Faith of a Historian*

SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON

To you, fellow members, who have honored me by election to your presidency this year, I feel that I owe a sort of *apologia pro vita mea*, a statement of the beliefs and principles that have guided my teaching and writing during the thirty-eight years since my first article was published in the *American Historical Review*. I have nothing revolutionary or even novel to offer. Very early in my professional career I observed a certain frustration in a historian whom I greatly admired, Henry Adams, who had spent much time and thought searching for a "law of history." So I have cultivated the vast garden of human experience which is history, without troubling myself overmuch about laws, essential first causes, or how it is all coming out. My creed or confession is probably no different from that of the great majority of practicing historians in the Western world.

The late Charles A. Beard, certainly one of the most beloved and by all odds the most provocative of my predecessors, described all writing of history as "an act of faith." With that I agree, although after reading some of his books I suspect that Beard's "act of faith" was a literal translation of the Spanish

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auto-da-fe. Every historian with professional standards speaks or writes what he believes to be true. But he must also have faith in the receptiveness of his audience. If a lecturer, he wishes to be heard; if a writer, to be read. He always hopes for a public beyond that of the long-suffering wife.

This legitimate desire of the historian to interest, to instruct, and to please, is at once a leading motive for his labors, a challenge to present his work in artistic form, and a danger to his professional integrity. It tempts him to deviate from the truth in order to satisfy school committees on whom he depends for "adoptions"; or the prejudices of reviewers and the emotions of the public to whom he looks for circulation. Historians of repute have sold their skill for a mess of royalties; and I hope we do not envy them. Most writers of pseudo-history, however, are gifted amateurs seeking to bolster some pet theory with carefully screened facts, or people trained in journalism or some similar calling in which the story's the thing. If it accords with the facts, fine; if not, so much the worse for the facts.

No person without an inherent loyalty to truth, a high degree of intellectual honesty, and a sense of balance, can be a great or even a good historian. Truth about the past is the essence of history and historical biography, the thing that distinguishes them from every other branch of literature. Everyone agrees to that; but when we come to define truth, dissension starts.

For my part, I stand firm on the oft-quoted sentence of Leopold von Ranke, which we American historians remember when we have forgotten all the rest of our German. "The present investigation," said Ranke in the preface to his first volume, published in 1824, "will simply explain the event exactly as it happened." Ranke was far from being the first to say that. He picked up the phrase, I imagine, from Wilhelm von Humboldt, who, in an address to the Prussian Academy three years earlier, declared the proper function of history to be "the exposition of what has happened." Some 2200 years earlier, Thucydides wrote, "The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest. But if he who desires to have before his eyes a true picture of the events which have happened, and of the like events which may be expected to happen hereafter . . . shall pronounce what I have written to be useful, then I shall be satisfied."

1Preface to 1st ed. (1824) of Geschichte der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker (3d ed., Leipzig, 1885), p. vii. The whole sentence in which this appears, is: "Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beigemessen: so hoher Ämter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will bloß zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen." "People have given History the function of judging the past, to serve the world for the instruction of years to come; but nothing beyond the present investigation will be attempted here—it will simply explain the event exactly as it happened."

2Quoted in Benedetto Croce, History as the Story of Liberty (Sprigge trans., New York 1941), p. 89.

3Peloponnesian War 1.22; in part Crawley's translation, in part Jowett's.
One might add quotation to quotation, merely to show that for almost 2500 years, in the Hebraic-Hellenic-Christian civilization that we inherit, truth has been recognized as the essence of history. In other words, the historian must be intellectually honest. Sublimating his own views of what ought to have been or should be, he must apply himself to ascertaining what really happened. Of course his own sense of values will enter into his selection and arrangement of facts. It goes without saying that complete, "scientific" objectivity is unattainable by the historian. His "choice of facts to be recorded, his distribution of emphasis among them, his sense of their significance and relative proportion, must be governed by his philosophy of life." No historian of my generation has ever pretended otherwise. Certain mid-nineteenth century historians fancied that they could be as objectively scientific about the multitudinous, unrefractory materials of human history as a physiologist should be (but seldom is) in describing muscular reactions. But none of these, from Ranke down, if pressed, would have denied that their philosophy of life influenced, if it did not dictate, their selection, emphasis, and arrangement.

