

JANUARY 20, 1969STEPHEN Z. STARR

I will hazard the guess that some members of the Club are present in the expectation that this paper will unveil another of my inimitable poets. They are in for a disappointment. I do have a depraved liking for the weeds in the garden of verses, and I am fascinated by the spectacle of people assuming an air of portentous solemnity as they proceed to make jackasses of themselves. But tonight's literary exercises must be on a higher plane. I will say, for the benefit of the more frivolous members of the audience, that I have a poet in reserve, to be trotted out on a suitable occasion, but this evening I stand here not as a collector of clownish poets, but as a Sunday historian.

Unlike those who can point to a specific incident or conversation or book as the starting point of the avocation of a lifetime, I do not know when or how my interest in history was aroused. If someone who is not a professional may claim the title of historian, I have been one as far back as I can remember. I read monographs when I was still in grammar school, and the absence of illustrations from such works bothered me far more than did my inability to understand much of what I was reading. I found the past endlessly fascinating, and I was filled with awe of the men of vast learning who possessed the mysterious art of being able to bring it to life. To open for the first time a book of history, given to me for a birthday or Christmas, was the most exciting of adventures. I was about to meet emperors and kings, soldiers and statesman, heroes and villains, beautiful and influential ladies who for some curious reason were frequently referred to as someone's mistresses; I was about to see plots and counterplots, wars, battles, revolutions, the conflict of parties, the intrigues of diplomats, and the clash of beliefs, most of which were over my head. And all this was reduced to an orderly narrative in which every personage was clearly labeled as good or bad, and every Event B was the inevitable consequence of some Event A.

Before I was out of high school, I was confirmed in the faith by the two great English stylists, Gibbon and Macaulay, and the greatest of the Germans, Theodor Mommsen. In my four years in college, well before the publish, picket or perish era, I had the good fortune to come under the tutelage of four dedicated teachers, for each of whom his own chosen segment of history was a challenging, living reality. They had in common the gift of communicating even to the least responsive football player in their classes their own enthusiasm for the growth of the English Constitution, for the French Revolution, for American history in the middle years of the last century, and for the diplomatic preliminaries of World War I, the latest and best war then available. I graduated with sufficient credits to give me a double major in history, and to that I owe the fact that I was then, and have remained to this day, contentedly ignorant of such latter-day keys to salvation as psychology and sociology, a state of ignorance that I have no intention of disturbing. Had it not been for the Depression, I would now speak to you with all the authority of a doctorate in history, and this paper would have been written on a lavish grant from one of our beneficent foundations. It was not to be, and I had to settle for becoming a member of the Establishment. Nevertheless, I consider myself a historian, albeit only a humble, non-voting member of the union, and it is as such that I speak to you tonight.

Anyone who lays claim to being a historian, even a weekend historian like myself, must at times ask himself some searching questions about the nature and value of his craft. What is history all about? What is the function of the historian? What obligations does he assume toward the past, toward his putative readers, toward himself, when he sits down to write, however relevant or irrelevant his topic may be to contemporary life?

For two hundred years past, Western civilization has had a strong historical orientation. History has in a very real sense been substituted for the traditional cultural certainties destroyed by the Reformation. This growth of historic-minded-

ness has been explained as a response to a search for security. The orderliness and coherence of history became a haven of refuge from the spiritual chaos, the traumatic changes in the relations of man with God, the physical world and society, which were the product of the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and lastly, the Scientific Revolution.

This historic-mindedness had as its most obvious manifestation an interest in the past for its own sake. This interest was to a great degree the creation of men who are condescendingly called the Romantic Historians: Macaulay, Carlyle and Froude in England, Michelet in France, Bancroft, Motley, Prescott and Parkman in our own country, and their disciples. Macaulay, the greatest of them all, thought of history as a branch of literature, and wrote his History of England from the Accession of James II with the deliberate intention, as he put it, To displace the latest novel from the tables of fashionable young ladies. And how brilliantly he succeeded! There is not in the entire five volumes of the History a single obscure sentence, a single phrase that is not perfectly keyed in tone and content to the paragraph of which it is a part. Superb reading from beginning to end, the History has energy, color, drama, a magnificent sweep of movement, characters of flesh and blood. It commands the reader's mind and heart, and gives him an irresistible sense of participation.

