The Social Responsibilities of the Historian*

CONYERS READ

The impelling force that brings us together tonight is a common interest in history. For some of us this interest is a professional one, for a large number of us it is a cultural one, for all of us it is what I shall call a pragmatical one. There is the history we disseminate, the history we absorb, the history we live by. I intend to consider tonight the first and the third of these categories and the relationships between them—that is to say the responsibilities of those who disseminate history, to those whose pattern of the past is one of the most important factors in their present behavior and in their future plans and hopes.

It may be well at the outset to define history as I use the word. I take it to mean the memory, recorded or unrecorded, of past human experience. I call it a memory in order to include within its scope those past experiences, particularly our personal past experiences, which never do get written down though their influence upon our individual lives is often very profound. I do not differentiate between different kinds of experience. It often becomes nec-

*Presidential address delivered at the annual dinner of the American Historical Association on December 29, 1949.
necessary, though it is never desirable, by reason of the enormous amount of ma-
terial involved, to divide and subdivide the field and to specialize in intellec-
tual or political or economic or scientific or aesthetic experience. But this di-
vision is of course artificial and arbitrary, just as artificial and arbitrary as any
one of the infinite number of human devices designed to make learning manageable.

For the great majority of us in the profession history is a bread and butter
question. There are exceptions of course. A few of us have been financially
lucky in the selection of our parents, or in the selection of our wives. A few of
us like James Ford Rhodes have created by our own efforts a condition of affluence which enables us in the afternoon of our days to approach Clio without
mercenary impulses. But for most of us in the profession, history is a means
of getting a living. One way or other we exchange our hard-won historical
knowledge for board and lodging, with a morsel, generally a very small mor-
sel, of the amenities of life to boot. By and large we are teachers in educational
institutions and our dissemination of history takes place in classrooms. As
such we attach a great deal of importance to academic insignia, caps and
gowns, Ph.D. degrees, and the like. Our attitude toward those who under-
take to perform our functions without these hallmarks is likely to be a con-
descending one. And yet a great deal of history is being disseminated these
days by those outside the guild. I wonder, for example, whether anyone in
the profession has done anything like so much in recent years as Raymond
Swing for the historical education of America at large. Certainly the sum
total of all who have drowsed in our classes is but a handful compared with
the hordes who have hung upon his words.

Within the profession our contribution divides itself between what we
teach and what we write. Of course, most of us do not write at all. It might be
better to say that we do not publish at all. Those of us who do are disposed to
maintain that we teach as well by writing as by word of mouth. I do not deny
this, but I think it is generally true that our writing is designed for quite a
different purpose and directed to quite a different circle than our classroom
cerebrations. I speak now of the average one of us who writes, leaving out of
account those few among us who can command a large reading public and
those of us whose writing is for the most part an extension, one might almost
call it a precipitation, of our classroom work in syllabi and textbooks. Per-
sonally I attach a great deal of importance to textbook writing and wish it
were better done. It is history in the large, and history in the large has much
greater social significance than history in the little. But most of us write his-
tory in the little. Our literary output is confined to a monograph or two on
subjects the social significance of which is to say the least many times removed. We are lucky if our efforts command the attention of a hundred readers, and even in that select company a considerable proportion make the effort because of their interest in the author rather than in the subject. We still flatter ourselves that those who do read serve like spores of yeast to leaven the whole mass. It may well be so, though one may venture to inquire whether analogous spores scattered by word of mouth in classrooms are not equally potent. These concentric circles of influence, like ripples, are difficult to measure. They vary in size and range with the size of the missile which created the disturbance in the first place. Probably it is safe to say that they cause no major inundations on the remoter beaches of the world. Compared with those who read our monographs those who sit in our classrooms are much the more numerous and probably much the more malleable company. And those who read, read about the minutiae while those who listen scan, as it were, the great panorama of the past, hear, as it were, the reverberating footsteps of whole civilizations on the march. From the point of view of the social significance of history it is not hard to decide in which capacity we perform the greater service.