So much has been written in recent years about these limitations on "scientific" objectivity as to obscure the plain, outstanding principle that the historian's basic task is one of presenting a corpus of ascertained fact. That is the hardest thing to get across to students today, especially to those who have been to the so-called progressive schools. Somewhere along the assembly-line of their education, these students have had inserted in them a bolt called "points of view," secured with a nut called "trends," and they imagine that the historian's problem is simply to compare points of view and describe trends. It is not. The fundamental question is, "What actually happened, and why?"

It matters little what "method" the young historian follows, if he acquires the necessary tools of research, a sense of balance, and an overriding urge to get at the truth. Courses on historical methodology are not worth the time that they take up. I shall never give one myself, and I have observed that many of my colleagues who do give such courses refrain from exemplifying their methods by writing anything. It is much more fun to pick to pieces the works of their contemporaries who do write. Historical methodology, as I see it, is a product of common sense applied to circumstances. If the period be one of which few monumenta have survived, the historian must use his imagination to bring the disjointed fragments into some logical pattern, as paleontologists reconstruct a prehistoric monster out of a bone or two. If the

era be a recent one for which there are mountains of facts, the historian may sink a few experimental tunnels and examine what they bring up; or he may laboriously try to pan out the "color" from the dirt, or he may employ a corps of miners to do the preliminary sifting for him. In any case, his judgment and set of values, acting alone or through his assistants, determine not only what is gold and what is dross but the design of the history which he creates out of the metal. The historian decides what is significant, and what is not.

Significant for what, you ask? Significant for understanding that stretch or segment of the past which he is examining. The historian's professional duty is primarily to illuminate the past for his hearers or readers; only secondarily and derivatively should he be concerned with influencing the future. He must frankly look backward, with frequent glances over his shoulder at the world in which he lives, and perhaps a prayer for the future world in which he hopes his descendants may live out their lives in peace. But, you will ask, whence cometh the light with which he illuminates the past? The Light of the World, as reflected by the Church? The red light of dialectical materialism? Or merely the klieg lights of modern publicity? And will not the light vary from age to age? Surely, Governor William Bradford's bayberry candle cast a different light from Governor Thomas Hutchinson's whale-oil lamp; Prescott's student lamp and Parkman's gaslight differ from the 1950 model fluorescent bulbs under which most of us work. No historian can be free, or indeed ought to be free, of the best light that his own day and age affords, because he is writing of the past but not for the past; he is writing for the public of today and tomorrow, and his contemporaries ask very different questions of historians from those that his grandfather's generation asked.

Intellectual honesty is the quality that the public in free countries always has expected of historians; much more than that it does not expect, nor often get. Any child knows that history can only be a reduced representation of reality, but it must be a true one, not distorted by queer lenses. Commodore Richard W. Bates and another officer at the Naval War College, with part-time assistance of a third, spent two years on an intensive, blow-by-blow study of the battle of Savo Island, which lasted exactly 42 minutes in the graveyard watch on August 9, 1942, and they have just produced a 400-page monograph on it. They have honestly tried to find out exactly what happened and why, sparing nobody, praising few, although shocked to the core at the faulty tactics that their search revealed. Skilled, honest, and laborious though

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6 Benedetto Croce has often been quoted as writing, "All history is contemporary history." What he did write is: "The practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of 'contemporary history' because, however remote in time events there recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate." *History as the Story of Liberty*, p. 19.
he was, Commodore Bates, for want of records sunk or lost, for lack of knowledge of what individual sailors, Japanese and American, out of the some ten thousand engaged, thought, felt, and did, could produce only an approximation of what happened on that tragic night. Like the best professional historians he took no short cuts, tested all a priori generalizations by ascertainable facts, and hesitated not to scrap his charts and shape a new course whenever new soundings revealed uncharted reefs. His Savo Island monograph is a fine example of intellectual honesty, because it was motivated by an earnest desire to "explain the event exactly as it happened." Gustaaf J. Renier rightly observes that "intellectual honesty is even more important for the historian than for the scientist, for, unlike the scientist, the historian cannot submit his conclusions to the test of experiment. He knows that his work may go unchecked for generations, and that he is therefore put on his honor."