The attitude of Macaulay and his peers toward the past, their acceptance of it on its own terms, was an expression of the romantic spirit. They did their best to enter fully into the thought and feelings of the past, to seize upon its life and spirit, to write of it without condescension, with as much emotional and intellectual sympathy as if they had been writing contemporary history. Much of the brilliance and dramatic force of Carlyle's volumes on the French Revolution, Mommsen's on the disintegration of the Roman Republic, of Froude's on the English Reformation, of Motley's on the rise of the Dutch Republic, are due to the ability of each of these gifted men to write as if he had seen with his own eyes the events he

describes, and had stood shoulder to shoulder with Robespierre and Danton, with Caesar and Cicero, with Sir Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh, with William the Silent and Philip II, King of Spain.

But the Romantic Historians were more than antiquaries of genius. They were deeply immersed in the past, but they were also men of their own time. They had a vision of the past as a prologue to the present. They saw history as a creative and inspiring force, as a guide to the present and a shaper of the future, as the vehicle through which, in the words of the great American historian, Allan Nevins, "each individual (is made) a sharer in the great deeds, ideas and movements of his ancestors." In their eyes, the duty of the historian was not merely to instruct but to inspire, not merely to teach political wisdom but to breed patriotism. In every word Macaulay wrote, one can feel his pride in those whose deeds and character had endowed with nobility the history of England and had made it the great and prosperous country of his own day. The opening words of George Bancroft's History of the United States declared that "It is the object of the present work to...follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country into its present happiness and glory," and for him the American Revolution was the beginning of a "never-ending career of reform and progress" for all mankind. The Romantic Historians shared a feeling of optimism; the grand theme of history was in their view progress toward a secular City of God, toward a goal of universal freedom, an ever more just, ever more rational, ever more perfect ordering of the life and institutions of mankind.

With scarcely any exceptions, the Romantic Historians were not professionals, nor did they look upon themselves as such. And even in their heyday, they did not have the field to themselves. From the 1820's on, another school was in the arena. These were the professionals, the actual or spiritual disciples of Leopold von Ranke, generally regarded as the first and greatest of modern historians. Ranke's primacy in point of time cannot be disputed,

but I think that in range and quality, Theodor Mommsen was his superior. This is a matter of opinion, but it is worthy of note that Mommsen was the only historian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature until it was given to Winston Churchill, 51 years later. What we call the modern or scientific school of historiography has as its point of departure a phrase of Ranke's in the preface of one of his works, published in 1824. He wrote, "History has had assigned to it the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of ages to come. To such lofty functions this work does not aspire. Its aim is merely to show what actually occurred." Those last few words, "what actually occurred," "wie es eigentlich gewesen," have caused the shedding of untold gallons of academic ink, to which I must now add a non-academic drop or two.

What did Ranke mean by "wie es eigentlich gewesen?" As a student, he had received the rigorous training of a classical philologist, the only exact discipline in the humanities that existed in the early years of the nineteenth century. This training led him to perceive that the historical literature of his day, based largely on tradition and relying heavily on imaginative reconstructions, was not history at all but romance, a tissue of inaccuracies, only a pack of tricks, in Voltaire's words, that we play on the dead. In Ranke's view, a true work of history had to be based solidly on the surviving written records of the past: the testimony of competent eyewitnesses, on charters, state papers, diplomatic reports and the like, and that the historian had the duty to establish exact facts by a meticulous analysis and collation of these sources. In my opinion, he meant no more than this. But his dictum, even on the basis of this interpretation, revolutionized historiography. Even the most romantic of his contemporaries felt compelled to conform to it by seeking out collections of documents and copying reams of dim and dusty parchments and papers.

So far, so good, but the Rankean Revolution, like most revolutions, escaped from its author's control and went beyond his intentions.

