is that Stresemann's eastern policy, already under-represented in Bernhard, recedes still further from view, and the Soviet Union appears in Sutton's volumes merely as an occasional and rather unwelcome intruder in Stresemann's predominantly western foreign policy. Yet it is safe to say that, for all except a few specialists, Sutton and not Bernhard - and still less the documents themselves - represents for the western world the authentic voice of Stresemann. Had the documents perished in 1945 in the bombing, and had the remaining Bernhard volumes disappeared, the authenticity and authority of Sutton would never have been questioned. Many printed collections of documents, gratefully accepted by historians in default of the originals, rest on no securer basis than this.

But I want to carry the story one step further. Let us forget ~~about~~ Bernhard and Sutton, and be thankful that we can, if we choose, consult the authentic papers of a leading participant in some important events of recent European history. What do the papers tell us? Among other things they contain records of some hundreds of Stresemann's conversations with the Soviet Ambassador in Berlin and of a score or so with Chicherin. These records have one feature in common. They depict Stresemann as having the lion's share of the conversations and reveal his arguments as invariably well put and cogent, while those of his partner are for the most part scanty, confused, and unconvinc-

1. *Gustav Stresemann, His Diaries, Letters and Papers*, i (1935) > Editor's Note.

ing. This is a familiar characteristic of all records of diplomatic conversations. The documents do not tell us what happened, but only what Stresemann thought had happened, or what he wanted others to think, or perhaps what he wanted himself to think, had happened. It was not Sutton or Bernhard, but Stresemann himself, who started the process of selection. And if we had, say, Chicherin's records of these same conversations, we should still learn from them only what Chicherin thought, and what really happened would still have to be reconstructed in the mind of the historian. Of course, facts and documents are essential to the historian. But do not make a fetish of them. They do not by themselves constitute history; they provide in themselves no ready-made answer to this tiresome question 'What is history?'

At this point I should like to say a few words on the question why nineteenth-century historians were generally indifferent to the philosophy of history. The term was invented by Voltaire, and has since been used in different senses; but I shall take it to mean, if I use it at all, our answer to the question, 'What is history?' The nineteenth century was, for the intellectuals of western Europe, a comfortable period exuding confidence and optimism. The facts were on the whole satisfactory; and the inclination to ask and answer awkward questions about them was correspondingly weak. Ranke piously believed that divine providence would take care of the meaning of history, if he took care of the facts; and Burckhardt, with a more modern touch of cynicism, observed that 'we are not initiated into the purposes of the eternal wisdom'. Professor Butterfield as late as 1931 noted with apparent satisfaction that 'historians have reflected little upon the nature of things, and even the nature of their own subject'.¹ But my predecessor in these lectures, Dr A. L. Rowse, more justly critical, wrote of Sir Winston Churchill's *World Crisis* - his book about the First World War - that, while it matched Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* in personality,

I. H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) 1 P- <7-

vividness, and vitality, it was inferior in one respect: it had 'no philosophy of history behind it'.¹ British historians refused to be drawn, not because they believed that history had no meaning, but because they believed that its meaning was implicit and self-evident. The liberal nineteenth-century view of history had a close affinity with the economic doctrine of laissez-faire - also the product of a serene and self-confident outlook on the world. Let everyone get on with his particular job, and the hidden hand would take care of the universal harmony. The facts of history were themselves a demonstration of the supreme fact of a beneficent and apparently infinite progress towards higher things. This was the age of innocence, and historians walked in the Garden of Eden, without a scrap of philosophy to cover them, naked and unashamed before the god of history. Since then, we have known Sin and experienced a Fall; and those historians who today pretend to dispense with a philosophy of history are merely trying, vainly and self-consciously, like members of a nudist colony, to recreate the Garden of Eden in their garden suburb. Today the awkward question can no longer be evaded.

During the past fifty years a good deal of serious work has been done on the question 'What is history?' It was from Germany, the country which was to do so much to upset the comfortable reign of nineteenth-century liberalism, that the first challenge came in the 1880s and 1890s to the doctrine of the primacy and autonomy of facts in history. The philosophers who made the challenge are now little more than names: Dilthey is the only one of them who has recently received some belated recognition in Great Britain. Before the turn of the century, prosperity and confidence were still too great in this country for any attention to be paid to heretics who attacked the cult of facts. But early in the new century, the torch passed to Italy, where Croce began to propound a philosophy of history which obviously owed much to German masters. All history is

1. A. L. Rowse, *The End of an Epoch* (1947), pp. 282-3.

'contemporary history', declared Croce,¹ meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording? In 1910 the American historian, Carl Becker, argued in deliberately provocative language that 'the facts of history do not exist for any historian till he creates them'.² These challenges were for the moment little noticed. It was only after 1920 that Croce began to have a considerable vogue in France and Great Britain. This was not perhaps because Croce was a subtler thinker or a better stylist than his German predecessors, but because, after the First World War, the facts seemed to smile on us less propitiously than in the years before 1914, and we were therefore more accessible to a philosophy which sought to diminish their prestige. Croce was an important influence on the Oxford philosopher and historian Collingwood, the only British thinker in the present century who has made a serious contribution to the philosophy of history. He did not live to write the systematic treatise he had planned; but his published and unpublished papers on the subject were collected after his death in a volume entitled *The Idea of History*, which appeared in 1945.

The views of Collingwood can be summarized as follows. The philosophy of history is concerned neither with 'the past *fey* itself nor with 'the historian's thought about it by itself', but with 'the two things in their mutual relations'. (This dictum reflects the two current meanings of the word 'history' - the inquiry conducted by the historian and the series of past events

1. The context of this celebrated aphorism is as follows: 'The practical requirements which underlie every historical judgement give to all history the character of "contemporary history", because, however remote in time events thus recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate' (B. Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, Engl. transl. 1941, p. 19).

2. *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1910, p. 528.

into which he inquires.) 'The past which a historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present.' But a past act is dead, i.e. meaningless to the historian, unless he can understand the thought that lay behind it. Hence 'all history is the history of thought', and 'history is the re-enactment in the historian's mind of the thought whose history he is studying'. The reconstitution of the past in the historian's mind is dependent on empirical evidence. But it is not in itself an empirical process, and cannot consist in a mere recital of facts. On the contrary, the process of reconstitution governs the selection and interpretation of the facts: this, indeed, is what makes them historical facts.' History', says Professor Oakeshott, who on this point stands near to Collingwood, 'is the historian's experience. It is "made" by nobody save the historian: to write history is the only way of making it.'¹

This searching critique, though it may call for some serious reservations, brings to light certain neglected truths.

In the first place, the facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. It follows that when we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it. Let me take as an example the great historian in whose honour and in whose name these lectures were founded. G. M. Trevelyan, as he tells us in his autobiography, was 'brought up at home on a somewhat exuberantly Whig tradition';² and he would not, I hope, disclaim the title if I described him as the last and not the least of the great English liberal historians of the Whig tradition. It is not for nothing that he traces back his family tree, through the great Whig historian George Otto Trevelyan, to Macaulay, incomparably the greatest of the Whig historians. Trevelyan's finest and maturest work, *England under Queen Anne*, was written against that background, and will yield

1. M. Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), p. 99.

2. G. M. Trevelyan, *An Autobiography* (1949) 5 p. n.

its full meaning and significance to the reader only when read against that background. The author, indeed, leaves the reader with no excuse for failing to do so. For, if following the technique of connoisseurs of detective novels, you read the end first, you will find on the last few pages of the third volume the best summary known to me of what is nowadays called the Whig interpretation of history; and you will see that what Trevelyan is trying to do is to investigate the origin and development of the Whig tradition, and to root it fairly and squarely in the years after the death of its founder, William III. Though this is not, perhaps, the only conceivable interpretation of the events of Queen Anne's reign, it is a valid and, in Trevelyan's hands, a fruitful interpretation. But, in order to appreciate it at its full value, you have to understand what the historian is doing.' For if, as Collingwood says, the historian must re-enact in thought what has gone on in the mind of his dramatis personae, so the reader in his turn must re-enact what goes on in the mind of the historian. Study the historian before you begin to study the facts. This is, after all, not very abstruse. It is what is already done by the intelligent undergraduate who, when recommended to read a work by that great scholar Jones of St Jude's, goes round to a friend at St Jude's to ask what sort of chap Jones is, and what bees he has in his bonnet. When you read a work of history, always listen out for the buzzing. If you can detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog. The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use - these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation. Indeed, if, standing "Sir George Qark on his head, I were to call history 'a hard core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts', my statement would, no

doubt, be one-sided and misleading, but no more so, I venture to think, than the original dictum.

The second point is the more familiar one of the historian's need of imaginative understanding for the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, for the thought behind their acts: I say 'imaginative understanding', not 'sympathy', lest sympathy should be supposed to imply agreement. The nineteenth century was weak in medieval history, because it was too much repelled by the superstitious beliefs of the Middle Ages, and by the barbarities which they inspired, to have any imaginative understanding of medieval people. Or take Burckhardt's censorious remark about the Thirty Years War: 'It is scandalous for a creed, no matter whether it is Catholic or Protestant, to place its salvation above the integrity of the nation.'¹ It was extremely difficult for a nineteenth-century liberal historian, brought up to believe that it is right and praiseworthy to kill in defence of one's country, but wicked and wrong-headed to kill in defence of one's religion, to enter into the state of mind of those who fought the Thirty Years War. This difficulty is particularly acute in the field in which I am now working. Much of what has been written in English-speaking countries in the last ten years about the Soviet Union, and in the Soviet Union about the English-speaking countries, has been vitiated by this inability to achieve even the most elementary measure of imaginative understanding of what goes on in the mind of the other party, so that the words and actions of the other are always made to appear malign, senseless, or hypocritical. History cannot be written unless the historian can achieve some kind of contact with the mind of those about whom he is writing.

The third point is that we can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present. The historian is of his own age, and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence. The very words which he uses -

i. J. Burckhardt, *Judgements on History and Historians* (1959) > P-179.

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words like democracy, empire, war, revolution - have current connotations from which he cannot divorce them. Ancient historians have taken to using words like *polis* and *plebs* in the original, just in order to show that they have not fallen into this trap. This does not help them. They, too, live in the present, and cannot cheat themselves into the past by using unfamiliar or obsolete words, any more than they would become better Greek or Roman historians if they delivered their lectures in a *chlamys* or a *toga*. The names by which successive French historians have described the Parisian crowds which played so prominent a role in the French revolution - *les sans-culottes*, *le peuple*, *la canaille*, *les bras-nus* - are all, for those who know the rules of the game, manifestos of a political affiliation and of a particular interpretation. Yet the historian is obliged to choose: the use of language forbids him to be neutral. Nor is it a matter of words alone. Over the past hundred years the changed balance of power in Europe has reversed the attitude of British historians to Frederick the Great. The changed balance of power within the Christian churches between Catholicism and Protestantism has profoundly altered their attitude to such figures as Loyola, Luther, and Cromwell. It requires only a superficial knowledge of the work of French historians of the last forty years on the French revolution to recognize how deeply it has been affected by the Russian revolution of 1917. The historian belongs not to the past but to the present. Professor Trevor-Roper tells us that the historian 'ought to love the past' This is a dubious injunction. To love the past may easily be an expression of the nostalgic romanticism of old men and old societies, a symptom of loss of faith and interest in the present or future.² Cliche for cliche, I

1. Introduction to J. Burckhardt, *Judgements on History and Historians* (1959) > P-17-

2. Compare Nietzsche's view of history: 'To old age belongs the old man's business of looking back and casting up his accounts, of seeking consolation in the memories of the past, in historical culture' (*Thoughts Out of Season*, Engl. transl., 1909, ii, pp. 65-6).

should prefer the one about freeing oneself from 'the dead hand of the past'. The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present.