As one aspect of intellectual honesty, the historian should feel a sense of responsibility to his public. The same contingencies of time and space that force a statesman or soldier to make decisions, impel the historian, though with less urgency, to make up his mind. His decisions will not, as the statesman's may, throw his country into a bloody war or a shameful capitulation; they will not, like the soldier's, win or lose a campaign; but they may well enter into the stream of history and vitally affect the future. Would the American Union have been preserved if Bancroft had not so vividly portrayed the struggle to achieve union? Would Napoleon III have made the fatal cast of dice in 1870 if French historians had not glorified Napoleon I? Would the English people have clung to their liberties through good and evil fortune if Hume, Lingard, and Mommsen had gained their ear, instead of Green, Macaulay, and Trevelyan? A mad or obstinate people may not hear the voice of a historian. The Greeks did not listen to Isocrates, who warned them with even greater authority than the Delphic Sybil, that, if they went on as they had gone on, their civilization would be torn asunder and they would be subjected to an alien domination. But the historian who knows, or thinks he knows, an unmistakable lesson of the past, has the right and the duty to point it out, even though it counteract his own beliefs or social theories.

Now some of you are doubtless thinking, Morison is skating on thin ice; if he doesn't look out, he will crash through into the bottomless pit where the spirits of James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard are ready to embrace him as one of theirs! So, without further ado, I shall pay my disrespects to what Robinson called "The New History," and what Beard called "Written History as an Act of Faith."
Samuel Eliot Morison

Beard, in his confession of faith, sets up a straw Ranke who pretended to reproduce past "actuality" in toto, and in a syllogism that makes one gasp for breath, goes on to assert that, since no historian can escape his personal limitations or transcend those of space and time, he must so select and arrange the facts of history as to influence the present or future in the direction that he considers socially desirable. The historian's value in the long run will "depend upon the length and correctness of his forecast." Beard's personal guess was that American history was moving forward to a collectivist democracy, which he defined as "a worker's republic" without poverty or luxury, "a beautiful country . . . labor required and carried on in conditions conducive to virtue." In other words, the Fabian dream that his English friends shared at the turn of the century.

While Beard's end was constant, his means, and so his "frame of reference" changed with the times. His first famous book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913) was written apparently to break down that excessive respect for the Federal Constitution which he believed to be the main legal block to social justice. The book had an immense success, promptly becoming the Progressives' Bible. Through it, Beard probably contributed more than any other writer, except Henry L. Mencken, to the scornful attitude of intellectuals toward American institutions, that followed World War I. But in course of time Beard came to believe that he had made a mistake; that if the millennial "worker's republic" was to be attained, the isolationists must come in first, like Kerensky before Lenin. This is evident in his *Basic History of the United States* (1944) and transparently clear in *The Enduring Federalist* (1948). In that, his penultimate work, the Federalist papers, which, with few exceptions, he had formerly dismissed as rationalizations of the money-grabbers, become one of the greatest political treatises of all time, expressing deep political and moral truths. Thus Beard came full circle. His 1913 book was received with greatest acclaim in the camp of Eugene Debs; his 1948 book evoked the wild enthusiasm of the Hearst press and the Chicago *Tribune.*

Throughout this evolution from left to right, Beard always detested war. Hence his writings were slanted to show that the military side of history was insignificant or a mere reflection of economic forces. In his *Rise of American Civilization* (1927) he led a procession of historians who, caught in the disillusion that followed World War I, ignored wars, belittled wars, taught that no war was necessary and no war did any good, even to the victor. All these antiwar historians were sincere, and few of them were doctrinaire pacifists, as their

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9 Ibid., p. 226.
actions in the last few years prove; nevertheless, their zeal against war did nothing to preserve peace. It only rendered the generation of youth which came to maturity around 1940 spiritually unprepared for the war they had to fight. One may share Beard's detestation for war—most Americans do—but one must admit that few of the things Americans value most, such as independence, liberty, union, or westward expansion, could have been won or secured unless men had been willing to fight for them. Nor may the social historian ignore the part that war and violence have played in American society. Think of the colonial train bands, the expeditions to Cartagena and Louisburg, Indian wars and western desperadoes, crack militia companies doing fancy drills in gaudy uniforms, soldiers' land bounties and veterans' assaults on the United States Treasury, the curious American craving for military titles, and the romantic militarism of Richard Harding Davis. Even Beard's fixed belief that war retarded the worker's millennium was a mere hypothesis; future historians may well find that the two world wars that Beard hated, and the Roosevelt administrations that he despised, did more for collective bargaining and for the worker's well-being and security than any previous half-century of peace.