No one can quarrel with the principle that the validity of a work of history depends in the first instance on its factual accuracy, and if we required no more of a historian than a bare recital of a series of facts and events, mere accuracy would be sufficient. Indeed, in the hands of many of Ranke's disciples, this is what wie es eigentlich gewesen came to stand for; the phrase was twisted into a meaning which Ranke never intended and certainly never followed in his own writings. Under the influence of his supposed doctrine, history was taken out of the hands of the romantic amateurs to become an academic preserve, solidly planted in the universities, and it also became, in theory at least, flawlessly objective and scientific. As a result, the latest novel resumed its old place of honor on the tables of fashionable young ladies. In the words of Professor Trevelyan, Macaulay's great-nephew, "great changes (occurred) in the management of Clio's temple. Her inspired prophets and bards have passed away and been succeeded by the priests of an established church; the vulgar have been excluded from the Court of the Gentiles; doctrine has been defined; heretics have been excommunicated; and the tombs of the aforesaid prophets have been duly blackened by the new hierarchy."

Assuredly, the Romantic Historians had their faults. Their conception of history drifted easily into distortions, especially in the hands of lesser men. They tended to idealize and poetize history, to overemphasize the pageantry of the past, to overdramatize the principal actors as either the embodiment of all the virtues or as utterly evil. Their writings, in the words of a contemporary historian, "encourage(d) a purely theatrical view of the past, as though history were an opera house inhabited by puppets striking noble attitudes preferably in picturesque settings, and quite removed from the ordinary embarrassments and distresses of mortal life." They were not at all scientific, nor even objective. They moralized, sometimes at excessive length, and they judged always with a heavy hand. But they were great artists of the written word, and they wrote with an artist's conscience. In their day they enriched

the world of the mind and of the spirit.

We don't read the Romantic Historians any more. They are old hat, and their works are drum and trumpet history. What history do we read, now that the academic gentlemen hold the field? The answer is, very little. There are, I think, two reasons for this. Firstly, historians no longer write for an educated general public. They write for each other. Lest I be accused of an outsider's bias, I will quote the words of a Professor of History in good standing: "The detailed, analytical history that is the standard product of our academies has little to say to the ordinary man. Indeed, it often seems to have only contempt and scorn for him. Popular means, in the academic lexicon, meretricious. It can hardly be otherwise, for in the asceticism which modern-day historical scholarship imposed upon itself lies the implication that excellence cannot be understood or appreciated by the layman. It is a rite for the initiate, not a means of communication with those 'outside'." This verdict errs on the side of mildness. We have more and better graduate schools, larger libraries, we have microfilm and the tape recorder, we have vast amounts of research, more and larger research grants, more historians, far more writing, and with all this, as far as the world at large is concerned, worse and less usable history.

The second reason for the decline in the fortunes of history is even harder to extenuate. There are honorable exceptions, but the stylistic level of most historical writing, especially in America, runs the gamut from the inept to the atrocious. Stylistic distinction appears to be looked upon with suspicion, as a dangerous flirtation with the Scarlet Woman of popularization. Bishop Mandell Creighton, historian of the Papacy, observed that it is not absolutely necessary to be dull in order to prove that one can write history. On the contrary, as Allan Nevins has remarked, "it is the luminous-minded author...who...writes with color, point and ease; it is the muddleheaded author, who goes wrong on facts and evidence, who also makes the inferior literay statement." The

British historian, C. V. Wedgwood, makes the point even more precisely: "The sense of form," she writes, "the capacity to weigh and use words correctly, the shaping of sentences, and the structure and presentation...are the natural concomitants of the clear, inquiring, disciplined and imaginative mind which is needed for historical research. Style in history is an index to the mind, and... good writing is almost the concomitant of good history." Nevins and Miss Wedgwood imply something that I am sorry to spell out. It seems to me that the stylistic poverty of so much American historical writing is not alone the result of the deplorably poor teaching of English composition in our high schools and colleges; it also indicates that a lax process of selection and insufficiently high intellectual standards have allowed too many poorly qualified candidates to proceed to their doctorates in history and have enabled them to pass on their inadequacies to new generations of students. A man whose writings are a vexation of the spirit lacks the first and essential qualification of a historian and teacher.

As I have mentioned, history, in obedience to Ranke's dictum, turned its face away from the Romantics and became objective. This process, however, was bedeviled by a serious philosophical difficulty which is far from being solved even yet. I doubt if any two historians would agree on the precise meaning of historical objectivity, and to be objective is even more difficult than it is to define the term. If objectivity means anything at all, it means that the historian, whatever his subject, will explore the sources, gather every extant fact related to it, test the facts for validity, and then reproduce them in order, with nothing added or subtracted. But to write history in this way is manifestly impossible. There are simply too many facts on any subject. No historian, even if he were to attain to the years of Methuselah, could gather them all. Hence he must first of all set limits to the scope of his study. Even then, the available facts will be far too many and he will have to go through them like a housewife through attic, discarding facts right and left.