And yet, paradoxically enough, our station in the profession and our progress in the profession depend rather upon what we write than upon how well we teach. Though we speak with the tongues of men and of angels it availeth us little in competition with the energetic fellow who, year after year, pulls the old lecture notes out of the old pork barrel in order to save time for the composition of special studies which few will read, fewer still long remember, and which will probably be rendered obsolete by some other energetic fellow working over the same ground, plowing perhaps a little deeper and screening the soil a little more carefully. I do not discredit this form of intellectual exercise though it often seems to me that we pay a considerable price for it. My complaint is that it commands such high priority—that those whose interests and whose talents run in somewhat different channels receive scant recognition. Good teaching, at the college level anyway, is relatively speaking unrecognized, and since this is so no really systematic effort is made to develop its potentialities. What, for example, is being done at the graduate school level in the way of teacher training for those who will inevitably make their major contribution to the commonweal as teachers? In all the universities with which I have at one time or another been connected, I have noted in the main a disdainful attitude toward schools of pedagogy. The position seems to be that though teacher training is regarded as essential in the lower schools it becomes a mere matter for ribaldry at the higher alti-
Conyers Read

tudes. I seem to detect a reflection of this point of view in a recent resolution of the Council of this Association to the effect that "the examination of textbooks [is] outside the function of the Association." It ought to be pointed out of course that the resolution referred to textbooks for use in the schools, but when I remember that twenty-two years ago a committee appointed by the Association inaugurated the most comprehensive investigation of the teaching of the social sciences in the schools ever attempted, and spent something over $300,000 in pursuit of that objective, I wonder why we are now disclaiming responsibility for what was then one of our major concerns. Certainly what we do at the upper levels, if it is to have its maximum social significance, must be reflected in what history is dispensed to the great mass of history students at the lower levels. Never perhaps has there been so much talk about the philosophy of history and so little concern about the performance of those tasks in which any kind of philosophy can really be brought to bear.

One of the wisest and wittiest men who ever spoke from this chair chose for his theme "Every Man His Own Historian." It is almost a sacrilege to attempt to summarize that brilliant discourse. But the essence of it was, I suppose, that the day-by-day actions of every man are based upon his knowledge of the past and his application of that knowledge to his present behavior and his future plans. He goes to bed in the darkness, confident that the sun will rise again as it always has risen and that he will rise with it in the light. He fills his bin with coal or his tank with oil, confident that winter will follow summer in the inveterate march of the seasons. He puts his money in a bank, confident that he can draw it out when he wants it, and so on. There is no point in belaboring the obvious. But actually all that we do and all that we plan is conditioned by what we call experience, our own experience or our observation of the experience of man or nature. What we mean by wisdom as distinct from learning is the ability to apply past experience to present problems. In its highest development, as John Milton has observed, "Old experience do attain to something like prophetic strain."

So when we teach history we teach those who are in their microcosms, their little worlds, already historians. Though no doubt they are unconscious of the fact, they continually and critically scrutinize the past. Their motive is of course a purely pragmatical one. But it is there, and, being there, it profoundly influences their attitude toward history in the large. This fact ought to be a great asset to us in our teaching of the subject.

It should be observed also that the average man is completely possessed

---

1 American Historical Review, LIII (April, 1948), 688.
The Social Responsibilities of the Historian

with the idea of progress, of getting ahead. That is perhaps the basis of his pathetic belief in the virtues of formal education. He sees it as a means of getting ahead. We may speculate as long as we like about concepts of progress among the intellectuals, but there is no doubt whatever about its prevalence among the rank and file. Probably every man has a rather sketchy idea of what he means by progress. He means at least this much—that it is possible by his own efforts to exchange his present estate for a better one. This idea of a better estate implies a value judgment, some criteria which we can apply to measure progress. It implies an end in view and means relevant to that end. It is progress toward something.

We may then as teachers of history confidently assume three well-established ideas in the minds of our students: (1) the idea of experience as a guide to action; (2) the idea of progress as an incentive to action; (3) the idea of criteria as measures of progress.

It is the rare bird who is interested in the past simply as the past—a world remote, apart, complete, such as Michael Oakeshott has envisaged. Unfortunately in our teaching we tend to focus our attention on the rare birds. The urge to perpetuate our kind is almost biological in its intensity. At the college level anyway we think of teaching history not enough in its broader implications and too much in terms of recruiting the ranks of historians. Probably not one of every hundred in our undergraduate classes ever intends to become a professional historian, but for that one we all too frequently leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness. It is the ninety and nine with whom I am here concerned. There are plenty of champions for the one among those present.