Of course we historians were not altogether to blame for American spiritual unpreparedness for World War II. Pacifism, disillusion, and a disregard for settled values were rampant in literature, on murals and the screen, and over the air. But historians bear the greater blame, for they are the ones who should have pointed out that war does accomplish something, that war is better than servitude, that war has been an inescapable aspect of the human story. Any American historian could subscribe to the sentiment that Isocrates expressed for his native Athens: "To our forefathers let honor be rendered no less for their hazardous enterprises than for their other good deeds; for not slight, nor few, nor obscure, but many, great and terrible were the battles that they sustained, some for their own land, some for the freedom of others."12

I wish that every young historian might read Beard's final book, President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War (1948), as an example of what happens when a historian consciously writes to shape the future instead of to illuminate the past; of a man becoming the victim or the prisoner of his "frame of reference." Without misstating many facts or garbling quotations, as the vulgar distorters of history do, Beard by ingenious arrangement and selection, ruthless rejection of attendant circumstances, and a liberal use of innuendo, compiled a powerful brief for the thesis that Franklin D. Roosevelt was the aggressor against Germany and Japan; that he wanted American entry into the war for his own purposes, planned and plotted for it and maneuvered Japan

12 Panegyricus, 51–52.
into striking Pearl Harbor in order to gain these sordid ends.\(^{13}\) If this be the New History, give me the old! But there is nothing new about it; to go back no farther, we can find the same sort of thing, not so well done to be sure, in *Mr. Madison's War* (1812) by John Lowell, and *A View of the Conduct of the Executive in the Foreign Affairs of the United States* (1797) by James Monroe. Beard used the facts of history—"actualities" he calls them—as Romain Rolland said politicians always use them: "History furnishes to politics all the arguments that it needs, for the chosen cause."\(^ {14}\) I submit that this sort of thing is not history in the accepted, traditional sense of the word; but, at best, a sort of imprecatory preaching.

So, contrary to Beard who urges you to adopt a conscious "frame of reference" or form of Utopia as a basis for the selection and arrangement of facts, I say that every historian should be wary of his preconceptions, and be just as critical of them, skeptical of them, as of the writings of his predecessors.

Skepticism is an important historical tool. It is the starting point of all revision of hitherto accepted history. As Alfred Sidgwick says, "Our skepticism... consists of a recognition of the defects of knowledge only in the hope of helping knowledge forward. Among its leading principles are these:—that doubt is always lawful but not always expedient; that human fallibility is only worth remembering for the sake of discovering and correcting actual errors; and that beliefs may be unquestioned without being unquestionable. So far from using the notion that man is fallible as an excuse for despair, or for tendering the advice that nothing should ever be believed, we use it as a justification of the effort to improve our knowledge little by little for ever."\(^ {16}\)

Skepticism is properly a two-edged sword in the hands of the historian; and if one edge of the two is keener than the other, it should be turned against oneself. Every honest historian has, time and again, rejected the theory or "frame" with which he started his research, and has built another to suit the facts that he plows up.

"Frame of reference" history\(^ {16}\) is of course the only kind that historians are allowed to write under a dictatorship, but they are not allowed to construct the frame. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* gives us a glance into the future. In that totalitarian England of his imagination—so horribly like certain regimes of today that it makes one shudder—the government keeps a corps of writers constantly at work writing new histories to replace the old, at every

\(^{13}\) My own review of this book is in *Atlantic Monthly*, CLXXXII (August, 1948), 91; see also Herbert Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbor: The Coming of the War between the United States and Japan* (Princeton, 1950); Basil Rauch, *Roosevelt: From Munich to Pearl Harbor* (New York, 1950).

\(^{14}\) Jean Christophe, VII (Dans la maison, 26th ed.), 236.

\(^{15}\) *The Use of Words in Reasoning* (London, 1901), p. 233.

\(^{16}\) Renier, p. 219, calls it "A Priorism," and has a good succinct statement of its dangers.
new turn of its policy. National figures associated with liberalism or democracy are either smeared, or, like Trotsky under the present Red regime, ignored as though they had never been.