If, however, these are some of the insights of what I may call the Collingwood view of history, it is time to consider some of the dangers. The emphasis on the role of the historian in the making of history tends, if pressed to its logical conclusion, to rule out any objective history at all: history is what the historian makes. Collingwood seems indeed, at one moment, in an unpublished note quoted by his editor, to have reached this conclusion:

St Augustine looked at history from the point of view of the early Christian; Tillamont, from that of a seventeenth-century Frenchman; Gibbon, from that of an eighteenth-century Englishman; Mommsen from that of a nineteenth-century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it.¹

This amounts to total scepticism, like Froude's remark that history is 'a child's box of letters with which we can spell any word we please'.² Collingwood, in his reaction against 'scissors-and-paste history', against the view of history as a mere compilation of facts, comes perilously near to treating history as something spun out of the human brain, and leads back to the conclusion referred to by Sir George Clark in the passage which I quoted earlier, that 'there is no "objective" historical truth'. In place of the theory that history has no meaning, we are offered here the theory of an infinity of meanings, none any more right than any other - which comes to much the same thing. The second theory is surely as untenable as the first. It does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different

1. R. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946), p. xii.

2. A. Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, i (1894), p. 21.

shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes. It does not follow that, because interpretation plays a necessary part in establishing the facts of history, and because no existing interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another, and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation. I shall have to consider at a later stage what exactly is meant by objectivity in history.

But a still greater danger lurks in the Collingwood hypothesis. If the historian necessarily looks at his period of history through the eyes of his own time, and studies the problems of the past as a key to those of the present, will he not fall into a purely pragmatic view of the facts, and maintain that the criterion of a right interpretation is its suitability to some present purpose? On this hypothesis, the facts of history are nothing, interpretation is everything. Nietzsche had already enunciated the principle: 'The falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it.... The question is how far it is life-furthering, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps species-creating.'¹ The American pragmatists moved, less explicitly and less wholeheartedly, along the same line. Knowledge is knowledge for some purpose. The validity of the knowledge depends on the validity of the purpose. But, even where no such theory has been professed, the practice has often been no less disquieting. In my own field of study I have seen too many examples of extravagant interpretation riding roughshod over facts not to be impressed with the reality of this danger. It is not surprising that perusal of some of M&M and more extreme products of Soviet and anti-Soviet schools of historiography should sometimes breed a certain nostalgia for that illusory nineteenth-century haven of purely factual history.

* How then, in the middle of the twentieth century, are we to define the obligation of the historian to his facts? I trust that I have spent a sufficient number of hours in recent years chasing and perusing documents, and stuffing my historical narrative with

properly footnoted facts, to escape the imputation of treating facts and documents too cavalierly. The duty of the historian to respect his facts is not exhausted by the obligation to see that his facts are accurate. He must seek to bring into the picture all known or knowable facts relevant, in one sense or another, to the theme on which he is engaged and to the interpretation proposed. If he seeks to depict the Victorian Englishman as a moral and rational being, he must not forget what happened at Stalybridge Wakes in 1850. But this, in turn, does not mean that he can eliminate interpretation, which is the life-blood of history. Laymen - that is to say, non-academic friends or friends from other academic disciplines - sometimes ask me how the historian goes to work when he writes history. The commonest assumption appears to be that the historian divides his work into two sharply distinguishable phases or periods. First, he spends a long preliminary period reading his sources and filling his notebooks with facts: then, when this is over, he puts away his sources, takes out his notebooks and writes his book from beginning to end. This is to me an unconvincing and unpalatable picture. For myself, as soon as I have got going on a few of what I take to be the capital sources, the itch becomes too strong and I begin to write - not necessarily at the beginning, but somewhere, anywhere. Thereafter, reading and writing go on simultaneously. The writing is added to, subtracted from, re-shaped, cancelled, as I go on reading. The reading is guided and directed and made fruitful by the writing: the more I write, the more I know what I am looking for, the better I understand the significance and relevance of what I find. Some historians probably do all this preliminary writing in their head without using pen, paper, or typewriter, just as some people play chess in their heads without recourse to board and chessmen: this is a talent which I envy, but cannot emulate. But I am convinced that, for any historian worth the name, the two processes of what economists call 'input' and 'output' go on simultaneously and are, in practice, parts of a single process. If you try to separate them,

if to give one priority over the other, you fall into one of two heresies. Either you write scissors-and-paste history without meaning or significance; or you write propaganda or historical fiction, and merely use facts of the past to embroider a kind of wiring which has nothing to do with history.

Our examination of the relation of the historian to the facts of history finds us, therefore, in an apparently precarious situation, navigating delicately between the Scylla of an untenable theory of history as an objective compilation of facts, of the unqualified primacy of fact over interpretation, and the Charybdis of an equally untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the mind of the historian who establishes the facts of history and masters them through the process of interpretation, between a view of history having the centre of gravity in the past and a view having the centre of gravity in the present. But our situation is less precarious than it seems. We shall encounter the same dichotomy of fact and interpretation again in these lectures in other guises - the particular and the general, the empirical and the theoretical, the objective and the subjective. The predicament of the historian is a reflexion of the nature of man. Man, except perhaps in earliest infancy and in extreme old age, is not totally involved in his environment and unconditionally subject to it. On the other hand, he is never totally independent of it and its unconditional master. The relation of man to his environment is the relation of the historian to his theme. The historian is neither the humble slave nor the tyrannical master of his facts. The relation between the historian and his facts is one of equality, of give-and-take. As any working historian knows, if he stops to reflect what he is doing as he thinks and writes, the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. It is impossible to assign primacy to one over the other.

The historian starts with a provisional selection of facts, and a provisional interpretation in the light of which that selection has been made - by others as well as by himself. As he works,

both the interpretation and the selection and ordering of facts undergo subtle and perhaps partly unconscious changes, through the reciprocal action of one or the other. And this reciprocal action also involves reciprocity between present and past, since the historian is part of the present and the facts belong to the past. The historian and the facts of history are necessary to one another. The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless. My first answer therefore to the question 'What is history?' is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.

2 *Society and the Individual*

THE question which comes first - society or the individual - is like the question about the hen and the egg. Whether you treat it as a logical or as a historical question, you can make no statement about it, one way or the other, which does not have to be corrected by an opposite, and equally one-sided, statement. Society and the individual are inseparable; they are necessary and complementary to each other, not opposites. 'No man is an island, entire of itself,' in Donne's famous words: 'every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.'¹ That is an aspect of the matter. On the other hand, take the dictum of J. S. Mill, the classical individualist: 'Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance.'² Of course not. But the fallacy is to suppose that they existed, or had any kind of substance, before being 'brought together'. As soon as we are born, the world gets to work on us and transforms us from purely biological into social units. Every human being at every stage of history or pre-history is born into a society and from his earliest years is moulded by that society. The language which he speaks is not an individual inheritance, but a social acquisition from the group in which he grows up. Both language and environment help to determine the character of his thought; his earliest ideas come to him from others. As has been well said, 'No individual apart from society would be both speechless and mindless. The lasting fascination of the Robinson Crusoe myth is due to its attempt to imagine an individual independent of Society. The attempt breaks down. Robinson is not an abstract individual, but an Englishman from York; he carries his Bible

1. *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, No. xvii.

2. J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, vn, 1.

historians - belong to this category of 'literary intellectuals'. They are so busy telling us that history is not a science, and explaining what it cannot and should not be or do, that they have no time for its achievements and its potentialities.

The other way to heal the rift is to promote a profounder understanding of the identity of aim between scientists and historians; and this is the main value of the new and growing interest in the history and philosophy of science. Scientists, social scientists, and historians are all engaged in different branches of the same study: the study of man and his environment, of the effects of man on his environment and of his environment on man. The object of the study is the same: to increase man's understanding of, and mastery over, his environment. The presuppositions and the methods of the physicist, the geologist, the psychologist, and the historian differ widely in detail; nor do I wish to commit myself to the proposition that, in order to be more scientific, the historian must follow more closely the methods of physical science. But historian and physical scientist are united in the fundamental purpose of seeking to explain, and in the fundamental procedure of question and answer. The historian, like any other scientist, is an animal who incessantly asks the question 'Why?' In my next lecture I shall examine the ways in which he puts the question and in which he attempts to answer it.

4 *Causation in History*

IF milk is set to boil in a saucepan, it boils over. I do not know, and have never wanted to know, why this happens; if pressed, I should probably attribute it to a propensity in milk to boil over, which is true enough but explains nothing. But then I am not a natural scientist. In the same way, one can read, or even write, about the events of the past without wanting to know why they happened, or be content to say that the Second World War occurred because Hitler wanted war, which is true enough but explains nothing. But one should not then commit the solecism of calling oneself a student of history or a historian. The study of history is a study of causes. The historian, as I said at the end of my last lecture, continuously asks the question 'Why?'; and so long as he hopes for an answer, he cannot rest. The great historian - or perhaps I should say more broadly, the great thinker - is the man who asks the question 'Why?' about new things or in new contexts.

Herodotus, the father of history, defined his purpose in the opening of his work: to preserve a memory of the deeds of the Greeks and the barbarians, 'and in particular, beyond everything else, to give the cause of their fighting one another'. He found few disciples in the ancient world: even Thucydides has been accused of having no clear conception of causation.¹ But when in the eighteenth century the foundations of modern historiography began to be laid, Montesquieu, in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and of their Rise and Decline*, took as his starting-point the principles that 'there are general causes, moral or physical, which operate in every monarchy, raise it, maintain it, or overthrow it', and that

I. F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, *passim*.

'all that occurs is subject to these causes'. A few years later in the *Esprit des his* he developed and generalized this idea. It was absurd to suppose that 'blind fate has produced all the effects which we see in the world'. Men were 'not governed uniquely by their fantasies'; their behaviour followed certain laws or principles derived from 'the nature of things'.¹ For nearly 200 years after that, historians and philosophers of history were busily engaged in an attempt to organize the past experience of mankind by discovering the causes of historical events and the laws which governed them. Sometimes the causes and the laws were thought of in mechanical, sometimes in biological, terms, sometimes as metaphysical, sometimes as economic, sometimes as psychological. But it was accepted doctrine that history consisted in marshalling the events of the past in an orderly sequence of cause and effect. 'If you have nothing to tell us', wrote Voltaire in his article on history for the Encyclopaedia, 'except that one barbarian succeeded another on the banks of the Oxus and Jaxartes, what is that to us?' In the last years the picture has been somewhat modified. Nowadays, for reasons discussed in my last lecture, we no longer speak of historical 'laws'; and even the word 'cause' has gone out of fashion, partly owing to certain philosophical ambiguities into which I need not enter, and partly owing to its supposed association with determinism, to which I will come presently. Some people therefore speak not of 'cause' in history, but of 'explanation' or 'interpretation', or of 'the logic of the situation', or of 'the inner logic of events' (this comes from Dicey), or reject the causal approach (why it happened) in favour of the functional approach (how it happened), though this seems inevitably to involve the question how it came to happen, and so leads us back to the question 'Why?' Other people distinguish between different kinds of cause - mechanical, biological, psychological, and so forth - and regard historical cause as a category of its own. Though some of these distinctions are in some degree valid, it may be

1. *De l'esprit des bis*, Preface and ch. I.

more profitable for present purposes to stress what is common to all kinds of cause rather than what separates them. For myself, I shall be content to use the word 'cause' in the popular sense and neglect these particular refinements.