How was the decision made to omit certain topics as not germane to the main subject, and to discard or perhaps to ignore certain facts? Are these the decisions of a disembodied intelligence floating in the ether, or are they made by the historian himself, a fallible human being, the possessor of a certain temperament, the product of a certain culture, of a specific education and training, a unit in a specific social environment? It is of course the historian who decides, and when he does so, he assumes the role of the policeman who directs traffic between "what actually occurred" and his readers. He, and not the facts themselves, is in charge of the proceedings. But this is the negation of pure objectivity. Indeed, we must now recognize that the abstract ideal of complete historical objectivity is impossible of realization.

The impossibility of a literally total historical objectivity becomes even more evident when our historian ventures into the areas which distinguish history properly so-called, from a monastic chronicle, namely the search for causal relationships between seemingly unrelated facts and events, and the drawing of general conclusions from them.

We now find ourselves deep in the Dismal Swamp of the debate on objectivity, and must try to locate dry land. Let us grant that what we are given as history on the printed page is the product of a human intellect. Our historian chooses a subject because it seems important or attractive to him. He defines the subject in time, in space and in scope. He does the research, and decides how far and to what depth he must carry it, where he must use primary sources and where he may rely on work other historians have done before him. In dealing with the sources, he passes judgment on the relative credibility of the materials he finds. As his research proceeds, he decides which facts are essential and germane to his subject, and which facts he may disregard. He determines the degree of importance to be attached to each of his facts in relation to the others, and the pattern in which they are to be presented. He decides what causal relationships, if any, there are between them. And

finally, he decides that the facts he has collected lead to certain conclusions or generalizations, which he then proceeds to state.

A human personality is at work at every step of the process we have described. Leaving aside the question of competence, is it possible for the result of such a process to be entirely objective? In a strict sense, no, for the historian is always present between us and the past, and the historian is a living human being. The facts with which he deals, as Carl Becker has remarked, are neutral; they have no meaning until he brings them to life. But to perform that feat, he must filter them through his intellect, past all his preconceptions and prejudices, some of which are conscious and can be guarded against, while others are wholly instinctive. He has certain attitudes, preferences, interests, sympathies and antipathies, some of which are peculiar to him and others of which he has because he lives at a certain time and in a certain cultural setting. When he writes on some phase of the Civil War, he may well have the multiple bias of a Northerner, a liberal in politics, a member of the white race and of the middle class. He must try not to form judgments based on his dislike of bombastic oratory, of political chicanery and of doctrinaire extremism. He must force himself not to impose his own standards of right and wrong on the actions of men who lived a hundred years ago in a drastically different cultural climate. And he must even learn to admit to himself that some of his likes or dislikes of certain doctrines, institutions, ideas and ideals may not have universal and eternal validity, that they may, in fact, be quite irrational and very, very wrong.

With all these obstacles in his path, can any historian be objective, even in a limited sense? I believe he can be, and if he has integrity, self-respect and professional pride, he will be. But to reach this conclusion, I have performed a semantic somersault. Our objective historian has undergone an odd transformation, like an algebraic number passing through zero; he has become something that looks for all the world like a subjective

historian. Can we permit this? I think we can and we must. There is nothing inherently wrong with subjective history; indeed, it is the only history worth reading. I agree with Sir Charles Oman's opinion that "No great book ever has been, or ever will be, written by a historian who suppressed self...The passionless chronicler... does not produce a readable book." Unless we are willing to call something resembling the Cincinnati Telephone Directory history, we must accept the fact that subjective history is the only kind we are ever likely to get. But we do have the right that our historian, having made the transition from objective to subjective with our consent, should thereafter play the game according to the rules, that he do his work accurately and in good faith, that he interpret his facts judiciously and honestly, and that his conclusions be based on a fair and reasonable appraisal of all the relevant evidence.

