

Why History?

Reflections for freshmen-- and others, by Francis L. Loewenheim

In an age increasingly dominated by the progress of nuclear science, the achievements of space technology, and the marvels of automation of all kinds, entering university students—and others also—might well ask why they should be expected to devote themselves with much care or concern to a subject which, to all intents and purposes, seems to have little use or relevance for the world in which they expect to live. It is a good and pertinent question. It deserves to be answered, and I should like to suggest some possible answers here.

Let me say at the outset that I believe that history—our knowledge and study of the past—is and must be something intensely personal, and that there may well be some historians, even some of my colleagues, who will disagree with what I have to say here. But I would hope that we could all agree upon the importance of historical study, and upon the importance of making it, in all possible ways, as meaningful as we can to all students of the past, young and old, beginner and graduate.

In answering the question—"Why history?"—perhaps the first thing for the historian to do is to avoid the pardonable temptation to claim too much for his subject.

There is really no need for him to do so. Perhaps the second thing for him to do, therefore, is to stress the things that history cannot do—and cannot be expected to do. For instance: History will not save the world. A knowledge of the past will not make people richer or happier (it may, indeed, have a very depressing effect). It will not make them social successes. In short, it has really none of the obvious advantages of, say, the natural and biological sciences.

More important yet, history is a cumulative, not a predictive, subject. History never repeats itself: only historians do. Moreover, historians cannot recreate the past; they can only reconstruct it—something very different. Finally, as in the case of the sciences (though for somewhat different reasons), some of its most important problems remain unanswered generations, even centuries, after the event. Why, for instance, the decline of the mighty Roman Empire? Why the disintegration of Christian unity in the sixteenth century? Why the failure of the Western democracies to resist the Nazi tyranny until it was almost too late? It is not too much to say that we know a great deal more about all of these historic questions than was known at the

(Continued on Page 7)

Those who do not remember the past . . .

(Continued from Page 1)
time these events occurred. Yet it is also true that the ultimate answers to these questions still evade us, and perhaps always will. This suggests something of the enormous difficulty of historical studies, but also of the magnitude of the questions with which they are, at best, confronted.

Having thus far stressed the difficulties of our discipline, let me now pass on to its more positive—and I think more important—features. Perhaps the first point to be made in this regard—and it is one that every student of history, old and new, must recognize—is that history is not a dead, closed, and finished subject (only professors and graduate students sometimes make it seem that way).

Present and Past

Croce, in a memorable phrase many years ago, remarked that "all history is contemporary history." By this he meant, I think, two things. In the first place, that—as every geologist well knows—the past is a seamless web, that it has no fixed beginning and no fixed end, that there is an ever present and continuing relationship between past and present. He also meant that we can achieve a better understanding of the past by achieving a better understanding of the present. Of course, it is entirely improper, and unhistorical, to read the purposes and motives of our own times into those past (though this is not an infrequent practice even these days). But there are, no doubt, also many aspects of our own times which, carefully considered, give us a better understanding of the experience of past generations. If, therefore,

the past can help us to understand better the world in which we live, a better understanding of our world can also contribute to our knowledge of the past.

Does History Teach?

It ought to be said at once that this is not a view of past and present that is shared by all historians. To many historians, the idea that history has anything to teach us is anathema. Following the second world war, one leading German university banned all historical theses on subjects after 1850. One distinguished scholar I know believed that history was just so many points on an examination—so many for one Irish Land Act, so many points for another. This is not history at all, of course; it is obscurantism at its stifling worst.

History, at its best, is something very different. It is Men and Politics, War and Diplomacy. Culture and Society. Ideas and Institutions. It is as big and encompassing as all of

life and civilization itself.

In one sense, of course, history is basically and essentially political. That is also what gives it so much of its interest and appeal. "History is simply past politics," a famous English historian once remarked. He was quite right—in a way. It has long puzzled me, therefore, that many undergraduate students who were, in many ways, so acutely conscious and alert to all the conflict and turmoil in the world around them (academic, athletic, and political), often seemed quite incapable of

working up any real interest and enthusiasm for the great conflicts of the past—as if these had either been resolved in one fashion or another, or for other reasons no longer had any relevance or meaning to our own time. It seems to me therefore, that one of the principal tasks of the historian at the present time is to reestablish—in Croce's sense—the relationship between past and present. But this is not—let me hasten to add—a goal that historians can hope to achieve alone. This is a

(Continued on Page 8)

What relevance has the past to the present?

standard in History, we cannot uphold it in Church or State."

(Continued from Page 7)

vital relationship that all students of history must learn to understand, and to be continually aware of throughout their historical studies.

Personal Judgment

And with that I come to what is really the central point of these remarks. Everything I have said thus far has been predicated on one further step—the assumption of personal judgment. I realize, of course, that this is an enormously controversial point among many historians, and has been so for many generations. On the other hand, it seems to me that, whatever historians have written on the principle of historical objectivity per se, the doctrine of personal judgment—or interpretation—has become firmly established in historical writing. It seems to me, therefore, that Gaetano Salvemini was quite right when he wrote once that "the essence of history is judgment," and that Carl Becker, the famous Cornell historian, was quite right also when he remarked, in a famous address, that "Everyman was (and ought to be) his own historian."