Let us begin by asking what the historian in practice does when he is confronted by the necessity of assigning causes to events. The first characteristic of the historian's approach to the problem of cause is that he will commonly assign several causes to the same event. Marshall the economist once wrote that 'people must be warned off by every possible means from considering the action of any one cause... without taking account of the others whose effects are commingled with it'.* The examination candidate who, in answering the question 'Why did revolution break out in Russia in 1917?', offered only one cause, would be lucky to get a third class. The historian deals in a multiplicity of causes. If he were required to consider the causes of the Bolshevik revolution, he might name Russia's successive military defeats, the collapse of the Russian economy under pressure of war, the effective propaganda of the Bolsheviks, the failure of the Tsarist government to solve the agrarian problem, the concentration of an impoverished and exploited proletariat in the factories of Petrograd, the fact that Lenin knew his own mind and nobody on the other side did - in short, a random jumble of economic, political, ideological, and personal causes, of long-term and short-term causes.

But this brings us at once to the second characteristic of the historian's approach. The candidate who, in reply to our question, was content to set out one after the other a dozen causes of the Russian revolution and leave it at that, might get a second class, but scarcely a first; 'well-informed, but unimaginative' would probably be the verdict of the examiners. The true historian, confronted with this list of causes of his own compiling, would feel a professional compulsion to reduce it to order, to establish some hierarchy of causes which would fix

I. *Memorials of Alfred Marshall*, ed. A. C. Pigou (1925), p. 428.

their relation to one another, perhaps to decide which cause, or which category of causes, should be regarded 'in the last resort' or 'in the final analysis' (favourite phrases of historians) as the ultimate cause, the cause of all causes. This is his interpretation of his theme; the historian is known by the causes which he invokes. Gibbon attributed the decline and fall of the Roman empire to the triumph of barbarism and religion. The English Whig historians of the nineteenth century attributed the rise of British power and prosperity to the development of political institutions embodying the principles of constitutional liberty. Gibbon and the English nineteenth-century historians have an old-fashioned look today, because they ignore the economic causes which modern historians have moved into the forefront. Every historical argument revolves round the question of the priority of causes.

Henri Poincaré, in the work which I quoted in my last lecture, noted that science was advancing simultaneously 'towards variety and complexity' and 'towards unity and simplicity', and that this dual and apparently contradictory process was a necessary condition of knowledge.¹ This is no less true of history. The historian, by expanding and deepening his research, constantly accumulates more and more answers to the question, 'Why?' The proliferation in recent years of economic, social, cultural, and legal history - not to mention fresh insights into the complexities of political history, and the new techniques of psychology and statistics - have enormously increased the number and range of our answers. When Bertrand Russell observed that 'every advance in a science takes us further away from the crude uniformities which are first observed into a greater differentiation of antecedent and consequent, and into a continually wider circle of antecedents recognized as relevant',² he accurately described the situation in history. But the historian, in virtue of his urge to understand the past, is simultaneously

1. H. Poincaré, *La Science et Vhypothesis* (1902), pp. 202-3.

2. B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (1918), p. 188.

compelled, like the scientist, to simplify the multiplicity of his answers, to subordinate one answer to another, and to introduce some order and unity into the chaos of happenings and the chaos of specific causes. 'One God, one Law, one Element, and one far-off Divine Event'; or Henry Adams's quest for 'some great generalization which would finish one's clamour to be educated'¹ - these read nowadays like old-fashioned jokes. But the fact remains that the historian must work through the simplification, as well as through the multiplication, of causes. History, like science, advances through this dual and apparently contradictory process.

At this point I must reluctantly turn aside to deal with two savoury red herrings which have been drawn across our path - one labelled 'Determinism in History; or the Wickedness of Hegel', the other 'Chance in History; or Cleopatra's Nose'. First I must say a word or two about how they come to be here. Professor Karl Popper, who in the 1930s in Vienna wrote a weighty work on the new look in science (recently translated into English under the title *The Logic of Scientific Enquiry*), published in English during the war two books of a more popular character: *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism*.² They were written under the strong emotional influence of the reaction against Hegel, who was treated, together with Plato, as the spiritual ancestor of Nazism, and against the rather shallow Marxism which was the intellectual climate of the British Left in the 1930s. The principal targets were the allegedly determinist philosophies of history of Hegel and Marx grouped together under the opprobrious name of 'Historicism'.³ In 1954 Sir Isaiah Berlin published his essay on

1. *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1928), p. 224.

2. *The Poverty of Historicism* was first published in book form in 1957J but consists of articles originally published in 1944 and 1945.

3. I have avoided the word 'historicism', except in one or two places where precision was not required, since Professor Popper's widely read writings on the subject have emptied the term of precise

Historical Inevitability. He dropped the attack on Plato, perhaps out of some lingering respect for that ancient pillar of the Oxford Establishment¹; and he added to the indictment the argument, not found in Popper, that the 'historicism' of Hegel and Marx is objectionable because, by explaining human actions in causal terms, it implies* a denial of human free will, and encourages historians to evade their supposed obligation (of which I spoke in my last lecture) to pronounce moral condemnation on the Charlemagnes, Napoleons, and Stalins of history. Otherwise not much has changed. But Sir Isaiah Berlin is a deservedly popular and widely-read writer. During the past five or six years, almost everyone in this country or in the United States who has written an article about history, or even a serious review of a historical work, has cocked a knowing snook at Hegel and Marx and determinism, and pointed out the absurdity of

I. The attack on Plato as the first Fascist originated, however, in a series of broadcasts by an Oxford man, R. H. Grossman, *Plato Today* (1937).

meaning. Constant insistence on the definition of terms is pedantic. But one must know what one is talking about, and Professor Popper uses 'historicism' as a catch-all for any opinion about history which he dislikes, including some which seem to me sound and others which are, I suspect, held by no serious writer today. As he admits (*The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 3), he invents 'historicist' arguments which have never been used by any known 'historicist'. In his writing, historicism covers both doctrines which assimilate history to science, and doctrines which sharply differentiate the two. In *The Open Society*, Hegel, who avoided prediction, is treated as the high-priest of historicism; in the introduction to *The Poverty of Historicism*, historicism is described as 'an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim'. Hitherto 'historicism' has been commonly used as the English version of the German 'Historicismus'; now Professor Popper distinguishes 'historicism' from 'historicism', thus adding a further element of confusion to the already confused usage of the term. M. C. D'Arcy, *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred* (1959), p. H, uses the word 'historicism' as 'identical with a philosophy of history'.

failing to recognize the role of accident in history. It is perhaps unfair to hold Sir Isaiah responsible for his disciples. Even when he talks nonsense, he earns our indulgence by talking it in an engaging and attractive way. The disciples repeat the nonsense, and fail to make it attractive. In any case, there is nothing new in all this. Charles Kingsley, not the most distinguished of our Regius Professors of Modern History, who had probably never read Hegel or heard of Marx, spoke in his inaugural lecture in 1860 of man's 'mysterious power of breaking the laws of his own being' as proof that no 'inevitable sequence' could exist in history.¹ But fortunately we have forgotten Kingsley. It is Professor Popper and Sir Isaiah Berlin who between them have flogged this very dead horse back into a semblance of life; and some patience will be required to clear up the muddle.

First then let me take determinism, which I will define - I hope, uncontroversially - as the belief that everything that happens has a cause or causes, and could not have happened differently unless something in the cause or causes had also been different.² Determinism is a problem not of history, but of all human behaviour. The human being whose actions have no cause and are therefore undetermined is as much an abstraction as the individual outside society whom we discussed in a previous lecture. Professor Popper's assertion that 'everything is possible in human affairs'³ is either meaningless or false. Nobody in ordinary life believes or can believe this. The axiom that everything has a cause is a condition of our capacity to under-

1. C. Kingsley, *The Limits of Exact Science as Applied to History* (1860), p. 22.

2. 'Determinism ... means ... that, the data being what they are, whatever happens happens definitely and could not be different. To hold that it could, means only that it would if the data were different' (S. W. Alexander in *Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, 1936, p. 18).

3. K. R. Popper, *The Open Society* (2nd ed., 1952), ii, p. 197.

stand what is going on around us.¹ The nightmare quality of Kafka's novels lies in the fact that nothing that happens has any apparent cause, or any cause that can be ascertained: this leads to the total disintegration of the human personality, which is based on the assumption that events have causes, and that enough of these causes are ascertainable to build up in the human mind a pattern of past and present sufficiently coherent to serve as a guide to action. Everyday life would be impossible unless one assumed that human behaviour was determined by causes which are in principle ascertainable. Once upon a time some people thought it blasphemous to inquire into the causes of natural phenomena, since these were obviously governed by the divine will. Sir Isaiah Berlin's objection to our explaining why human beings acted as they did, on the ground that these actions are governed by the human will, belongs to the same order of ideas, and perhaps indicates that the social sciences are in the same stage of development today as were the natural sciences when this kind of argument was directed against them.

Let us see how we handle this problem in everyday life. As you go about your daily affairs, you are in the habit of meeting Smith. You greet him with an amiable, but pointless, remark about the weather, or about the state of college or university business; he replies with an equally amiable and pointless remark about the weather or the state of business. But supposing that one morning Smith, instead of answering your remark in his usual way, were to break into a violent diatribe against your personal appearance or character. Would you shrug your shoulders, and treat this as a convincing demonstration of the freedom of Smith's will and of the fact that everything is possible in

i. °The Law of Causality is not imposed upon us by the world', but 'is perhaps for us the most convenient method of adapting ourselves to the world' (J. Rueff, *From the Physical to the Social Sciences*, Baltimore, 1929, p. 52). Professor Popper himself (*The Logic of Scientific Enquiry*, p. 248) calls belief in causality a 'metaphysical hypostatization of a well-justified methodological rule'.

human affairs? I suspect that you would not. On the contrary, you would probably say something like: 'Poor Smith! You know, of course, his father died in a mental hospital,' or 'Poor Smith! He must have been having more trouble with his wife.' In other words, you would attempt to diagnose the cause of Smith's apparently causeless behaviour, in the firm conviction that some cause there must be. By so doing you would, I fear, incur the wrath of Sir Isaiah Berlin, who would bitterly complain that, by providing a causal explanation of Smith's behaviour, you had swallowed Hegel's and Marx's deterministic assumption, and shirked your obligation to denounce Smith as a cad. But nobody in ordinary life takes this view, or supposes that either determinism or moral responsibility is at stake. The logical dilemma about free will and determinism does not arise in real life. It is not that some human actions are free and others determined. The fact is that all human actions are both free and determined, according to the point of view from which one considers them. The practical question is different again. Smith's action had a cause, or a number of causes; but in so far as it was caused not by some external compulsion, but by the compulsion of his own personality, he was morally responsible, since it is a condition of social life that normal adult human beings are morally responsible for their own personality. Whether to hold him responsible in this particular case is a matter for your practical judgement. But, if you do, this does not mean that you regard his action as having no cause: cause and moral responsibility are different categories. An Institute and Chair of Criminology have recently been established in this university. It would not, I feel sure, occur to any of those engaged in investigating the causes of crime to suppose that this committed them to a denial of the moral responsibility of the criminal.

Now let us look at the historian. Like the ordinary man, he believes that human actions have causes which are in principle ascertainable. History, like everyday life, would be impossible if this assumption were not made. It is the special function of the

historian to investigate these causes. This may be thought to give him a special interest in the determined aspect of human behaviour: but he does not reject free will - except on the untenable hypothesis that voluntary actions have no cause. Nor is he troubled by the question of inevitability. Historians, like other people, sometimes fall into rhetorical language and speak of an occurrence as 'inevitable*' when they mean merely that the conjunction of factors leading one to expect it was overwhelmingly strong. Recently I searched my own history for the offending word, and cannot give myself an entirely clean bill of health: in one passage I wrote that, after the revolution of 1917, a clash between the Bolsheviks and the Orthodox Church was 'inevitable'. No doubt it would have been wiser to say 'extremely probable'. But may I be excused for finding the correction a shade pedantic? In practice, historians do not assume that events are inevitable before they have taken place. They frequently discuss alternative courses available to the actors in the story, on the assumption that the option was open, though they go on quite correctly to explain why one course was eventually chosen rather than the other. Nothing in history is inevitable, except in the formal sense that, for it to have happened otherwise, the antecedent causes would have had to be different. As a historian, I am perfectly prepared to do without 'inevitable', 'unavoidable', 'inescapable', and even 'ineluctable'. Life will be drabber. But let us leave them to poets and metaphysicians.