Enough of what I do not believe. The positive task for the honest historian, I do believe, is to illuminate the past. He will inevitably try to answer some of the questions that contemporary society asks of the past, such as the causes of and prevention of war, the working of democracy under different sets of conditions and by various peoples, and the part that personality, climate, and environment play in determining events. But these considerations should be secondary in the historian’s mind. After his main object of describing events “simply as they happened,” his principal task is to understand the motives and objects of individuals and groups, even those that he personally dislikes, and to point out mistakes as well as achievements by persons and movements, even by those that he loves. In a word, he must preserve balance.

This principle of balance or proportion—what the French mean by mesure—is, I believe, the most valuable quality for a historian, after intellectual honesty. Mesure means, for instance, that you should not relate diplomatic history in a vacuum, confining your narrative to the exchange of notes, but try to discover the forces of economics, public opinion, and the like behind the foreign offices. Mesure means that in describing the humanitarian movement in the United States a century ago, you must at least refer to similar movements in other countries, which influenced ours. Mesure means that you can no longer write political history without considering social forces, or social history without describing political acts and conditions that translate aspirations into deeds, or naval history without touching on concomitant efforts of the ground and air forces. Mesure means that you should not write the history of an industry from the management point of view without considering labor; or a history of a labor union without considering the capitalist side. There is no royal road for a young historian to acquire a sense of balance, although a becoming humility toward his fellow workers, and skepticism directed toward himself as toward them, will be of assistance. It may be that a sense of balance and proportion is innate rather than acquired; possibly it may be patiently inculcated by a teacher who has it. That I do not pretend to know. But I do predict that no unbalanced history can live long; that in due time it will be a mere curiosity like those nasty antipapist and anti-Protestant tracts of the seventeenth century, which serve only to illustrate the partisan passions of the times.

Those partisan passions may not be ignored. Since the life of man, at least in his great moments, is emotional, prejudiced, and passionate, the historian should try to express some of the emotion, the prejudice, and the passion
in his prose; and he must, through his imagination, enter to some extent into those feelings in order to portray them with sympathetic warmth or appropriate indignation. He will have no difficulty in doing this if he approach his subject with verve and enthusiasm. Unless it be the dull pedantry of the average doctoral dissertation in history, there is no quality more repugnant to readers than a chilly impartiality. Yet enthusiasm is no excuse for the historian going off balance. He should remind the reader that outcomes were neither inevitable nor foreordained, but subject to a thousand changes and chances. And if he records the passions of past times, he must appease them as well by showing how the “pointers with pride” were too complacent, and the “viewers with alarm” were too nervous; how every winning cause had elements of evil, and every losing cause had some kernel of good. He should be wary of numbers and statistics and not fall into the common fallacy that “mostest” is more important than “fustest,” that the big battalions or the big production figures inevitably make the decisions.

A historian owes respect to tradition and to folk memory; for “History is corrected and purified tradition, enlarged and analyzed memory,” Rosenstock-Huessy, in an address before this Association in 1934 from which this dictum is quoted, warned our profession that we were losing our hold on the public through wanton and unnecessary flouting of tradition. He meant not only the “debunkers” but the historians who embraced dialectical materialism as an easy explanation of past reality—which saved them a great deal of painful thought. One result was the mass murder of historical characters. Personality ceased to be important if statesmen were puppets of economic and social forces; hence in many works written in the 1920’s and 1930’s, there are no great men or leading characters, only automata whose speeches, ideas, or aspirations are mentioned merely to give the historian an opportunity to sneer or smear. Dialectical materialism will admit no highmindedness, no virtue, no nobility of character—unless on the part of a revolutionist. It made a great appeal to young scholars, as perhaps was natural during those two woeful decades, 1920–1940; yet none the less unfortunate. For the “debunkers” and dialectical materialists, by robbing the people of their heroes, by insulting their folk-memory of great figures whom they admired, repelled men of good will from written history and turned other men, including many not of good will, to communism.

Dialectical materialists who did not go communist are now rather lonely. The age of “debunking” has passed; even Woodward, who coined the term,
is dead; a new generation both here and in Europe is sounding and elucidating national and sectional traditions. But much harm was done, and little good. So, although it is less cogent today than fifteen years ago, I wish to repeat Rosenstock-Huessy's warning—historians, deal gently with your people's traditions! If you feel the urge to pull something apart, try your hand on a myth rather than a tradition. Some historical myths, like the Magna Carta one, were very useful in their day. Others, like Jamestown log cabins, Marcus Whitman's journey, or the exclusively Celtic composition of the Notre Dame football team, are harmless. But still others, like the Cavalier myth of Virginia, the forged letters of Washington and Franklin, the myth that the Pilgrim Fathers invented democracy and free enterprise, and the old "perfidious Albion" myth which still has currency, cater to regional hubris or racial prejudice, and need deflation.