Now there will be some historians, perhaps, who will approve of this doctrine when applied to the august pages of the "American Historical Review," but will look askance at university students expressing their own "historical judgment." There will also be some students who, having been reared on a diet of "factual history," will find this kind of "interpretative history" both uncongenial and uninteresting. They would much prefer not to have to come to any conclusions about, say, Machiavelli, or Louis XIV, or Bismark. They would much prefer to concentrate on the details of what these men did, than to have to wrestle, on their own, with the meaning of their deeds.

All Opinions Not Equal

This is not to say, of course, that snap historical judgments can be tolerated; they are deplorable in freshmen and Presidential candidates alike. I am sure that neither Becker nor Salvemini for a moment thought that personal judgment should be permitted to lead to wild flights of imagination—e.g., the French Revolution was caused by Freemasons, Britain was responsible for the second world war, F.D.R. incited the Japanese into bombing Pearl Harbor. They believed that beyond the basic questions of fact—the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, the First World War began on August 4, 1914, the Munich conference took place on September 29-30, 1938—the most important and most meaningful questions could—and should—in the end be answered by every individual in his own way.

The Test

The real test of historical comprehension, then, it seems to me, comes not in the mindless, mechanical recitation of factual detail, but in the interpretative arrangement of this detail into

a meaningful pattern. This, indeed, is the final test of historical understanding: to what extent are the student's judgments his own, carefully thought out, supported, and developed, and to what extent are they merely the rote repetition of received information?

Having said all this, there remains one gnawing problem: Can we put our historical knowledge to any constructive use in the present, and if so, how is this to be accomplished? The case for the negative was stated most powerfully by Friedrich Nietzsche almost a hundred years ago when he said "the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history." There is, unfortunately, much in the history of the modern world—our own times included—to prove him right. Yet to accept his verdict as permanent and irrevocable would be to condemn our knowledge of things past to little more than intellectual ballast.

Does History Repeat?

George Santayana once remarked that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat its mistakes." I think that most people would agree with that most heartily, and there will be few in these troubled days who will support the proposition that what we know cannot help us. But what is it in the experience of modern or earlier times that is of meaning and relevance to our own? It is precisely here that the factor of personal judgment becomes most important, indeed inescapable. Can we, for instance, see in the East-West confrontation of our times a repetition of the 1930's, or of the growing Anglo-German rivalry that helped to bring on the Great War of 1914-1918? Can we, in revolutionary times such as ours, learn anything from the long series of religious-political wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, and from Europe's experience with the French Revolution and Napoleon?

These are questions that every thoughtful person must answer for himself. And, even if history never exactly repeats itself, an understanding of some of these turning points of modern history may well help us to achieve a better understanding of the manifold problems and crises of our time. It would be good to know that there exists, at the highest levels of our government, a clear awareness of this relationship of past and present, of the relationship of historical experience to the revolutionary world in which we live.

Misuse of History

But let me hasten to add that the application of historical knowledge to contemporary affairs also carries within it a serious danger—the misuse of this historical knowledge for political and other purposes. We are all, I'm sure, familiar with the dangerous misuse of science and technology in our time. But let there be no doubt about it; the misuse of history can be as

dangerous, and perhaps even more insidious, than this misuse of science and technology.

The recent history of Europe is filled with the misuse of history. It played a fateful role in Hitler's rise to power, and it must be observed that we have not altogether escaped this practice in this country. But it is a dangerous thing to distort the history of one's own country, at home and abroad, for partisan purposes.

Inseparable Relation

For those who distort their country's past can seldom tell the truth about its present; and those who cannot tell the truth about the present can rarely do better with the past. That is something for all of us to remember, especially in this election year.

Beyond all such problems of past and present, personal judgment and interpretative history—but closely related to them all—there remains one other aspect of historical study that no student of the past, old or new, can ignore. This is the inseparable relationship of history, character, and personality—our own character and personality.

A Moral Expression

I noted earlier that the problems of "interpretive history" were, in many ways, much greater than those of mere "factual history." One principal reason for this, of course, is that in expressing judgments on the past—on men and events, ideas and institutions—we are also passing judgment on ourselves. For in passing on the nobility

and baseness of other days, we are also passing judgment on these qualities in our own lives and times.

History, in the end, is not only a moral experience, it is also a moral act. It becomes an act of faith, not only about the past, but about the present. It is important not only because of what it tells us about the past, it is even more important because of what it tells us about ourselves.

No one, it seems to me, has ever expressed this view of history so well as did Lord Acton, one of the most distinguished of modern historians, at the close of his inaugural lecture at Cambridge nearly 70 years ago:

"Whatever a man's notions of these later centuries are, such, in the main, the man himself will be. Under the name of History, they cover the articles of his philosophic, his religious, and his political creed. They give his measure; they denote his character: and, as praise is the shipwreck of historians, his preferences betray him more than his aversions. Modern History touches us so nearly, it is so deep a question of life and death, that we are bound to find our own way through it, and to owe our insight to ourselves. The historians of former ages, unapproachable for us in knowledge and in talent, cannot be our limit. We have the power to be more rigidly impersonal, disinterested and just than they; and to learn from undisguised and genuine records to look with remorse upon the past, and to the future with assured hope of better things; bearing this in mind, that if we lower our