So barren and pointless does this charge of inevitability appear, and so great the vehemence with which it has been pursued in recent years, that I think we must look for the hidden motives behind it. Its principal source is, I suspect, what I may call the 'might-have-been' school of thought - or rather of emotion. It attaches itself almost exclusively to contemporary history. Last term here in Cambridge I saw a talk to some society advertised under the title 'Was the Russian Revolution Inevitable?' I am sure it was intended as a perfectly serious talk. But if you had seen a talk advertised on 'Were the Wars of the Roses Inevit-

able?' you would at once have suspected some joke. The historian writes of the Norman Conquest or the American War of Independence as if what happened was in fact bound to happen, and as if it was his business simply to explain what happened and why; and nobody accuses him of being a determinist and of failing to discuss the alternative possibility that William the Conqueror or the American insurgents might have been defeated. When, however, I write about the Russian revolution of 1917 in precisely this way - the only proper way to the historian - I find myself under attack from my critics for having by implication depicted what happened as something that was bound to happen, and failed to examine all the other things that might have happened. Suppose, it is said, that Stolypin had had time to complete his agrarian reform, or that Russia had not gone to war, perhaps the revolution would not have occurred; or suppose that the Kerensky government had made good, and that the leadership of the revolution had been assumed by the Mensheviks or the Social Revolutionaries instead of by the Bolsheviks. These suppositions are theoretically conceivable; and one can always play a parlour game with the might-have-beens of history. But they have nothing to do with determinism; for the determinist will only reply that, for these things to have happened, the causes would also have had to be different. Nor have they anything to do with history. The point is that today nobody seriously wishes to reverse the results of the Norman Conquest or of American independence, or to express a passionate protest against these events; and nobody objects when the historian treats them as a closed chapter. But plenty of people, who have suffered directly or vicariously from the results of the Bolshevik victory, or still fear its remoter consequences, desire to register their protest against it; and this takes the form, when they read history, of letting their imagination run riot on all the more agreeable things that might have happened, and of being indignant with the historian who goes on quietly with his job of explaining what did happen and why their agreeable

wish-dreams remain unfulfilled. The trouble about contemporary history is that people remember the time when all the options were still open, and find it difficult to adopt the attitude of the historian for whom they have been closed by *thefait accompli*. This is a purely emotional and unhistorical reaction. But it has furnished most of the fuel for the recent campaign against the supposed doctrine of 'historical inevitability'. Let us get rid of this red herring once and for all.

The other source of the attack is the famous crux of Cleopatra's nose. This is the theory that history is, by and large, a chapter of accidents, a series of events determined by chance coincidences, and attributable only to the most casual causes. The result of the Battle of Actium was due not to the sort of causes commonly postulated by historians, but to Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra. When Bajazet was deterred by an attack of gout from marching into central Europe, Gibbon observed that 'an acrimonious humour falling on a single fibre of one man may prevent or suspend the misery of nations'.¹ When King Alexander of Greece died in the autumn of 1920 from the bite of a pet monkey, this accident touched off a train of events which led Sir Winston Churchill to remark that 'a quarter of a million persons died of this monkey's bite'.² Or take again Trotsky's comment on the fever contracted while shooting ducks which put him out of action at a critical point of his quarrel with Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin in the autumn of 1923: 'One can foresee a revolution or a war, but it is impossible to foresee the consequences of an autumn shooting-trip for wild ducks.'³ The first thing to be made clear is that this question has nothing to do with the issue of determinism. Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra, or Bajazet's attack of gout, or Trotsky's feverish chill, were just as much causally determined as anything else that happens. It is unnecessarily discourteous to Cleopatra's

1. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. lxiv.
2. W. Churchill, *The World Crisis: The Aftermath* (1929)* P- 386.
3. L. Trotsky, *My Life* (Engl. transl., 1930), p. 425.

beauty to suggest that Antony's infatuation had no cause. The connexion between female beauty and male infatuation is one of the most regular sequences of cause and effect observable in everyday life. These so-called accidents in history represent a sequence of cause and effect interrupting - and, so to speak, clashing with - the sequence which the historian is primarily concerned to investigate. Bury, quite rightly, speaks of a 'collision of two independent causal chains'.¹ Sir Isaiah Berlin, who opens his essay on *Historical Inevitability* by citing with praise an article of Bernard Berenson on 'The Accidental View of History', is one of those who confuse accident in this sense with an absence of causal determination. But, this confusion apart, we have a real problem on our hands. How can one discover in history a coherent sequence of cause and effect, how can we find any meaning in history, when our sequence is liable to be broken or deflected at any moment by some other, and from our point of view irrelevant, sequence?

We may pause here for a moment to notice the origin of this recent widespread insistence on the role of chance in history. Polybius appears to have been the first historian to occupy himself with it in any systematic way; and Gibbon was quick to unmask the reason. 'The Greeks', observed Gibbon, 'after their country had been reduced to a province, imputed the triumphs of Rome not to the merit, but to the fortune, of the republic.'² Tacitus, also a historian of the decay of his country, was another ancient historian to indulge in extensive reflexions on chance. The renewed insistence by British writers on the

1. For Bury's argument on this point see *The Idea of Progress* (1920) pp. 303-4.

2. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. xxxviii. It is amusing to note that the Greeks, after their conquest by the Romans, also indulged in the game of historical 'might-have-beens' - the favourite consolation of the defeated: if Alexander the Great had not died young, they told themselves, 'he would have conquered the West and Rome would have become subject to Greek kings' (K. von Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity*, N. Y. O 1954, p. 395).

importance of accident in history dates from the growth of a mood of uncertainty and apprehension which set in with the present century and became marked after 1914. The first British historian to sound this note after a long interval appears to have been Bury, who, in an article of 1909 on 'Darwinism in History', drew attention to 'the element of chance coincidence' which in large measure 'helps to determine events in social evolution'; and a separate article was devoted to this theme in 1916 under the title 'Cleopatra's Nose'.¹ H. A. L. Fisher, in the passage already quoted, which reflects his disillusionment over the failure of liberal dreams after the First World War, begs his readers to recognize 'the play of the contingent and the unforeseen' in history.² The popularity in this country of a theory of history as a chapter of accidents has coincided with the rise in France of a school of philosophers who preach that existence - I quote Sartre's famous *L'Être et le néant* - has 'neither cause nor reason nor necessity'. In Germany, the veteran historian Meinecke, as we have already noted, became impressed towards the end of his life with the role of chance in history. He reproached Ranke with not having paid sufficient attention to it; and after the Second World War he attributed the national disasters of the past forty years to a series of accidents, the vanity of the Kaiser, the election of Hindenburg to the presidency of the Weimar Republic, Hitler's obsessional character, and so forth - the bankruptcy of a great historian's mind under

1. Both articles are reprinted in J. B. Bury, *Selected Essays* (1930); for Collingwood's comments on Bury's views, see *The Idea of History*, pp. 148-50.

2. For the passage, see p. 43 above. Toynbee's quotation of Fisher's dictum in *A Study of History*, v, p. 414, reveals a complete misapprehension: he regards it as a product of the 'modern Western belief in the omnipotence of chance', which 'gave birth' to *laissez-faire*. The theorists of *laissez-faire* believed not in chance, but in the hidden hand which imposed beneficent regularities on the diversity of human behaviour; and Fisher's remark was a product not of *laissez-faire* liberalism, but of its breakdown in the 1920s and 1930s.

the stress of the misfortunes of his country.¹ In a group or a nation which is riding in the trough, not on the crest, of historical events, theories that stress the role of chance or accident in history will be found to prevail. The view that examination results are all a lottery will always be popular among those who have been placed in the third class.

But to uncover the sources of a belief is not to dispose of it; and we have still to discover exactly what Cleopatra's nose is doing in the pages of history. Montesquieu was apparently the first who attempted to defend the laws of history against this intrusion. 'If a particular cause, like the accidental result of a battle, has ruined a state,' he wrote in his work on the greatness and decline of the Romans, 'there was a general cause which made the downfall of this state ensue from a single battle.' The Marxists also had some difficulty over this question. Marx wrote of it only once, and that only in a letter:

World history would have a very mystical character if there were no room in it for chance. This chance itself naturally becomes part of the general trend of development and is compensated by other forms of chance. But acceleration and retardation depend on such 'accidentals', which include the 'chance' character of the individuals who are at the head of a movement at the outset.²

Marx thus offered an apology for chance in history under three heads. First, it was not very important; it could 'accelerate' or 'retard', but not, by implication, radically alter, the course of events. Second, one chance was compensated by another, so that in the end chance cancelled itself out. Third, chance was especially illustrated in the character of individuals.³ Trotsky

1. The relevant passages are quoted by W. Stark in his introduction to F. Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, pp. xxxv-xxxvi.

2. Marx and Engels, *Works* (Russian ed.), xxvi, p. 108.

3. Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, Epilogue i, equated 'chance' and 'genius' as terms expressive of human inability to understand ultimate causes.

reinforced the theory of compensating and self-cancelling accidents by an ingenious analogy:

The entire historical process is a refraction of historical law through the accidental. In the language of biology, we might say that the historical law is realized through the natural selection of accidents.¹

I confess that I find this theory unsatisfying and unconvincing. The role of accident in history is nowadays seriously exaggerated by those who are interested to stress its importance. But it exists, and to say that it merely accelerates or retards, but does not alter, is to juggle with words. Nor do I see any reason to believe that an accidental occurrence - say, the premature death of Lenin at the age of fifty-four - is automatically compensated by some other accident in such a way as to restore the balance of the historical process.

Equally inadequate is the view that accident in history is merely the measure of our ignorance - simply a name for something which we fail to understand.² This no doubt sometimes happens. The planets got their name, which means of course 'wanderers', when they were supposed to wander at random through the sky, and the regularity of their movements was not understood. To describe something as a mischance is a favourite way of exempting oneself from the tiresome obligation to investigate its cause; and, when somebody tells me that history is a chapter of accidents, I tend to suspect him of intellectual laziness or low intellectual vitality. It is common practice with serious historians to point out that something hitherto treated as accidental was not an accident at all, but can be rationally explained and significantly fitted into the broader pattern of events. But this also does not fully answer our question. Accident is not

1. L. Trotsky, *My Life* (1930), p. 422.

2. Tolstoy took this view: 'We are forced to fall back on fatalism as an explanation of irrational events, that is to say, of events the rationality of which we do not understand' (*War and Peace*, Bk ix, ch.i); see also the passage cited on p. 101, note 3.

simply something which we fail to understand. The solution of the problem of accident in history must, I believe, be sought in a quite different order of ideas.