In the long run the teaching of history has to justify itself in social terms, that is to say in terms demonstrably significant to the average citizen. This will be increasingly true as education at all levels becomes increasingly a public charge. Your taxpayer is a pragmatical fellow. As likely as not he will put the hackneyed question, “What is the good of history anyway?” It is a pertinent question which, in the professional interest, we dare not evade. If we produce an answer which leads the taxpayer to conclude that history butters no bread, he may decide that in that case it shall furnish no bread and butter for the historian.

Half a century ago a certain rich man built for himself a palatial residence on the outskirts of Philadelphia. It was in the grand manner. Even the spigots of the bathtubs were plated with gold—all of it designed simply for the greater comfort of this certain rich man and his progeny. Today, that same mansion has been converted into a chemical research laboratory. In some such

2 Michael Oakeshott, Experience and Its Modes (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 86 ff.
fashion the ivory towers we have erected for our private enjoyment, if they are to survive, must be converted into research laboratories. Learning without reference to social living has no more claim upon social support than any other form of self-indulgence.

But there is much more to the matter than that. Historians and their critics have long been conducting a running fight between those who contemplate the past as an objective reality, which by diligence and dispassionate judgment can be described as it actually happened, and those who see the past simply as a projection of the ideas and interests of the present upon the accumulated data of remembered experience. The former group envisages the past as something finished and complete and unchanged; the latter group sees it as through a glass darkly, a colored glass at once translucent and reflective, in which the light which comes through is not clearly distinguishable from the light which is thrown back.

It would be very rash for anyone from this chair to pronounce a final judgment on a matter still sub judice. We can, however, distinguish between the accumulation of data and the selection and arrangement of data, between the factual basis for the judgment and the judgment itself. And it can hardly be denied that every act of selection and every act of arrangement constitutes a judgment and implies the criteria for a judgment. In the accumulation of data we may I think without dispute agree that the utmost care and all the paraphernalia of exact research should be applied to the sifting of the true from the false, the probable from the improbable. In this field of labor a great deal of our historical research now lies. We are busy, most of us, assembling the reliable data for the synthesis. The difficulties begin to appear when as historians we attempt the synthesis; and, contrary to widespread opinion, this is an act which most of us habitually perform not in books but in classrooms, from the primary grades to postgraduate courses. There by selection, arrangement, and particularly by emphasis we impose the pattern. It is idle to deny that the pattern we impose is profoundly influenced not only by our personal idiosyncrasies but by the whole climate of opinion in which we live. That is why history has to be rewritten for every generation. We ask different questions of the past from those our fathers asked, emphasizing considerations which our fathers ignored, and ignoring considerations which our fathers held to be of paramount importance. The older historians move in never-ending march from our studies to our attics and from our attics to our dustbins. If we regard them at all it is rather as recorders of the times in which they lived than of the times of which they professed to write. The few who survive on any other basis owe more to their style than to their substance. We have
The Social Responsibilities of the Historian

The changing interpretations of the past have on the whole arisen less from the discovery of new facts than from the imposition of new interpretations on old facts. Compare, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas with Edward Gibbon or Thomas Babington Macaulay with Karl Marx. It makes a lot of difference whether the historian approaches the past as a Christian zealot or as a skeptic, or as a good Whig or as a good Socialist. It makes a good deal of difference not only to you and me but to those uncounted thousands who have formulated and are still formulating their ideas about human progress in terms of their interpretation of the past. Are we, for example, mere implementations of biological urges destined to no more significant end than the banquet chamber of the earthworms, or are we divinely created in accordance with a divine purpose and containing within ourselves the potentialities of eternal life? Our answer to this question will have a profound influence upon our personal and social behavior. At this point history impinges very definitely upon the basic problems of modern society. Totalitarian governments have been quick to realize that fact and they have proceeded to impose their patterns not only upon their political and economic organizations but upon their whole cultural life. History under Hitler and Mussolini was not what it had been; history, to say nothing of music and all the arts, under Stalin is not what it used to be. We begin to find ourselves in a world in which the Thomist, the Fascist, the Nazi, the Communist, together with the unorganized hordes of cynics and skeptics, each produces and endorses his own version of how we came to be what we are. The matter extends even further than that, for their history inevitably indicates trends which they expect to be projected into the remote future. The ultimate fruit is implicit in the seed or, to apply an old saw, as the twig is bent, the tree is inclined. This fact may be distasteful to us, but I think it is beyond dispute. Therein, I believe, lies the social responsibility of the historian, by which I mean anyone who undertakes to interpret the past to the present. I emphatically include novelists and playwrights and above all radio commentators.