Under the most favorable circumstances, a historian works under severe handicaps. I will describe them in Miss Wedgwood's words: "(The historian)," she writes, "gains his knowledge through evidence which, at the very best, is incomplete; which is always contradictory; which raises as many questions as it solves; which breaks off tormentingly just where he needs it most, or yet more tormentingly, becomes ambiguous and dark. He can rarely establish the truth. He can only grope towards it; he gropes, moreover, with an intellect which, being furnished in the twentieth century, finds it extremely difficult to understand any other, which is overconfident, apt to leap to wrong conclusions, unaware of its own shortcomings, or if aware, then unable to make allowances for them. The greatest scholar can never reach more than some kind of partial and personal version of the truth....All the efforts of historical scholarship are ultimately reduced to a mere matter of human opinion." Paced with these problems, our historian should, I think, accept the obligation to reflect their existence in his writings. He has no excuse whatever for intellectual arrogance, for offering us his version of history as if it were fresh from the

top of Mount Sinai, graven in stone on the tablets of the law.

And yet, alas, he frequently does, and therein lies the greatest occupational hazard of the historical profession. If our historian is not a mere antiquary, a harmless collector of anecdotes, then, either consciously or unconsciously, he will study the past for the purpose of discovering not just what happened, but more importantly, why it happened as it did and not otherwise. In other words, his purpose is to find a meaning in history, and that places him on what lawyers call a slippery slope. To begin with, his search for the meaning of a given series of events will necessarily be colored by his knowledge of the outcome; he has read the last chapter of the detective story first. Secondly, he can of necessity only seek and can only find, a meaning which is comprehensible and meaningful to him. And thirdly, if he is a historian worth his salt, he is looking for a meaning that he hopes will have value not only for his contemporaries but for the future as well; he tries to build a bridge of understanding between the past and the future, and when he does that, he adds the special temptations of the missionary to his already heavy burdens.

If our historian's professional conscience is elastic to the smallest degree, the meanings he finds in the past may not be those which his facts legitimately warrant. Like the traveler who returns from abroad with his prejudices confirmed, he is apt to find just the meanings he is looking for. He will then select those facts which support his preconceived ideas, and will ignore those which do not fit, or which actually contradict the meanings he is determined to find.

What kind of history is produced under such circumstances? At the crudest level, this end product is blatant propaganda masquerading as history. We are familiar with the perversions that passed for history in Nazi Germany, with the rubbish that is produced to order in Communist countries to make the past fit the requirements of the latest twist of the party line, and with the pathetic

abortions advertised as "rediscoveries" of black history that in the past year or two have become the academic historians' equivalent of the mini-skirt. These things can be dismissed. They are usually turned out by unimaginative hacks; they are easily recognized for what they are, even by the unsophisticated, and are therefore self-defeating. I suspect that even as propaganda, they are not very successful.

My concern is with a more insidious type of slanted history. Let me describe it in the prophetic words of a great master, Carl Becker, written forty years ago: "...in periods of stress, when the times are thought to be out of joint, those who are dissatisfied with the present are likely to be dissatisfied with the past also. At such times historians, those of the younger generation at least, catching the spirit of unrest, will be disposed to cross-examine the past in order to find out why it did not usher in a better state of affairs, will be disposed, as it were, to sit in judgment on what was formerly done, approving or disapproving in the light of present discontents."

Let us grant at once that in principle, there is nothing wrong with reinterpetations of history, whether they come from an older or a younger generation. On the contrary, the greatest source of the vitality of history, its greatest fascination as an intellectual discipline, is that it does not pronoure any final judgments. The term "verdict of history," dear to the hearts of politicians who have just lost an election, is sheer nonsense. History pronounces no verdicts whatever. Historians do, but their verdicts are binding only for their own generation if they are binding at all; succeeding generations are not foreclosed by any doctrine of stare decisis from pronouncing their own, and to the degree that each of these verdicts, however greatly it may differ from those which came before it, proceeds from the best thought of its time and is based on an honest assessment of the available evidence, it is entirely valid.

This legitimate and indeed fruitful process of reinterpretation is the source of new and

interesting insights. It stimulates thought and opens up new lines of investigation. It adds to the historian's repertoire the techniques and points of view of other disciplines. And even after a given interpretation is largely superseded, it usually leaves behind a permanent addition to the sum total of historical understanding. I can cite as cases in point Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier theory as a key to an understanding of American life and character, and Charles Beard's emphasis on economic considerations as a major factor in the drafting of the Constitution and in the causation of the Civil War.