At an earlier stage we saw that history begins with the selection and marshalling of facts by the historian to become historical facts. Not all facts are historical facts. But the distinction between historical and unhistorical facts is not rigid or constant; and any fact may, so to speak, be promoted to the status of a historical fact once its relevance and significance are discerned. We now see that a somewhat similar process is at work in the historian's approach to causes. The relation of the historian to his causes has the same dual and reciprocal character as the relation of the historian to his facts. The causes determine his interpretation of the historical process, and his interpretation determines his selection and marshalling of the causes. The hierarchy of causes, the relative significance of one cause or set of causes or of another, is the essence of his interpretation. And this furnishes the clue to the problem of the accidental in history. The shape of Cleopatra's nose, Bajazet's attack of gout, the monkey-bite that killed King Alexander, the death of Lenin - these were accidents which modified the course of history. It is futile to attempt to spirit them away, or to pretend that in some way or other they had no effect. On the other hand, in so far as they were accidental, they do not enter into any rational interpretation of history, or into the historian's hierarchy of significant causes. Professor Popper and Professor Berlin - I cite them once more as the most distinguished and widely read representatives of the school - assume that the historian's attempt to find significance in the historical process and to draw conclusions from it is tantamount to an attempt to reduce 'the whole of experience' to a symmetrical order, and that the presence of accident in history dooms any such attempt to failure. But no sane historian pretends to do anything so fantastic as to embrace 'the whole of experience'; he cannot embrace more than a minute fraction of the facts even of his chosen sector or aspect of history. The world

of the historian, like the world of the scientist, is not a photographic copy of the real world, but rather a working model which enables him, more or less effectively to understand it and to master it. The historian distils from the experience of the past, or from so much of the experience of the past as is accessible to him, that part which he recognizes as amenable to rational explanation and interpretation, and from it draws conclusions which may serve as a guide to action. A recent popular writer, speaking of the achievements of science, refers graphically to the processes of the human mind, which, 'rummaging in the ragbag of observed "facts", selects, pieces, and patterns the *relevant* observed facts together, rejecting the *irrelevant*, until it has sewn together a logical and rational quilt of "knowledge"'.¹ With some qualification as to the dangers of undue subjectivism, I should accept that as a picture of the way in which the mind of the historian works.

This procedure may puzzle and shock philosophers, and even some historians. But it is perfectly familiar to ordinary people going about the practical business of life. Let me illustrate. Jones, returning from a party at which he has consumed more than his usual ration of alcohol, in a car whose brakes turn out to have been defective, at a blind corner where visibility is notoriously poor, knocks down and kills Robinson, who was crossing the road to buy cigarettes at the shop on the corner. A*ter the mess has been cleared up, we meet - say at local police headquarters - to inquire into the causes of the occurrence. Was it due to the driver's semi-intoxicated condition - in which case there might be criminal prosecution? Or was it due to the defective brakes - in which case something might be said to the garage which overhauled the car only the week before? Or was it due to the blind corner - in which case the road authorities might be invited to give the matter their attention? While we are discussing these practical questions, two distinguished gentlemen - I shall not attempt to identify them - burst into the

I. L. Paul, *The Annihilation of Man* (1944), p. 147.

room and begin to tell us, with great fluency and cogency, that, if Robinson had not happened to run out of cigarettes that evening, he would not have been crossing the road and would not have been killed; that Robinson's desire for cigarettes was therefore the cause of his death; and that any inquiry which neglects this cause will be waste of time, and any conclusions drawn from it meaningless and futile. Well, what do we do? As soon as we can break into the flow of eloquence, we edge our two visitors gently but firmly towards the door, we instruct the janitor on no account to admit them again, and we get on with our inquiry. But what answer have we to the interrupters? Of course, Robinson was killed because he was a cigarette-smoker. Everything that the devotees of chance and contingency in history say is perfectly true and perfectly logical. It has the kind of remorseless logic which we find in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. But, while I yield to none in my admiration for these ripe examples of Oxford scholarship, I prefer to keep my different modes of logic in separate compartments. The Dodgsonian mode is not the mode of history.

History therefore is a process of selection in terms of historical significance. To borrow Talcott Parson's phrase once more, history is 'a selective system' not only of cognitive, but of causal, orientations to reality. Just as from the infinite ocean of facts the historian selects those which are significant for his purpose, so from the multiplicity of sequences of cause and effect he extracts those, and only those, which are historically significant; and the standard of historical significance is his ability to fit them into his pattern of rational explanation and interpretation. Other sequences of cause and effect have to be rejected as accidental, not because the relation between cause and effect is different, but because the sequence itself is irrelevant. The historian can do nothing with it; it is not amenable to rational interpretation, and has no meaning either for the past or the present. It is true that Cleopatra's nose, or Bajazet's gout, or Alexander's monkey-bite, or Lenin's death, or Robinson's cigarette-smoking, had

results. But it makes no sense as a general proposition to say that generals lose battles because they are infatuated with beautiful queens, or that wars occur because kings keep pet monkeys, or that people get run over and killed on the roads because they smoke cigarettes. If on the other hand you tell the ordinary man that Robinson was killed because the driver was drunk, or because the brakes did not work, or because there was a blind corner on the road, this will seem to him a perfectly sensible and rational explanation; if he chooses to discriminate, he may even say that this, and not Robinson's desire for cigarettes, was the 'real' cause of Robinson's death. Similarly, if you tell the student of history that the struggles in the Soviet Union in the 1920s were due to discussions about the rate of industrialization, or about the best means of inducing the peasants to grow grain to feed the towns, or even to the personal ambitions of rival leaders, he will feel that these are rational and historically significant explanations, in the sense that they could also be applied to other historical situations, and that they are 'real' causes of what happened in the sense that the accident of Lenin's premature death was not. He may even, if he is given to reflection on these things, be reminded of Hegel's much quoted and much misunderstood dictum in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* that 'what is rational is real, and what is real is rational'.

Let us return for a moment to the causes of Robinson's death. We had no difficulty in recognizing that some of the causes were rational and 'real' and that others were irrational and accidental. But by what criterion did we make the distinction? The faculty of reason is normally exercised for some purpose. Intellectuals may sometimes reason, or think that they reason, for fun. But, broadly speaking, human beings reason to an end. And when we recognized certain explanations as rational, and other explanations as not rational, we were, I suggest, distinguishing between explanations which served some end and explanations which did not. In the case under discussion it made sense to suppose that the curbing of alcoholic indulgence in drivers, or a

stricter control over the condition of brakes, or an improvement in the siting of roads, might serve the end of reducing the number of traffic fatalities. But it made no sense at all to suppose that the number of traffic fatalities could be reduced by preventing people from smoking cigarettes. This was the criterion by which we made our distinction. And the same goes for our attitude to causes in history. There, too, we distinguish between rational and accidental causes. The former, since they are potentially applicable to other countries, other periods, and other conditions, lead to fruitful generalizations, and lessons can be learned from them; they serve the end of broadening and deepening our understanding.¹ Accidental causes cannot be generalized; and, since they are in the fullest sense of the word unique, they teach no lessons and lead to no conclusions. But here I must make another point. It is precisely this notion of an end in view which provides the key to our treatment of causation in history; and this necessarily involves value judgements. Interpretation in history is, as we saw in the last lecture, always bound up with value judgements, and causality is bound up with interpretation. In the words of Meinecke - the great Meinecke, the Meinecke of the 1920s - 'the search for causalities in history is impossible without reference to values . . . behind the search for causalities there always lies, directly or indirectly, the search for values'.² And this recalls what I said earlier, about the dual and reciprocal function of history - to promote our understanding of the past in the light of the present and of the present in

1. Professor Popper at one moment stumbles on this point, but fails to see it. Having assumed 'a plurality of interpretations which are fundamentally on the same level of both suggestiveness and arbitrariness' (whatever exactly these two words imply), he adds in a parenthesis that 'some of them may be distinguished by their fertility - a point of some importance' (*The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 151). It is not a point of some importance: it is *the* point, which proves that 'historicism' (in some meanings of the term) is not so poor after all.

2. *Kausalitäten und Werte in der Geschichte* (1928), translated in F. Stern, *Varieties of History* (1957), pp. 268, 273.

the light of the past. Anything which, like Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra's nose, fails to contribute to this dual purpose is from the point of view of the historian dead and barren.

At this juncture, it is time for me to confess to a rather shabby trick which I have played on you, though, since you will have had no difficulty in seeing through it, and since it has enabled me on several occasions to shorten and simplify what I had to say, you will perhaps have been indulgent enough to treat it as a convenient piece of shorthand. I have hitherto consistently used the conventional phrase 'past and present'. But, as we all know, the present has no more than a notional existence as an imaginary dividingline between thepastandthefuture. In speaking of the present, I have already smuggled another time dimension into the argument. It would, I think, be easy to show that, since past and future are part of the same time-span, interest in the past and interest in the future are interconnected. The line of demarcation between prehistoric and historical times is crossed when people cease to live only in the present, and become consciously interested both in their past and in their future. History begins with the handing down of tradition; and tradition means the carrying of the habits and lessons of the past into the future. Records of the past begin to be kept for the benefit of future generations. 'Historical thinking', writes the Dutch historian Huizinga, 'is always teleological.'¹ Sir Charles Snow recently wrote of Rutherford that 'like all scientists ___ he had, almost without thinking what it meant, the future in his bones'.² Good historians, I suspect, whether they think about it or not, have the future in their bones. Besides the question 'Why?' the historian also asks the question 'Whither?'

1. J. Huizinga, translated in *Varieties of History*, ed. F. Stern (1957) p. 293.

2. *The Baldwin Age*, ed. John Raymond (1960), p. 246.

5 *History as Progress*

LET me begin by quoting a passage from Professor Powicke's inaugural lecture as Regius Professor in Modern History in Oxford thirty years ago:

The craving for an interpretation of history is so deep-rooted that, unless we have a constructive outlook over the past, we are drawn either to mysticism or to cynicism.¹

'Mysticism' will, I think, stand for the view that the meaning of history lies somewhere outside history, in the realms of theology or eschatology - the view of such writers as Berdyaev or Niebuhr or Toynbee.² 'Cynicism' stands for the view, examples of which I have several times quoted, that history has no meaning, or a multiplicity of equally valid or invalid meanings, or the meaning which we arbitrarily choose to give to it. These are perhaps the two most popular views of history today. But I shall unhesitatingly reject both of them. This leaves us with that odd, but suggestive, phrase 'a constructive outlook over the past'. Having no way of knowing what was in Professor Powicke's mind when he used the phrase, I shall attempt to read my own interpretation into it.

Like the ancient civilizations of Asia, the classical civilization of Greece and Rome was basically unhistorical. As we have already seen, Herodotus as the father of history had few children; and the writers of classical antiquity were on the whole as little concerned with the future as with the past. Thucydides believed that nothing significant had happened in time before

1. F. Powicke, *Modern Historians and the Study of History* (1955), p. 174.

2. 'History passes over into theology,' as Toynbee triumphantly 'asserted (*Civilization on Trial*, 1948, preface).

the events which he described, and that nothing significant was likely to happen thereafter. Lucretius deduced man's indifference to the future from his indifference to the past:

Consider how that past ages of eternal time before our birth were no concern of ours. This is a mirror which nature holds up to us of future time after our death.¹

Poetic visions of a brighter future took the form of visions of a return to a golden age of the past - a cyclical view which assimilated the processes of history to the processes of nature. History was not going anywhere: because there was no sense of the past, there was equally no sense of the future. Only Virgil, who in his fourth eclogue had given the classical picture of a return to the golden age, was inspired in the *Aeneid* momentarily to break through the cyclical conception: *'Imperium sine fine dedi'** was a most unclassical thought, which later earned Virgil recognition as a quasi-Christian prophet.