That being so, then what part are we as historians to play in what everybody is calling education for democracy? The matter is not altogether in our hands. At the public school level there is a considerable amount of control exercised over our history textbooks, particularly our textbooks in American history. Those historians who seek to enter that highly competitive and highly
lucrative market must conform to certain standards, exposing themselves the while, if not to a visit from the secret police, to that even more dreadful fate, the premature death of their brainchild from lack of support. One can afford to be dull, if one has good friends at court, but one cannot afford to be unorthodox, at least not when the merits of democracy are in question.

But the issue is more fundamental than loaves and fishes even if loaves and fishes come near the center of our private perplexities. The issue really is, do we accept the idea of control in principle? Stated concretely, in a world of conflicting ideologies, in which past trends are important factors in determining present judgments, shall we assert our right not only to impose our own interpretations upon the past but to propagate that interpretation through the classroom, the press, and the radio? In these terms the issue becomes part of the larger issue between freedom and regimentation.

We accept, and probably for the most part approve, a large measure of regimentation in almost every other area, but we still cling manfully to freedom in speech and worship. To be sure we impose restraints upon religious practices which seem to us to conflict with other social considerations. We deny polygamy to the Mormon and the suttee to the Hindu. And we impose restraints upon freedom of speech, and the radio and the press, when the exercise of freedom threatens our individual reputations, our moral standards, or the violent overthrow of our government. Shall we stop there? If we have learned anything at all from the experience of the last twenty-five years it is that words are weapons, often the most dangerous type of weapons. Dr. Goebbels understood that, Mr. Molotov understands it. The mental and moral distraction of the French people created by skillful propaganda in 1938-39 was certainly one of the chief causes of their collapse in 1940. We may maintain if we like that the Anglo-Saxon breed is impervious to influences of that sort. But evidently our Communist friends do not think so.

In the end, we assure ourselves, the truth will prevail. But what about in the meantime? When Milton wrote his *Areopagitica*, when Locke wrote his *Essay on Government*, even when John Stuart Mill wrote his *Essay on Liberty*, the potential threat of revolution could still serve as a check upon despotism. But revolution is now almost out of the question. The powers in the hands of government are too overwhelming. Barricades belong to the days of cavalry, not of tanks and machine guns. And those who control the strategic centers of power are in a position not only to prevent revolt but even to prevent remonstrance. There are some grounds for believing that they may even control the very processes of thought. Heroics will not avail us.
One man with a dream, at pleasure,  
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;  
And three with a new song’s measure,  
Can trample an empire down.

The music makers like to think this may be so, but it is a long journey from the song to the empire, and the obstacles in the way are so formidable that years of servitude may intervene between the dream and its realization.

We are, as Karl Mannheim has observed, living in an age of transition from laissez faire to a planned society in which we will either be ruled by a dictatorship or by a government democratically controlled. The age we are leaving, the liberal age if you like, was characterized by a plurality of aims and values and by a neutral attitude toward the main issues of life. In that age neutrality went so far that we ceased to believe, out of mere fairness, in our own objectives. Confronted by such alternatives as Mussolini and Hitler and last of all Stalin have imposed, we must clearly assume a militant attitude if we are to survive. The antidote to bad doctrine is better doctrine, not neutralized intelligence. We must assert our own objectives, define our own ideals, establish our own standards and organize all the forces of our society in support of them. Discipline is the essential prerequisite of every effective army whether it march under the Stars and Stripes or under the Hammer and Sickle. We have to fight an enemy whose value system is deliberately simplified in order to achieve quick decisions. And atomic bombs make quick decisions imperative. The liberal neutral attitude, the approach to social evolution in terms of dispassionate behaviorism will no longer suffice. Dusty answers will not satisfy our demands for positive assurances. Total war, whether it be hot or cold, enlists everyone and calls upon everyone to assume his part. The historian is no freer from this obligation than the physicist.