Too rigid specialization is almost as bad for a historian's mind, and for his ultimate reputation, as too early an indulgence in broad generalization and synthesis. Everyone should, I believe, study something general or national in scope and something special or local; should do research on a remote period and on a contemporary period, and work on more than one type of history. The national field teaches you what to look for in local history; whilst intensive cultivation of grass-roots—or, as in my case, coral reefs and mudflats—teaches you things that you cannot see in the broad national view. Local history as a sideline also serves to integrate a historian with his community, to make him a valued and respected member of it, instead of "just another professor."

Contemporary history offers many pitfalls, and poses more and different problems than eras long past; as I know very well, after jumping from 1492 to 1942. There is an advantage in writing about admirals like Columbus who cannot answer back! Yet, my recent venture into contemporary naval history has been rich in experience and has taught me much. For one thing, I no longer have the reverence for documents that I once had, or the distrust for oral sources that I was once taught. Military documents vary in value as their writers know the truth and try honestly to tell what really happened; one could not get along without them, but one must check them, not only against the enemy's documents but by the oral testimony of participants, provided always it be fresh; for "the strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink."

Participation in naval actions has taught me a greater tolerance of the mistakes of naval commanders than I could have entertained if I had fought the war in Washington. One has to experience the noise and confusion of battle to appreciate how difficult it is for the responsible commander to estimate a

19 Title of an article by Capt. Ralph C. Parker USN in *U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, LXXVI (January, 1950), 59.
fluid situation correctly, and to make the right decision under pressure. And, although Tolstoy exaggerated the role of chance and denied the role of intellect in warfare, both are present. A sailor's opportunity for fame, or even for survival, often depends on a fortunate shot, or on a decision that was wrong in view of what he did know, yet right in view of the factors that he could not grasp. The planner of operations, in modern war, is just as important as the men who execute the plans; military planning calls for intellectual qualities of the highest order.

Fashions in history are constantly changing. Back in the 1930's few publishers would take a source book on American history. Since 1945 a spate of "liberty documents" and the like are competing for adoptions, and for the tedium of required readers. There is now a seller's market in early Americana—colonial history, folklore, early westerns, and the like—and I wish that more of our members would take advantage of it instead of letting journalists and novelists rake in the cash. There is a decided change of attitude toward our past, a friendly, almost affectionate attitude, as contrasted with the cynical, almost hateful one of young intellectuals twenty-five years ago. At that time Kenneth Murdock and I were voices crying in the wilderness against the common notion of the grim Puritan painted by J. Truslow Adams and other popular historians of the day: the steeple-hatted, long-faced Puritan living in a log cabin and planning a witch-hunt or a battue of Quakers as a holiday diversion. That picture has given way to one of the jolly Puritan sitting in a little frame house furnished with early American furniture, silverware and pewter, one arm around a pretty Priscilla and the other reaching for a jug of hard cider. Twenty years ago it was difficult to get any hearing for our denial that English colonists in general and Puritans in particular were hostile to the arts; now we have to discourage students from comparing a tavern-sign portrait of George II to a Romney, or going into ecstasies over the beautiful "functionalism" of a seventeenth century Connecticut hog-yoke.

Fifty years ago, it was difficult to find any general history of the United States that did not present the Federalist-Whig-Republican point of view, or express a very dim view of all Democratic leaders except Cleveland. This fashion has completely changed; it would be equally difficult today to find a good general history of the United States that did not follow the Jefferson-Jackson-F. D. Roosevelt line. That, I confess, is my own approach. I was converted to it, forty years ago, by doing my first piece of intensive research on New England Federalism, and discovering that the "wise and good and rich," whom Fisher Ames thought should rule the nation, were stupid, narrow-minded, and local in their outlook compared with the Republicans. I still believe that the Jeffersonian "line" is the one that the main stream of
United States "actuality" has followed, just as British "actuality" is best explained by historians who write in the Whig-Liberal-Labour tradition. But I also believe that there has been altogether too much of it, and that the present situation is unbalanced and unhealthy, tending to create a sort of neoliberal stereotype.\textsuperscript{20} We need a United States history written from a sanely conservative point of view, like Keith Feiling's recent \textit{History of England}. But we do not want nostalgic histories that merely invoke an impossible return to the policies and conditions of some past era. For, as every classicist knows, the Stoic doctrine of recurrence impelled the political scientists and statesmen of Rome "to seek solutions for the ever more complex problems of Roman civilization by abortive effort to rejuvenate the virtues, and to reenact the policies, of the past."\textsuperscript{21} Frustration and failure will attend any American historian who tries to do that; but fame and success await one who will make a fresh distillation of our entire history, with the conservative tradition acting as the leaven.

