

SUBSTANCE OF HISTORY

1. MEANING :

A book about history is a book about the past. It describes about once that had been and will never be repeated exactly.

The Greek work *istoria* meant that which we came to know as a result of an "enquiry", and the English word history has almost the same meaning. But the German work *Geschichte* carries three- fold meaning: the things that have happened; the activity by which we can come to know them; and the narration of what we have come to know.¹

In this sense history may refer to the deed, the story of the deed, and to skilled procedure which makes it possible for the storyteller to recount what really happened;

When we talk and write about history we are assuming that it is possible to know what the past was like and to distinguish between the past as it really was and the account which we are giving of it.

2. DEFINITION (or what is HISTORY ?) :

Let us discuss the views of a few eminent authorities who have endeavoured to define history for us :

Bertrand Russell :

"History in the large answers (as far as may be) the question "how did things get here" which is interesting to most intelligent children".²

This is a reference to the long march of man in history; the present has a past; and, it is through the knowledge of history that the various phases of the past are unfolded to us.

Furthermore, the study of the past is full of interest. It is not an insipid catalogue of past events; it has a value of its own. History in itself is an attractive study. People are drawn to it on its own accord.

Lord Acton :

"It is a unique opportunity of recording, in the way most useful to the greatest number, the usefulness of 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 best document, and the ripest conclusions of international research".³

Acton believed that history based on document has to be studied with an objective. By this definition, history would not only be the study of past, dry-as-dust, but the approach to the study of history should be philosophical. History is replete with meaning; and, it is the philosophy of history that has brought many followers to the field of the study of history.

Croce begins his celebrated work with these words : "Contemporary history is wont to be called the history of a passage of time, looked upon as most recent past, whether it be that of the last fifty years, a decade, a year, a month, a day, or indeed of the last hour or of the last minute".⁴

This is a theory that all history is a contemporary history. It is natural that the historian is always influenced in the period he lives in; and he delves in the past with his eyes always fixed on the contemporary events. In fact it is the need of the present that galvanizes the interest of historian in the study of the past.

Collingwood, an Oxford don, defined history in the following words :

"Every historian would agree, I think, that history is a kind of research or inquiry. What kind of inquiry it is I do not yet see. The point is that generically it belongs to what we call the sciences: that is, the forms of thought whereby we ask questions

and try to answer".⁵ Science in general, it is important to realize, does not consist in collecting what we already know and arranging it in this or that kind of pattern. It consists in fastening upon something we do not know, and try to discover it. Science is finding things out; and in that sense history is a science".⁶

Collingwood, obviously, falls in line with Croce who believed that philosophy of history is vital in the study of history. But he goes further. He calls history a kind of science. This would mean that laws of history are discernable through scientific study of history. History, therefore, according to Collingwood, is a science. Accordingly, those who join the ranks and files of historians are stimulated in their decisions by the fact that history is a science.

Encyclopaedia Britannica :

History has been defined in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as to be "prose narration of past events as accurate as fallible human testimony can make it."

This definition suggests that the description of the past varies with different historians. 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 a 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.

In sum, history is a record of the past of man and woman. There is not one but many approaches to the study of the past. All of them are directed to depict the past accurately. The efforts have not ceased; they are continuing.

What draws people to the study of history, therefore, has a direct bearing on their definition of history. For varieties of

reasons, people are seen in the company of history and this lends colour to their outlook on history.

3. SCOPE :

If history is record of past events, the natural question is what past should it include. Galbraith complains that the real trouble about history as the service of men is that its scope is entirely undefined. There can be history of anything and of everything, and in this sense history is a method of arriving at truth rather than a subject itself. It is just one way of explaining ourselves to ourselves.

We may begin by saying that all the facts are born free and equal; but this would soon land the historians in a wonderland. History, therefore, has to be reduced to a more orderly world. This calls for selection. An exhaustive definition of the scope of history was given by G. P. Gooch :

"The scope of history has gradually widened till it has come to include every aspect of the life of humanity. No one would now dare to maintain with Secley that history was the biography of states, and with Freeman that it was merely past politics. The growth of nations, the achievements of men of action, the rise and fall of parties remain among the most and engrossing themes of the historian, but he now casts his net wider and embraces the whole record of civilisation. The influence of nature, the pressure of economic factors, the origin and the transformation of ideas, the contribution of science and art, religion and philosophy, literature and law, the material condition of life, the fortunes of masses—such problems now claim his attention in no less degree. He must see life steadily and see it whole."

Sir Charles Oman's view of the scope of history is equally extensive. He, too, felt that the historian has to interest himself with the events beginning from the discovery of the use of fire to the invention of radio-telegraphy.

Collingwood in his work, *Idea of History*, defined the scope of history under the title "Object of History".

"One science differs from another in that it finds out things of a different kind. What kind of things does history find out? I answer, *res-gestae*: actions of human beings that have been done in the past. Although this answer raises all kind of further questions many of which are controversial, still, however they may be answered, the answers do not discredit the proposition that history is the science of *res-gestae*, the attempt to answer questions about human actions done in the past".

There are historians who believe that history is a Muse of all knowledge. In it are included, in their view, the local history, national history, world history and the history of civilization. For this, all the records which could bring the vanished past back to life rightly belong to the province of history. The handwritings, musical notation, pictures, sculpture, technical equipment, alternations of the crust of the earth, profound spiritual transformations, the changes suffered by political, moral and religious institutions, the growth of virtue and sentiments which have gradually been formed in the course of centuries and are still alive in us, are all within the scope of history.