It was the Jews, and after them the Christians, who introduced an entirely new element by postulating a goal towards which the historical process is moving - the teleological view of history. History thus acquired a meaning and purpose, but at the expense of losing its secular character. The attainment of the goal of history would automatically mean the end of history: history itself became a theodicy. This was the medieval view of history. The Renaissance restored the classical view of an anthropocentric world and of the primacy of reason, but for the pessimistic classical view of the future substituted an optimistic view derived from the Jewish-Christian tradition. Time, which had once been hostile and corroding, now became friendly and creative: contrast Horace's *'Damnosa quid non imminuit dies?'* with Bacon's *'Veritas temporis filia'*. The rationalists of the Enlightenment, who were the founders of modern historiography, retained the Jewish-Christian teleological view, but secularized the goal; they were thus enabled to restore the rational character

I. *De Rerum Natura*, iii, ll. 992-5.

of the historical process itself. History became progress towards the goal of the perfection of man's estate on earth. Gibbon, the greatest of the Enlightenment historians, was not deterred by the nature of his subject from recording what he called 'the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race'.¹ The cult of progress reached its climax at the moment when British prosperity, power, and self-confidence were at their height; and British writers and British historians were among the most ardent votaries of the cult. The phenomenon is too familiar to need illustration; and I need only quote one or two passages to show how recently faith in progress remained a postulate of all our thinking. Acton, in the report of 1896 on the project of the *Cambridge Modern History* which I quoted in my first lecture, referred to history as 'a progressive science'; and in the introduction to the first volume of the history wrote that 'we are bound to assume, as the scientific hypothesis on which history is to be written, a progress in human affairs'. In the last volume of the history, published in 1910, Dampier, who was a tutor of my college when I was an undergraduate, felt no doubt that 'future ages will see no limit to the growth of man's power over the resources of nature and of his intelligent use of them for the welfare of his race'.² In view of what I am about to say, it is fair for me to admit that this was the atmosphere in which I was

1. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. xxxviii; the occasion of this digression was the downfall of the western empire. A critic in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 November 1960, quoting this passage, asks whether Gibbon quite meant it. Of course he did; the point of view of a writer is more likely to reflect the period in which he lives than that about which he writes - a truth well illustrated by this critic, who seeks to transfer his own mid-twentieth-century scepticism to a late eighteenth-century writer.

2. *Cambridge Modern History: Its Origin, Authorship, and Production* (1907), p. 13; *Cambridge Modern History*, i (1902), p. 4; xii (1910), p. 791.

educated, and that I could subscribe without reservation to the words of my senior by half a generation, Bertrand Russell: 'I grew up in the full flood of Victorian optimism, and . . . something remains with me of the hopefulness that then was easy.'¹

In 1920, when Bury wrote his book *The Idea of Progress*, a bleaker climate already prevailed, the blame for which he laid, in obedience to the current fashion, on 'the doctrinaires who have established the present reign of terror in Russia', though he still described progress as 'the animating and controlling idea of western civilization'.² Thereafter this note was silent. Nicholas I of Russia is said to have issued an order banning the word 'progress': nowadays the philosophers and historians of western Europe, and even the United States, have come belatedly to agree with him. The hypothesis of progress has been refuted. The decline of the west has become so familiar a phrase that quotation marks are no longer required. But what, apart from all the shouting, has really happened? By whom has this new current of opinion been formed? • The other day I was shocked to come across, I think, the only remark of Bertrand Russell I have ever seen which seemed to me to betray an acute sense of class: 'There is, on the whole, much less liberty in the world now than there was a hundred years ago.'³ I have no measuring-rod for liberty, and do not know how to balance the lesser liberty of few against the greater liberty of many. But on any standard of measurement I can only regard the statement as fantastically untrue. I am more attracted by one of those fascinating glimpses which Mr A. J. P. Taylor sometimes gives us into Oxford academic life. All this talk about the decline of civilization, he writes, 'means only that university professors used to have domestic servants and now do their own washing-up'.⁴ Of course, for former domestic servants, washing-up by

1. B. Russell, *Portraits From Memory* (1956), p. 17.

2. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (1920), pp. vii-viii.

3. B. Russell, *Portraits From Memory* (1956), p. 124.

4. *The Observer* 21 June 1959.

professors may be a symbol of progress. The loss of white supremacy in Africa, which worries Empire Loyalists, Africaner Republicans, and investors in gold and copper shares, may look like progress to others. I see no reason why, on this question of progress, I should *ipso facto* prefer the verdict of the 1950s to that of the 1890s, the verdict of the English-speaking world to that of Russia, Asia, and Africa, or the verdict of the middle-class intellectual to that of the man in the street, who, according to Mr Macmillan, has never had it so good. Let us for the moment suspend judgement on the question whether we are living in a period of progress or of decline, and examine a little more closely what is implied in the concept of progress, what assumptions lie behind it, and how far these have become untenable.

I should like, first of all, to clear up the muddle about progress and evolution. The thinkers of the Enlightenment adopted two apparently incompatible views. They sought to vindicate man's place in the world of nature: the laws of history were equated with the laws of nature. On the other hand, they believed in progress. But what ground was there for treating nature as progressive, as constantly advancing towards a goal? Hegel met the difficulty by sharply distinguishing history, which was progressive, from nature, which was not. The Darwinian revolution appeared to remove all embarrassments by equating evolution and progress: nature, like history, turned out after all to be progressive. But this opened the way to a much graver misunderstanding, by confusing biological inheritance, which is the source of evolution, with social acquisition, which is the source of progress in history. The distinction is familiar and obvious. Put a European infant in a Chinese family, and the child will grow up with a white skin, but speaking Chinese. Pigmentation is a biological inheritance, language a social acquisition transmitted by the agency of the human brain. Evolution by inheritance has to be measured in millennia or in millions of years; no measurable biological change is known to have occurred in man

since the beginning of written history. Progress by acquisition can be measured in generations. The essence of man as a rational being is that he develops his potential capacities by accumulating the experience of past generations. Modern man is said to have no larger a brain, and no greater innate capacity of thought, than his ancestor 5000 years ago. But the effectiveness of his thinking has been multiplied many times by learning and incorporating in his experience the experience of the intervening generations. The transmission of acquired characteristics, which is rejected by biologists, is the very foundation of social progress. History is progress through the transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another.

Secondly* we need not and should not conceive progress as having a finite beginning or end. The belief, popular less than fifty years ago, that civilization was invented in the Nile Valley in the fourth millennium B.C. is no more credible today than the chronology which placed the creation of the world in 4004 B.C. Civilization, the birth of which we may perhaps take as a starting-point for our hypothesis of progress, was surely not an invention, but an infinitely slow process of development, in which spectacular leaps probably occurred from time to time. We need not trouble ourselves with the question when progress - or civilization - began. The hypothesis of a finite end of progress has led to more serious misapprehension. Hegel has been rightly condemned for seeing the end of progress in the Prussian monarchy - apparently the result of an overstrained interpretation of his view of the impossibility of prediction. But Hegel's aberration was capped by that eminent Victorian, Arnold of Rugby, who in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in Oxford in 1841 thought that modern history would be the last stage in the history of mankind: 'It appears to bear marks of the fullness of time, as if there would be no future history beyond it.'¹ Marx's prediction that the proletarian revo-

I. T. Arnold, *An Inaugural Lecture on the Study of Modern History* (1841), p. 38.

lution would realize the ultimate aim of a classless society was logically and morally less vulnerable; but the presumption of an end of history has an eschatological ring more appropriate to the theologian than to the historian, and reverts to the fallacy of a goal outside history. No doubt a finite end has attractions for the human mind; and Acton's vision of the march of history as an unending progress towards liberty seems chilly and vague. But if the historian is to save his hypothesis of progress, I think he must be prepared to treat it as a process into which the demands and conditions of successive periods will put their own specific content. And this is what is meant by Acton's thesis that history is not only a record of progress but a 'progressive science', or, if you like, that history in both senses of the word - as the course of events and as the record of those events - is progressive. Let us recall Acton's description of the advance of liberty in history:

It is by the combined efforts of the weak, made under compulsion, to resist the reign of force and constant wrong, that, in the rapid change but slow progress of four hundred years, liberty has been preserved, and secured, and extended, and finally understood.¹

History as the course of events was conceived by Acton as progress towards liberty, history as the record of those events as progress towards the understanding of liberty: the two processes advanced side by side.² The philosopher Bradley, writing in an age when analogies from evolution were fashionable, remarked that 'for religious faith the end of evolution is presented as that which... is already evolved'.³ For the historian the end of progress is not already evolved. It is something still infinitely remote; and pointers towards it come in sight only as we advance. This does not diminish its importance. A compass

1. Acton, *Lectures on Modern History* (1906), p. 51.

2. K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (Engl. transl., 1936), p. 236, also associates man's 'will to shape history' with his 'ability to understand it'.

3. F. H. Pradley, *Ethical Studies* (1876), p. 293.

is a valuable and indeed indispensable guide. But it is not a chart of the route. The content of history can be realized only as we experience it.

My third point is that no sane person ever believed in a kind of progress which advanced in an unbroken straight line without reverses and deviations and breaks in continuity, so that even the sharpest reverse is not necessarily fatal to the belief. Clearly there are periods of regression as well as periods of progress. Moreover, it would be rash to assume that, after a retreat, the advance will be resumed from the same point or along the same line. Hegel's or Marx's four or three civilizations, Toynbee's twenty-one civilizations, the theory of a life-cycle of civilizations passing through rise, decline, and fall - such schemes make no sense in themselves. But they are symptomatic of the observed fact that the effort which is needed to drive civilization forward dies away in one place and is later resumed at another, so that whatever progress we can observe in history is certainly not continuous either in time or in place. Indeed, if I were addicted to formulating laws of history, one such law would be to the effect that the group - call it a class, a nation, a continent, a civilization, what you will - which plays the leading role in the advance of civilization in one period is unlikely to play a similar role in the next period, and this for the good reason that it will be too deeply imbued with the traditions, interests, and ideologies of the earlier period to be able to adapt itself to the demands and conditions of the next period.¹ Thus it may very well happen that what seems for one group a period of decline may seem to another the birth of a new advance. Progress does not and cannot mean equal and simultaneous progress for all.

i. For a diagnosis of such a situation see R. S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What?* (N.Y., 1939), p. 88: 'Elderly people in our culture are frequently oriented towards the past, the time of their vigour and power, and resist the future as a threat. It is probable that a whole culture in an advanced stage of loss of relative power and disintegration may thus have a dominant orientation towards a lost golden age, while life is lived sluggishly along in the present.'

It is significant that almost all our latter-day prophets of decline, our sceptics who see no meaning in history and assume that progress is dead, belong to that sector of the world and to that class of society which have triumphantly played a leading and predominant part in the advance of civilization for several generations. It is no consolation to them to be told that the role which their group has played in the past will now pass to others. Clearly a history which has played so scurvy a trick on them cannot be a meaningful or rational process. But, if we are to retain the hypothesis of progress, we must, I think, accept the condition of the broken line.

Lastly, I come to the question what is the essential content of progress in terms of historical action. The people who struggle, say, to extend civil rights to all, or to reform penal practice, or to remove inequalities of race or wealth, are consciously seeking to do just those things: they are not consciously seeking to 'progress', to realize some historical 'law' or 'hypothesis' or progress. It is the historian who applies to their actions his hypothesis of progress, and interprets their actions as progress. But this does not invalidate the concept of progress. I am glad on this point to find myself in agreement with Sir Isaiah Berlin that 'progress and reaction, however much the words may have been abused, are not empty concepts'.¹ It is a presupposition of history that man is capable of profiting (not that he necessarily profits) by the experience of his predecessors, and that progress in history, unlike evolution in nature, rests on the transmission of acquired assets. These assets include both material possessions and the capacity to master, transform, and utilize one's environment. Indeed, the two factors are closely inter-connected, and react on one another. Marx treats human labour as the foundation of the whole edifice; and this formula seems acceptable if a sufficiently broad sense is attached to 'labour'. But the mere accumulation of resources will not avail unless it brings with it not only increased technical and social

1. *Foreign Affairs*, xxviii, No. 3 June 1950), p. 382.

knowledge and experience, but increased mastery of man's environment in the broader sense. At the present time, few people would, I think, question the fact of progress in the accumulation both of material resources and of scientific knowledge, of mastery over the environment in the technological sense. What is questioned is whether there has been in the twentieth century any progress in our ordering of society, in our mastery of the social environment, national or international, whether indeed there has not been a marked regression. Has not the evolution of man as a social being lagged fatally behind the progress of technology?