But by no means are all reinterpretations either legitimate or fruitful. There are simple-minded reinterpretations, which disregard the fact, obvious to any layman, that any historical situation has a complex causation; these concentrate on one cause, and by an arbitrary selection of the evidence, prove, for example, that wars are caused by greedy manufacturers of munitions. Then there are the fairy-tale reinterpretations, produced by historians who have surrendered their brains and judgment to a political ideology, and profess to see all history as a demonstration of its eternal truth. The Marxist reinterpretations of the American past are an example. Then there are the reinterpretations produced by the lovers of paradox, the excessively clever historians, who, in Allan Nevins' words, "reject the obvious...merely because it is obvious, and...present instead some explanation which will give them a reputation for independence, ingenuity and subtlety."

When this last type of reinterpretation is simply a case of a budding historian sowing his professional wild oats, I can find no fault with it. A degree of misapplied virtuosity, of intellectual exhibitionism, is excusable in the young. These are scholarly measles, which the passage of time will usually cure, but not always. I would far rather have eager neophytes whose enthusiasm leads them into wrongheadedness, than prematurely aged fact-collecting drudges. Nor do I have any quarrel with those who project into their appraisal of the issues and conflicts of the past the emotional

impact on themselves of the same or similar issues of their own time, provided they do so with discretion and restraint. As Arthur Schlesinger maintained, the only events of the past about which a historian can be completely impartial are those involving issues about which his generation no longer cares.

But what are we to make of reinterpretations based on hatred? What kind of reinterpretation will be produced by a historian driven by hatred of himself and of his role in society, hatred of the history of his country, hatred of the society in which he lives, hatred of the Western civilization whose traditions he has inherited? What validity is there in a reinterpretation that flows from the historian's blind urge to escape from a rational world into an irrational, purposeless gutter of the intellect, an urge which the French so aptly call envie de boue - a longing for the mud?

These perhaps excessively grim questions came to me last summer, as I read a collection of papers entitled Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History. written by eleven products of our best graduate schools, who, between them, have held or received at least twenty fellowships and research grants. The mechanical craftsmanship of these essays is nothing if not impressive; thus, the lead essay of 26 pages relies on 146 footnotes, occupying 16 pages of very small type, to buttress its thesis that to understand the Revolution, we must erase from our minds the memory of the elite, meaning Samuel and John Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, Madison, etc., who were mere froth on the surface of events; the real history of the Revolution, the learned author contends, can only be written from the point of view of the "powerless, the inarticulate, the poor." The fact that this thesis flies in the face of the evidence and is old hat besides, doesn't seem to bother him.

The New Past historians, whose average age is a shade under 33, mount the barricades to oppose the view, held by most of their elders in

the profession during the past 25 years, that with rare exceptions, Americans have stayed within a narrow band of the political spectrum lying very near the center, that our unquestioned agreements have been far more influential than our occasional disagreements, and that even the radical dissenters, both of the right and of the left, have generally accepted the fundamental validity of the liberal tradition. This is the so-called consensus theory. Those who hold it see as the central theme of American history an instinctive preference for the politics of compromise, a habit of accomodating and harmonizing differing points of view, and the avoidance whenever possible of irreconcilable conflicts of ideologies. The consensus theory is a theory like any other; it is certainly not sacred, and is open to challenge by any historian who disagrees with it and believes that a proper reading of the evidence either fails to support it or proves something different. A challenge of orthodoxy on such grounds invites legitimate historical debate which deepens our understanding of the past and at the same time reaffirms the dignity and value of history as an intellectual discipline.

But this is not the kind of challenge the New Past historians have in mind. Rational debate is not their strongest point. There is one honorable exception, to whom we might properly address the time-honored question, "What is a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" but his ten colleagues see not the consensus theory as the enemy, but the American past in toto, inasmuch as it has led to an American present that they find intolerable. Thus, four of the essays take a fall out of American foreign policy from 1870 to the present, with a few extra swipes at the Cold War; it appears that by a shameless use of the weapons of economic exploitation, aggression and a provocative foreign policy, behind the false and hypocritical front of our pretended unselfishness and benevolence, we have created an empire, and are determined to keep it regardless of cost and morality. It appears too that the Monroe Doctrine, the Open Door Policy in China, and our sanctimonious advocacy of peace have had the same motive: a desire for profits. It appears, finally,

that we fought the Axis Powers in World War II not because we had any moral or ideological quarrel with them, but because they were a threat to our pocketbooks. On this, we can best comment in the words of Lord Castlereagh about someone who professed to like sweet champagne; Lord Castlereagh remarked, "A man who will say that, will say anything. "