It may be safely said that if history includes such strangers like the study of geology, microbiology, it would cease to be history proper. It would be much to the benefit of history if it does not permit the vast numbers of competing callers in its scope and issues tickets only to those who are specially qualified for it. Otherwise it would be a mumbo-jumbo and it would neglect its proper field. It ought to permit the histories of various kinds in its folds but exclude with a rigid 'no' all those claims which are without substantial justification.

The natural sciences and even some sciences like psychology, sociology, painting and music, to mention only a few

obvious examples, fall out of the domain of history.

History is thus, a residuum—when all other sciences have carved out a little existence for themselves—and therefore, it should include that part of man's action without which the picture of the past could not be drawn.

Religious, political and military aspects are the chief concerns of a historian when dealing with local, national and international history; history of movements and ideas are also part of this enquiry; internal administration of countries could not be excluded from the scope of history and so is the case with the claim of economic factors.

We may say that all the facts are born free and equal; but this could soon land the historian in a wonderland. History, therefore, has to be rescued to a more orderly world. This calls for selection. Clio, the goddess of history, has to contend with a few suitors, but it is the interest of both and both sides should be pleased.

4. NATURE :

History is concerned with four questions according to A.F. Pollard :

"Now there are three or four different kinds of questions which every student of history is called upon to answer, some of them elementary, some profound; there is the question when, and the question where, the question how and the question why?"⁹

The first question relates to time and the second concerns with the place. The third and the fourth questions, though the first two are equally of high value, really constitute the real enquiry into the nature of history.

The enquiry does not stop at the mere description of the past but it goes further and explains the reasons behind an event. This, of course, incidentally is the fact that confers on history the title of philosophy.

5. PURPOSE AND VALUE :

Has history any purpose or value? Those who look down upon this field of knowledge come up with a quick answer. They call history "bunk".

The historians, of course, did not accept this opinion which categorically declares that history has no value at all. The historians and philosophers of history have taken a great care in this respect and have discussed the role of history.

Croce gives the answer to this question by raising further questions : "On the other hand, once the indissoluble link between life and thought in history has been effected, the doubt that have been expressed as to the certainty and the utility of history disappear altogether in a moment. How could that which is a present producing of our spirit ever be uncertain? How could that knowledge be useless which solves a problem that has come forth from the bosom of life?"¹⁰

E.H. Carr believes that the understanding of the past with the help of the present is only one aspect. The other is the understanding of the present with the help of the past.

E.H. Carr said : "Learning from history is never simply a one-way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the inter-relation between them."¹¹

Collingwood defines history as an experience which could make an individual gauge what he could do in the light of the past :

"My answer is that history is 'for' human self-knowledge. It is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish

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 him from other men, but his nature as man. Knowing yourself means knowing, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the man you are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries: the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is".¹²

Bertrand Russell does not believe in the philosophy of history and remarked: "History is invaluable in increasing our knowledge of human nature, because it shows how people may be expected to behave in new situation".¹³

It is true, though, that past does not repeat itself exactly, but one could avoid pitfalls. The expression that even a donkey does not hit itself twice on the same stone makes out a case of history as a great teacher. No one can afford to overlook the past if one wants to avoid similar perils.

Mr. Vinogradoff points out that history is a science. He says, "It is not uncommon in our days of superficial impressions and unstable convictions to doubt the value of history. As the past never repeats itself exactly in the same way as before, modern sceptics come to discard its memories as useless stories. And yet history, if studied without prejudices, teaches the greatest lesson of all to treat social life not as a mechanical combination, but as an organic process. We are constantly striving to shape and improve it, but it cannot be pulled to pieces and resettled at pleasure, because its roots are in the past and its functions stretch over centuries".¹⁴

This is the theory of the continuity of history. To borrow a metaphor from Ibn-i-Khaldun, we have no stick to beat the water in an ocean into the past and present. The past creeps into the present however hard we might try to prevent this to happen.

Bernard Russell believes that history is interesting and its study makes people bold. Ambitious "individual can achieve great things, and teacher of history ought make this clear to his pupil. "For without hope nothing of importance is accomplished".¹⁴

It is obvious that history has educative, moral, political, religious and military value.¹⁷ By no stretch of imagination one could visualize history as meaningless story; it is not a trash; but there are historians who call history as a science and read history with a view to discover laws to enable them to apply them to the modern issues which confront them.

I don't feel to cast any doubt on the value of history in this respect. My view is that history should less be used as a propaganda; it should tell us the truth about the past. This past could not be reduced to abstract laws and, therefore, could not be applied to unidentical situations of modern times. But this past could lend us sufficient light to permit us to avoid glaring pitfalls. The value of history is still very high if the true light is discovered and it serves to illuminate the future path.

A STUDY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

for

M.A. Students
&
OTHER COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS

By

Dr. Muhammad Aslam Qureshi

M A (History), M A. (Pol Sc) Pb (Gold Medalist)
D. Phil (Oxon)

PUNJAB UNIVERSITY LAHORE

PAKISTAN BOOK CENTRE

Chowk Urdu Bazar
Lahore
Phone: 7230611

Royal Shopping Centre
6th Road Rawalpindi