The symptoms which inspire this question are obvious. But I suspect none the less that it is wrongly put. History has known many turning-points, where the leadership and initiative has passed from one group, from one sector of the world, to another: the period of the rise of the modern state and the shift in the centre of power from the Mediterranean to western Europe, and the period of the French revolution, have been conspicuous modern examples. Such periods are always times of violent upheavals and struggles for power. The old authorities weaken, the old landmarks disappear; out of a bitter clash of ambitions and resentments the new order emerges. What I would suggest is that we are now passing through such a period. It appears to me simply untrue to say that our understanding of the problems of social organization or our good will to organize society in the light of that understanding have regressed: indeed, I should venture to say that they have greatly increased. It is not that our capacities have diminished, or our moral qualities declined. But the period of conflict and upheaval, due to the shifting balance of power between continents, nations, and classes, through which we are living has enormously increased the strain on these capacities and qualities, and limited and frustrated their effectiveness for positive achievement. While I do not wish to underestimate the force of the challenge of the past fifty years to the belief in progress in the western world, I am still not con-

vinced that progress in history has come to an end. But, if you press me further on the content of progress, I think I can only reply something like this. The notion of a finite and clearly definable goal of progress in history, so often postulated by nineteenth-century thinkers, has proved inapplicable and barren. Belief in progress means belief not in any automatic or inevitable process, but in the progressive development of human potentialities. Progress is an abstract term; and the concrete ends pursued by mankind arise from time to time out of the course of history, not from some source outside it. I profess no belief in the perfectibility of man or in a future paradise on earth. To this extent I would agree with the theologians and the mystics who assert that perfection is not realizable in history. But I shall be content with the possibility of unlimited progress - or progress subject to no limits that we can or need envisage - towards goals which can be defined only as we advance towards them, and the validity of which can be verified only in a process of attaining them. Nor do I know how, without some such conception of progress, society can survive. Every civilized society imposes sacrifices on the living generation for the sake of generations yet unborn. To justify these sacrifices in the name of a better world in the future is the secular counterpart of justifying them in the name of some divine purpose. In Bury's words, 'the principle of duty to posterity is a direct corollary of the idea of progress'.¹ Perhaps this duty does not require justification. If it does, I know of no other way to justify it.

This brings me to the famous crux of objectivity in history. The word itself is misleading and question-begging. In an earlier lecture I have already argued that the social sciences - and history among them - cannot accommodate themselves to a theory of knowledge which puts subject and object asunder, and enforces a rigid separation between the observer and the thing observed. We need a new model which does justice to the complex process of interrelation and interaction between them.

I. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (1920), p. ix.

The facts of history cannot be purely objective, since they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian. Objectivity in history - if we are still to use the conventional term - cannot be an objectivity of fact, but only of relation, of the relation between fact and interpretation, between past, present, and future. I need not revert to the reasons which led me to reject as unhistorical the attempt to judge historical events by erecting an absolute standard of value outside history and independent of it. But the concept of absolute truth is also not appropriate to the world of history - or, I suspect, to the world of science. It is only the simplest kind of historical statement that can be adjudged absolutely true or absolutely false. At a more sophisticated level, the historian who contests, say, the verdict of one of his predecessors will normally condemn it, not as absolutely false, but as inadequate or one-sided or misleading, or the product of a point of view which has been rendered obsolete or irrelevant by later evidence. To say that the Russian revolution was due to the stupidity of Nicholas II or to the genius of Lenin is altogether inadequate - so inadequate as to be altogether misleading. But it cannot be called absolutely false. The historian does not deal in absolutes of this kind.

Let us go back to the sad case of Robinson's death. The objectivity of our inquiry into that event depended not on getting our facts right - these were not in dispute - but on distinguishing between the real or significant facts, in which we were interested, and the accidental facts, which we could afford to ignore. We found it easy to draw this distinction, because our standard or test of significance, the basis of our objectivity was clear, and consisted of relevance to the goal in view, i.e. reduction of deaths on the roads. But the historian is a less fortunate person than the investigator who has before him the simple and finite purpose of reducing traffic casualties. The historian, too, in his task of interpretation needs his standard of significance, which is also his standard of objectivity, in order to distinguish between the

significant and the accidental; and he too can find it only in relevance to the end in view. But this is necessarily an evolving end, since the evolving interpretation of the past is a necessary function of history. The traditional assumption that change has always to be explained in terms of something fixed and unchangeable is contrary to the experience of the historian. 'For the historian', says Professor Butterfield, perhaps implicitly reserving for himself a sphere into which historians need not follow him, 'the only absolute is change.'¹ The absolute in history is not something in the past from which we start; it is not something in the present, since all present thinking is necessarily relative. It is something still incomplete and in process of becoming - something in the future towards which we move, which begins to take shape only as we move towards it, and in the light of which, as we move forward, we gradually shape our interpretation of the past. This is the secular truth behind the religious myth that the meaning of history will be revealed in the Day of Judgement. Our criterion is not an absolute in the static sense of something that is the same yesterday, today, and for ever: such an absolute is incompatible with the nature of history. But it is an absolute in respect of our interpretation of the past. It rejects the relativist view that one interpretation is as good as another, or that every interpretation is true in its own time and place, and it provides the touchstone by which our interpretation of the past will ultimately be judged. It is this sense of direction in history which alone enables us to order and interpret the events of the past - the task of the historian - and to liberate and organize human energies in the present with a

I. H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), p. 58. Compare the more elaborate statement in A. von Martin, *The Sociology of the Renaissance* (Engl. transl., 1945), p. i: 'Inertia and motion, static and dynamic, are fundamental categories with which to begin a sociological approach to history. ... History knows inertia in a relative sense only: the decisive question is whether inertia or change predominates.' Change is the positive and absolute, inertia the subjective **and** relative, element in history.

view to the future - the task of the statesman, the economist, and the social reformer. But the process itself remains progressive and dynamic. Our sense of direction, and our interpretation of the past, are subject to constant modification and evolution as we proceed.

Hegel clothed his absolute in the mystical shape of a world spirit, and made the cardinal error of bringing the course of history to an end in the present, instead of projecting it into the future. He recognized a process of continuous evolution in the past, and incongruously denied it in the future. Those who, since Hegel, have reflected most deeply on the nature of history have seen in it a synthesis of past and future. Tocqueville, who did not entirely free himself from the theological idiom of his day and gave too narrow content to his absolute, nevertheless had the essence of the matter. Having spoken of the development of equality as a universal and permanent phenomenon, he went on:

If the men of our time were brought to see the gradual and progressive development of equality as at once the past and the future of their history, this single discovery would give that development the sacred character of the will of their lord and master.¹

An important chapter of history could be written on that still unfinished theme. Marx, who shared some of Hegel's inhibitions about looking into the future, and was principally concerned to root his teaching firmly in past history, was compelled by the nature of his theme to project into the future his absolute of the classless society. Bury described the idea of progress, a little awkwardly, but clearly with the same intention, as 'a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future'.² Historians, says Namier in a deliberately paradoxical phrase, which he proceeds to illustrate with his usual wealth of

1. De Tocqueville, *Preface to Democracy in America*.
2. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (1920), p. 5.

examples, 'imagine the past and remember the future'.¹ Only the future can provide the key to the interpretation of the past; and it is only in this sense that we can speak of an ultimate objectivity in history. It is at once the justification and the explanation of history that the past throws light on the future, and the future throws light on the past.

What, then, do we mean when we praise a historian for being objective, or say that one historian is more objective than another? Not, it is clear, simply that he gets his facts right, but rather that he chooses the right facts, or, in other words, that he applies the right standard of significance. When we call a historian objective, we mean I think two things. First of all, we mean that he has a capacity to rise above the limited vision of his own situation in society and in history - a capacity which, as I suggested in an earlier lecture, is partly dependent on his capacity to recognize the extent of his involvement in that situation, to recognize, that is to say, the impossibility of total objectivity. Secondly, we mean that he has the capacity to project his vision into the future in such a way as to give him a more profound and more lasting insight into the past than can be attained by those historians whose outlook is entirely bounded by their own immediate situation. No historian today will echo Acton's confidence in the prospect of 'ultimate history'. But some historians write history which is more durable, and has more of this ultimate and objective character, than others; and these are the historians who have what I may call a long-term vision over the past and over the future. The historian of the past can make an approach towards objectivity only as he approaches towards the understanding of the future.

When, therefore, I spoke of history in an earlier lecture as a dialogue between past and present, I should rather have called it a dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends. The historian's interpretation of the past, his selection of the significant and the relevant, evolves with the

1. L. B. Namier, *Conflicts* (1942), p. 70.

progressive emergence of new goals. To take the simplest of all illustrations, so long as the main goal appeared to be the organization of constitutional liberties and political rights, the historian interpreted the past in constitutional and political terms. When economic and social ends began to replace constitutional and political ends, historians turned to economic and social interpretations of the past. In this process, the sceptic might plausibly allege that the new interpretation is no truer than the old; each is true for its period. Nevertheless, since the preoccupation with economic and social ends represents a broader and more advanced stage in human development than the preoccupation with political and constitutional ends, so the economic and social interpretation of history may be said to represent a more advanced stage in history than the exclusively political interpretation. The old interpretation is not rejected, but is both included and superseded in the new. Historiography is a progressive science, in the sense that it seeks to provide constantly expanding and deepening insights into a course of events which is itself progressive. This is what I should mean by saying that we need 'a constructive outlook over the past'. Modern historiography has grown up during the past two centuries in this dual belief in progress, and cannot survive without it, since it is this belief which provides it with its standard of significance, its touchstone for distinguishing between the real and the accidental. Goethe, in a conversation towards the end of his life, cut the Gordian knot a little brusquely:

When eras are on the decline, all tendencies are subjective; but on the other hand when matters are ripening for a new epoch, all tendencies are objective.¹

Nobody is obliged to believe either in the future of history or in the future of society. It is possible that our society may be destroyed or may perish of slow decay, and that history may relapse into theology - that is to say, a study not of human

I. Quoted in J. Huizinga, *Men and Ideas* (1959), p. 80.

achievement, but of the divine purpose - or into literature - that is to say, a telling of stories and legends without purpose or significance. But this will not be history in the sense in which we have known it in the last 200 years.

I have still to deal with the familiar and popular objection to any theory which finds the ultimate criterion of historical judgement in the future. Such a theory, it is said, implies that success is the ultimate criterion of judgement, and that, if not whatever is, whatever will be, is right. For the past 200 years most historians have not only assumed a direction in which history is moving, but have consciously or unconsciously believed that this direction was on the whole the right direction, that mankind was moving from the worse to the better, from the lower to the higher. The historian not only recognized the direction, but endorsed it. The test of significance which he applied in his approach to the past was not only a sense of the course on which history was moving, but a sense of his own moral involvement in that course. The alleged dichotomy between the 'is' and the 'ought', between fact and value, was resolved. It was an optimistic view, a product of an age of overwhelming confidence in the future; Whigs and Liberals, Hegelians and Marxists, theologians and rationalists, remained firmly, and more or less articulately, committed to it. For 200 years it could have been described without much exaggeration as the accepted and implicit answer to the question 'What is history?' The reaction against it has come with the current mood of apprehension and pessimism, which has left the field clear for the theologians who seek the meaning of history outside history, and for the sceptics who find no meaning in history at all. We are assured on all hands, and with the utmost emphasis, that the dichotomy between 'is' and 'ought' is absolute and cannot be resolved, that 'values' cannot be derived from 'facts'. This is, I think, a false trail. Let us see how a few historians, or writers about history, chosen more or less at random, have felt about this question.