Social history exhibits a similar uninventiveness, for it seems very difficult for social historians to describe anything but improvements, as they move on from decade to decade. But the main ill of American social historians is indigestion. You cannot include everything from wonder-working providences to badly working plumbing; better leave the one to Edward Johnson and the other to the Quennells. Social history puts a greater strain on literary expression and on the sense of balance than any other kind. Hitherto the novelists have been very much better at writing it than the historians. We need to improve our human perception as well as our literary style if we expect to be the teachers of social history that, for instance, Marcel Proust was and Conrad Richter is. Historians notably lack the talent at description which novelists have developed to a high degree; Prescott had it, of course, and Parkman; but you can count on the fingers of one hand the American historians now writing who can describe a scene, an event, or a natural setting in such a way that the reader can see it. (The reason is largely that the writer cannot see it himself; he sits in a library and writes instead of going about by whatever means of transportation is available, and finding out for himself what historic sites look like today.) Then, too, some social historians forget that history is a \textit{story} that moves; they divorce their subject altogether from the main stream of political history, giving it no context and no time. In the Western countries, political and constitutional history must always be the skeleton on which any other kind of history is hung; and if you are concerned over the decay of liberty, you should be also concerned lest political and constitutional history

fall into desuetude. The American historian of architecture, education, labor, medicine, or any other social subject, should have a sense of chronology and not apply to 1850 the standards of 1950, or ignore the context and attendant circumstances of ideas, principles, and events that he may consider abominable.

Although the present conception of history as the sum total of all aspects of human activity has vastly complicated and increased the burdens of the general historian, he must accept the challenge. He should welcome, and must do his best to read and grasp, the flood of monographs that the presses are issuing on social-history subjects. He must do his best to apply to history the principles that the sociologists are painfully (and usually in horrible English) working out in human relations. He must admit that there is a vast amount to do in the social history of any Western country, with the whole of Asia opening up new fields to Western historians.

Although the magnitude of work before you younger historians, and the conditions under which you may have to perform it, are appalling, you are nevertheless to be envied. For the world has revolved to one of those “seasons, in human affairs,” in the words of William Ellery Channing 120 years ago, “of inward and outward revolution, when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in multitudes, and a new and undefined good is thirsted for.”22 The times are your challenge; what will be your response? The historical profession will have little use for timid pedants, whose ambition goes no farther than to get a firm footing on one of the lower steps of the academic escalator, proceeding painlessly from one professorial grade to another until overtaken by death and oblivion. It wants men and women of courage as well as of honesty and balance. A historical career can be a great adventure, and not in ideas alone; witness the lives of Bolton and Trevelyan, men who write history that sings to the heart while it informs the understanding. A historian’s life may be filled with conflict, not only the relatively clean fighting of armed forces but the dirty fighting of political campaigns and congressional investigations. We want more bold and positive characters to enter the profession.

Finally, a bit of advice nineteen centuries old, which St. Paul offered to all the faithful of Ephesus, but which seems particularly applicable to historians: “Henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.” Seek guidance from the Author of all lights, of all history, “and be renewed in the spirit of your mind.”23 Or, as St. Thomas Aquinas put it, in his noble

23 Ephesians iv:17-18, 23.
prayer for a scholar, "Grant me sharpness in understanding, sagacity in interpretation, facility in learning, and abundant grace in expression."

With honesty of purpose, balance, a respect for tradition, courage, and, above all, a philosophy of life, any young person who embraces the historical profession will find it rich in rewards and durable in satisfaction.

Such is the substance of my faith; and if I were to sum up my credo in a single word, it would be that proud motto of Fustel de Coulanges, *Quaero*—I seek to learn.

*Harvard University*