Mankind has always sought out transcendental sanctions for his mores. If left to his own devices he creates a whole mythology to justify them. Hence Moses on Mt. Sinai, hence the Petrine theory. Religion in the past met an imperative demand for a pattern of life which had well-defined standards and a clear objective. It provided, as Whitehead has pointed out, a vision of something beyond, behind and within the present flux of immediate things. Basically the religious sanction took a historical form. It was something which happened in the remote past, some specific act or word which made manifest the ways of God to man. In course of time this miraculous imperative was confirmed and strengthened by continuing acceptance and approval so that

---

8 Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time* (London, 1943), *passim.*
even when a less credulous age rejected the miracle it accepted the force of prescriptive right. Mankind still looks to the past to sustain his patterns of the present. If historians, in their examination of the past, represent the evolution of civilization as haphazard, without direction and without progress, offering no assurance that mankind's present position is on the highway and not on some dead end, then mankind will seek for assurance in a more positive alternative whether it be offered from Rome or from Moscow.

This sounds like the advocacy of one form of social control as against another. In short, it is. But I see no alternative in a divided world. Probably in any planned world we can never be altogether free agents, even with our tongue and our pen. The important thing is that we shall accept and endorse such controls as are essential for the preservation of our way of life. This surely does not mean the support of any inert status quo in a rapidly changing world where institutions must continually be adjusted to changing social needs. It does mean that we recognize certain fundamental values as beyond dispute. These values we must define as precisely as may be and must defend against all assaults, historical or otherwise.

There is no menace to essential freedoms in this concept of control. Quite the contrary. It simply recognizes the fact that freedom can survive only if it goes hand in hand with a deep sense of social responsibility, particularly among those whose business is education in any form and at any level. This need not imply any deliberate distortion of the past in the interests of any ideology. Always it will be our obligation as historians to consider and present developing civilization in all its aspects. We shall still, like the doctor, have to examine social pathology if only to diagnose the nature of the disease. But we must realize that not everything which takes place in the laboratory is appropriate for broadcasting at the street corners. And we must recognize the pathological for what it is and not discuss with equal indifference the diseased and the healthy organism. Certainly we must be able to distinguish between the two.

But we need something more than an intellectual commitment. We need an act of faith. As historians we must carry back into our scrutiny of the past the same faith in the validity of our democratic assumptions which, let us say, the astronomer has in the validity of the Copernican theory. What the scientist utilizes as a good working hypothesis is nothing more than faith based upon experience—that form of directed experience which we call experimentation. He has the advantage over the historian that he can constantly check the validity of his hypotheses by repeating his experiments. The historian is, however, not so badly off in this respect as he is sometimes made
The Social Responsibilities of the Historian

out to be. Those of us who drew our first lessons in historical methodology from Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, will recall that the fundamental principle of history is there defined to be "the analogy between present and past humanity." On the basis of that analogy we confidently supply many of the lacks in our documentation. By the same token, contemporary social experience provides us with a laboratory for testing the validity of our social assumptions. If we cannot control the experiment we can at any rate observe and utilize it. Our conclusions from these observations will furnish us with a good working hypothesis for the appraisal of times past. And a good working hypothesis is just as imperative for the historian as for the scientist. Without it historical research can achieve little more than a mere collection of meaningless data.

So I am inclined to think that the first prerequisite of a historian is a sound social philosophy. Actually he finds in the past what he looks for in the past. He selects and arranges and emphasizes his factual data with reference to some pattern in his mind, some concept of what is socially desirable, and he follows the evolution of society with constant reference to that objective. Growth becomes for him movement toward it; decay, movement away from it. And, of course, by implication, the curve which he plots for the past inevitably projects itself into the future. He points the way, either with Spengler to destruction or with Toynbee to salvation. Therein lies his great opportunity for social service and the great instrument which he holds in his hand either for social good or for social evil.

It is not inconceivable, as we come to recognize the relativity of all history, that we shall turn again to Clio the Muse, chastened and disciplined by long confinement in strait quarters, but still a muse. Once again we may find courage to attempt history in the grand manner. Someone among us may even aspire to greater heights. He may recall that our professional pedigree leads back through the little pedants to the great poets and undertake to record in imperishable verse the greatest of all epics, the epic of the unfolding potentialities of the human spirit from the cowering beast in the cave to the unchallenged master of the world. So the wheel will turn the full circle and deep-browed Homer come to his own again.

*University of Pennsylvania*