Gibbon justifies the amount of space devoted in his narrative to the victories of Islam on the ground that 'the disciples of Mohammed still hold the civil and religious sceptre of the Oriental world'. But, he adds, 'the same labour would be unworthily bestowed on the swarms of savages who, between the seventh and twelfth centuries, descended from the plains of Scythia', since 'the majesty of the Byzantine throne repelled and survived these disorderly attacks'.¹ This seems not unreasonable. History is, by and large, a record of what people did, not of what they failed to do: to this extent it is inevitably a success story. Professor Tawney remarks that historians give 'an appearance of inevitableness' to an existing order 'by dragging into prominence the forces which have triumphed and thrusting into the background those which they have swallowed up'.² But is not this in a sense the essence of the historian's job? The historian must not underestimate the opposition; he must not represent the victory as a walk-over if it was touch-and-go. Sometimes those who were defeated have made as great a contribution to the ultimate result as the victors. These are familiar maxims to every historian. But, by and large, the historian is concerned with those who, whether victorious or defeated, achieved something. I am not a specialist in the history of cricket. But its pages are presumably studded with the names of those who made centuries rather than of those who made ducks and were left out of the side. Hegel's famous statement that in history 'only those peoples can come under our notice which form a state',³ has been justly criticized as attaching an exclusive value to one form of social organization and paving the way for an obnoxious state-worship. But, in principle, what Hegel is trying to say is correct, and reflects the familiar dis-

1. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. iv.

2. R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912), p. 177.

3. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (English transl., 1884), p. 40.

inction between prehistory and history; only those peoples which have succeeded in organizing their society in some degree cease to be primitive savages and enter into history. Carlyle in his *French Revolution* called Louis XV 'a very World Solecism incarnate'. He evidently liked the phrase, for he embroidered it later in a longer passage:

What new universal vertiginous movement is this: of institutions, social arrangements, individual minds, which once worked cooperative, now rolling and grinding in distracted collision? Inevitable; it is the breaking-up of a World Solecism, worn out at last.¹

The criterion is once more historical: what fitted one epoch had become a solecism in another, and is condemned on that account. Even Sir Isaiah Berlin, when he descends from the heights of philosophical abstraction and considers concrete historical situations, appears to have come round to this view. In a broadcast delivered some time after the publication of his essay on *Historical Inevitability*, he praised Bismarck, in spite of moral shortcomings, as a 'genius' and 'the greatest example in the last century of a politician of the highest powers of political judgement', and contrasted him favourably in this respect with such men as Joseph II of Austria, Robespierre, Lenin, and Hitler, who failed to realize 'their positive ends'. I find this verdict odd. But what interests me at the moment is the criterion of judgement. Bismarck, says Sir Isaiah, understood the material in which he was working; the others were led away by abstract theories which failed to work. The moral is that 'failure comes from resisting that which works best ... in favour of some systematic method or principle claiming universal validity'.² In other words the criterion of judgement in history is not some 'principle claiming universal validity', but 'that which works best'.

1. T. Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, I, i, ch. 4; I, iii, ch. 7.

2. Broadcast on 'Political Judgement' in the B.B.C Third Programme, 19 June 1957.

It is not only -I need hardly say - when analysing the past that we invoke this criterion of 'what works best'. If someone informed you that he thought that, at the present juncture, the union of Great Britain and the United States of America in a single state under a single sovereignty was desirable, you might agree that this was quite a sensible view. If he went on to say that constitutional monarchy was preferable to presidential democracy as a form of government, you might also agree that this was quite sensible. But suppose he then told you that he proposed to devote himself to conducting a campaign for the reunion of the two countries under the British crown; you would probably reply that he would be wasting his time. If you tried to explain why, you would have to tell him that issues of this kind have to be debated on the basis not of some principle of general application, but of what would work in given historical conditions; you might even commit the cardinal sin of speaking of history with a capital H and tell him that History was against him. The business of the politician is to consider not merely what is morally or theoretically desirable, but also the forces which exist in the world, and how they can be directed or manipulated to probably partial realizations of the ends in view. Our political decisions, taken in the light of our interpretation of history, are rooted in this compromise. But our interpretation of history is rooted in the same compromise. Nothing is more radically false than to set up some supposedly abstract standard of the desirable and condemn the past in the light of it. For the word 'success', which has come to have invidious connotations, let us by all means substitute the neutral 'that which works best'. Since I have joined issue with Sir Isaiah Berlin on several occasions during these lectures, I am glad to be able to close the account with, at any rate, this measure of agreement.

But acceptance of the criterion of 'what works best' does not make its application either easy or self-evident. It is not a criterion which encourages snap verdicts, or which bows down to the view that what is, is right. Pregnant failures are not un-

known in history. History recognizes **what I may call 'delayed achievement'**: the **apparent** failures of today **may turn out to have made a** vital contribution to the achievement of **tomorrow** - prophets born before their time. Indeed, one of the advantages of this criterion over the criterion of a supposedly fixed and universal principle is that it may require us to postpone our judgement or to qualify it in the light of things that have not yet happened. Proudhon, who talked freely in terms of abstract moral principles, condoned the *coup d'état* of Napoleon III after it had succeeded; Marx, who rejected the criterion of abstract moral principles, condemned Proudhon for condoning it. Looking back from a longer historical perspective, we shall probably agree that Proudhon was wrong and Marx right. The achievement of Bismarck provides an excellent starting-point for an examination of this problem of historical judgement; and, while I accept Sir Isaiah's criterion of 'what works best', I am still puzzled by the narrow and short-term limits within which he is apparently content to apply it. Did what Bismarck created really work well? I should have thought that it led to an immense disaster. This does not mean that I am seeking to condemn Bismarck, who created the German Reich, or the mass of Germans who wanted it and helped to create it. But, as a historian, I still have many questions to ask. Did the eventual disaster occur because some hidden flaws existed in the structure of the Reich? or because something in the internal conditions which brought it to birth destined it to become self-assertive and aggressive? or because, when the Reich was created, the European or world scene was already so crowded, and expansive tendencies among the existing Great Powers already so strong, **that** the emergence of another expansive Great Power was sufficient to cause a major collision and bring down the whole system in ruins? On the last hypothesis, it may be wrong to hold Bismarck and the German people responsible, or solely responsible, for the disaster: you cannot really blame the last **straw**. But an objective judgement on Bismarck's achievement

and how it worked awaits an answer from the historian to these questions, and I am not sure that he is yet in a position to answer them all definitively. What I would say is that the historian of the 1920s was nearer to objective judgement than the historian of the 1880s, and that the historian of today is nearer than the historian of the 1920s; the historian of the year 2000 may be nearer still. This illustrates my thesis that objectivity in history does not and cannot rest on some fixed and immovable standard of judgement existing here and now, but only on a standard which is laid up in the future and is evolved as the course of history advances. History acquires meaning and objectivity only when it establishes a coherent relation between past and future.

Let us now take another look at this alleged dichotomy between fact and value. Values cannot be derived from facts. This statement is partly true, but partly false. You have only to examine the system of values prevailing in any period or in any country to realize how much of it is moulded by the facts of the environment. In an earlier lecture I drew attention to the changing historical content of value-words like liberty, equality, or justice. Or take the Christian church as an institution largely concerned with the propagation of moral values. Contrast the values of primitive Christianity with those of the medieval papacy, or the values of the medieval papacy with those of the Protestant churches of the nineteenth century. Or contrast the values promulgated today by, say, the Christian church in Spain, with the values promulgated by the Christian churches in the United States. These differences in values spring from differences of historical fact. Or consider the historical facts which in the last century and a half have caused slavery or racial inequality or the exploitation of child labour - all once accepted as morally neutral or reputable - to be generally regarded as immoral. The proposition that values cannot be derived from facts is, to say the least, one-sided and misleading. Or let us reverse the statement. Facts cannot be derived from values. This is partly true, but may also be misleading, and requires quali-

fication. When we seek to know the facts, the questions which we ask, and therefore the answers which we obtain, are prompted by our system of values. Our picture of the facts of our environment is moulded by our values, i.e. by the categories through which we approach the facts; and this picture is one of the important facts which we have to take into account. Values enter into the facts and are an essential part of them. Our values are an essential part of our equipment as human beings. It is through our values that we have that capacity to adapt ourselves to our environment, and to adapt our environment to ourselves, to acquire that mastery over our environment, which has made history a record of progress. But do not, in dramatizing the struggle of man with his environment, set up a false antithesis and a false separation between facts and values. Progress in history is achieved through the interdependence and interaction of facts and values. The objective historian is the historian who penetrates most deeply into this reciprocal process.

A clue to this problem of facts and values is provided by our ordinary use of the word 'truth' - a word which straddles the world of fact and the world of value, and is made up of elements of both. Nor is this an idiosyncrasy of the English language. The words for truth in the Latin languages, the German *Wahrheit*, the Russian *pravda*,¹ all possess this dual character. Every language appears to require this word for a truth which is not merely a statement of fact and not merely a value judgement, but embraces both elements. It may be a fact that I went to London last week. But you would not ordinarily call it a truth: it is devoid of any value content. On the other hand, when the Founding Fathers of the United States in the Declaration of Independence referred to the self-evident truth that all men are

1. The case of *pravda* is especially interesting, since there is another old Russian word for truth, *istina*. But the distinction is not between truth as fact and truth as value; *pravda* is human truth in both aspects, *istina* divine truth in both aspects - truth about God and truth as revealed by God.

created equal, you may feel that the value content of the statement predominates over the factual content, and may on that account challenge its right to be regarded as a truth. Somewhere between these two poles - the north pole of valueless facts and the south pole of value judgements still struggling to transform themselves into facts - lies the realm of historical truth. The historian, as I said in my first lecture, is balanced between fact and interpretation, between fact and value. He cannot separate them. It may be that, in a static world, you are obliged to pronounce a divorce between fact and value. But history is meaningless in a static world. History in its essence is change, movement, or - if you do not cavil at the old-fashioned word - progress.

I return therefore in conclusion to Acton's description of progress as 'the scientific hypothesis on which history is to be written'. You can, if you please, turn history into theology by making the meaning of the past depend on some extra-historical and super-rational power. You can, if you please, turn it into literature - a collection of stories and legends about the past without meaning or significance. History properly so-called can be written only by those who find and accept a sense of direction in history itself. The belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere. A society which has lost belief in its capacity to progress in the future will quickly cease to concern itself with its progress in the past. As I said at the beginning of my first lecture, our view of history reflects our view of society. I now come back to my starting-point by declaring my faith in the future of society and in the future of history.

6 *The Widening Horizon*

THE conception which I have put forward in these lectures of history as a constantly moving process, with the historian moving within it, seems to commit me to some concluding reflexions on the position of history and of the historian in our time. We live in an epoch when - not for the first time in history - predictions of world catastrophe are in the air, and weigh heavily on all. They can be neither proved nor disproved. But they are at any rate far less certain than the prediction that we shall all die; and, since the certainty of that prediction does not prevent us from laying plans for our own future, so I shall proceed to discuss the present and future of our society on the assumption that this country - or, if not this country, some major part of the world - will survive the hazards that threaten us, and that history will continue.

The middle years of the twentieth century find the world in a process of change probably more profound and more sweeping than any which has overtaken it since the medieval world broke up in ruins and the foundations of the modern world were laid in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The change is no doubt ultimately the product of scientific discoveries and inventions, of their ever more widespread application, and of developments arising directly or indirectly out of them. The most conspicuous aspect of the change is a social revolution comparable with that which, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, inaugurated the rise to power of a new class based on finance and commerce, and later on industry. The new structure of our industry and the new structure of our society present problems too vast for me to embark on here. But the change has two aspects more immediately relevant to my theme - what I may call a change in depth,