One topic is conspicuously absent from Towards a New Past. It does not contain a single essay on the Civil War, which, more than any other event in our history, negates the consensus theory. The omission is understandable. The spectacle of the North going to war without a single sordid motive, out of an idealistic devotion to the Union and a humanitarian zeal to eradicate slavery, does not fit the image of the American past and American character as these historians choose to see it. Nevertheless, this omission is a great personal disappointment to me. I was looking forward to reading what a New Past historian might have to say on such Civil War problems as the Copperhead movement, resistance to the draft, and agitation for peace without victory, subjects which he and his colleagues are exceptionally well qualified to discuss with authority.

I do not intend to review Towards a New Past in detail, but one last point about it is worth noting. One of its persistent themes is that there has always been a mysterious force at work in America to keep the doors of opportunity tightly shut in the faces of the poor and downtrodden, that the thrust of our institutions has by deliberate design been such as to make upward social and economic mobility for the lower classes as difficult as possible. We are assured of this in utter seriousness by historians the majority of whom, judging by their names, cannot be more than two or at most three generations removed from Ellis Island or Castle Garden. This, if you please, is the New Past.

The dust jacket of Towards a New Past depicts, appropriately enough^ the American Eagle cut up into large chunks and about to be speared by

a steel pen. I suggest that an even more appropriate design would have been a portrait of Clio, the muse of history, with her garments torn and befouled, and sporting the black eye she acquired in her encounter with the lads and lassies of the New Past.

But why single out Towards a New Past? The following is from a New York Times review of a book on the role of mathematics in mental growth: "To those great minds who view the 'three r's' as the be-all and the end-all, everything else comes under the heading of 'frills.' Indeed, even mathematics needs careful circumscription. It means the good old curriculum from addition to long division with perhaps some excursion into fractions and decimals for those with ambitions to become Congressmen. Something as erudite as algebra is seriously suspect." This is what Oscar Wilde called hitting below the intellect. We seem to be living in the era of the Higher Insanity. I expect any day to learn that one of our young geniuses has discovered Black Mathematics, or that he has been granted a fellowship to rewrite Quantum Mechanics from the point of view of the "powerless, the inarticulate, the poor."

If we live in an intellectual climate in which outrageously false statements like the one I have just quoted can be made with the evident expectation of being taken seriously, then it is not surprising that some historians too should join the cultural delinquents in diving into a morass of unreason. What these people, the spiritual heirs, if you please, of Gibbon and Macaulay, of Ranke and Mommsen, of Bancroft and Prescott, are serving up to us, and presumably teaching their students, is a bitter travesty of history; it is history in a Hallowe'en mask.

This, I think, is a sorry spectacle. We have noted that the historical sense of the nineteenth century was a response to a need for certainties in a confused and confusing world. Our grandfathers had an instinctive grasp of the truism that no society can move forward in a rational way until its members have gained a comprehension of

the historical forces that have produced that society. Our world is even more confused and confusing than theirs. Is the New Past intended to give us the certainties we need, or does it demonstrate that the new generation of historians have abdicated from the highest potentialities of their craft? Are they telling us that the only lessons history has to teach are the vicious distortions they read into it? Is their attitude here to stay? Being old enough to be an optimist, I think not. I cannot bring myself to believe that history, in the words of the Prophet Ezekiel, "is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty ground."

We hear much nowadays about alienation, the loss of a sense of identity among the young. I hope and trust that history will eventually re-discover one of its finest reasons for being, the privilege of giving the young, and even the old, an essential element of their identity: the inspiring story of the past whose heirs they are. Robert Oppenheimer has written that "in those high undertakings where man derives strength and insight from the public excellence, we have been impoverished. We hunger for nobility; for the rare words that harmonize simplicity and truth." I believe that history can be a facet of Oppenheimer's "public excellence", that it can give us a sense of nobility and the "rare words that harmonize simplicity and truth," and I can think of no better reason for continuing as a Sunday historian.

Stephen Z. Starr
