

RANDOM REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY  
OF HISTORY IN SOUTH AFRICA

BY

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GRAHAMSTOWN  
RHODES UNIVERSITY

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INAUGURAL LECTURE DELIVERED AT  
RHODES UNIVERSITY

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THE STUDY OF HISTORY IN SOUTH AFRICA

I had planned on the occasion of my Inaugural Lecture to speak about my researches in mediaeval history, to which, almost surreptitiously I have returned since my appointment to the Chair of History at Rhodes University. This would have been construed, if not as self-indulgence, then certainly as escapism by those whose studies it is at once my duty and my pleasure to provoke. Instead the theme or more accurately the fugue of my lecture, is what threatens to be a disappearing species, namely "*homo integer*", the whole man about whom it is the business of the historian to write. It is possible now, as never in the past, to pick up books purporting to contain history, and yet not find in them any individual mentioned by name. Or if a name creeps in like that of Yorick in Hamlet it is a label to a skull called a skull. An example of this is to be found for instance in the Penguin best seller, "What Happened in History." by Professor V. Gordon Childe. While it is true that in the text names do occur, in the whole index, only one man is cited, and that merely as adjunct to a theorem—"Pythagoras' theorem". We can use the index to find out about Symbols, Querns, Gods, Women, Camels (for transport) and even "Small Change." But if we seek to understand how one of the greatest thinkers of antiquity sought to solve the questions with which the public affairs of his day confronted him, then we scour the text and find this: "A champion of oligarchy and a defender of slavery, Aristotle appears as the mouthpiece of the class from which his patrons and pupils were recruited and as the victim of the contradictions in the economy of the City-state which were all too apparent in his day."<sup>(1)</sup> Reading back a little, we do admittedly find that

<sup>(1)</sup> V. G. Childe, *What happened in History*, p. 223.

this "victim" and this "mouthpiece" was in fact a man, and one of "comprehensive interests and encyclopaedic erudition." One presumes that he lived, because the author states that in 321 B.C. he died, and that "the vast Aristotelian corpus consists of notes of lectures". It would seem that in death we shall not be divided.

It is true, that to many of the questions which Aristotle asked, he found answers, especially in the field of science, which are now proven to be wrong, and that the veneration in which he was held, a position not altogether dissimilar to that accorded to scientists today, was at times a shackle to intellectual progress. But to go on to assert that by the Middle Ages, Aristotle's system with all its blemishes was virtually incorporated in the sacred canon of the Christian Church is demonstrably false.<sup>(2)</sup> In the first place, Aristotelian science was unknown as a system in the west until the latter half of the 12th Century, and by that time, the Christian Church had a pretty clear notion of what were and what were not sacred canon as distinct from views consonant with those canon. In the second place, the Church, for reasons which if not defensible, are like all errors comprehensible, condemned as heresy parts of Aristotle's Physics, which were held to limit the omnipotence of God. God, the theologians argued could create a void, He could create an infinite universe; ergo Aristotle's Physics being the work of mortal man, was wrong in parts. Already before the condemnation of 1277, there was a small group of critics who questioned Aristotle's theories of motion, and from the 14th Century onwards, the schools of Paris and Oxford concentrated on finding alternative explanations of the motion of projectiles and falling bodies. Nicholas of Oresme was to proclaim that God might well have started off the universe like a clock and left it to run itself. Jean Buridan, in the same century began to work out a theory of impetus which was to influence the thinking of both Leonardo da Vinci and Galileo, both of whom had access to and used his work.<sup>(3)</sup> So far from being incorporated in the Canon of the Church, then, parts of the Aristotelian Physics were put beyond the pale of orthodoxy because they were not consonant with the mediaeval concept of the omnipotence of God.

What is remarkable about Aristotle is, not that he erred, but that, confronted with a complex society and a tremendous advance in the frontiers of human learning, he had the courage to ask questions as well as to face facts and to ask how man would use his creations to serve human ends. The questions he asked were the kind of questions which man, whatever his social

<sup>(2)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>(3)</sup> H. Butterfield, *Origins of Modern Science*, pp. 1-14.

forms, needs constantly to reformulate. Most of his tentative answers can only be related to the city state, and are only comprehensible against the background of the Hellenic world. But the questions he asked, though inflected by local circumstances will I believe remain pertinent all through time, for, even if an answer, absolutely right and therefore timeless could be found, its transliteration would depend on agents who, like us, are both mortal and fallible. So far from being a mouthpiece, if metaphor must be found, he was and is the Grand Inquisitor.

I do not want to be misunderstood, save only perhaps as a cat may be, who looks at a King and finds the Crown somewhat awry. What I challenge, is certainly not the author for whose work I have profound admiration, nor the book, though it is not unimpeachable, but the presumption of its best selling title. It implies that all that happened in the past is knowable and known to Professor Childe, that history ceased at the point when Professor Childe laid down his pen, and that the data of archaeology, namely, solid remainders, are an infallible index, when in truth they are little more than is the tombstone to the memory of him whom it commemorates. *De mortuis nil nisi monumenta.*

There are things that archaeology cannot tell us, just as there are things that history cannot tell us, but inasmuch as history is the story of man, his thoughts and his actions of which archaeological remains are but samples, the difference between the two studies is not that between certainty and uncertainty, but that between what is true in a prescribed field and that which may bring us a little nearer truth itself. I do not claim that history proves anything or that it can provide formulae for the resolution of our dilemmas. It can perhaps suggest the evils we should avoid, and the principles we should seek to follow; it cannot secure that we profit from the demonstration. But it can challenge our dogmas, chasten our arrogance and temper our egoism. Above all it can prevent us from the perpetual temptation to confuse the passions of the transient moment with the certitude of the eternally right and just.

*Sic quoque dissimiles ad finem tendimus omnes  
Nemo pedem retrahit quo sibi limes erit—*

*Likeness is none between us, (yet) we go to the selfsame end.  
The foot that hath crossed that threshold shall no man  
withdraw again.<sup>(4)</sup>*

History then is the story of mortal men and women, and I do not bother to add the conventional "in society" because short

<sup>(4)</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, trans. Helen Waddell, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, 1948.

of ship-wrecked mariners, hermits and anchorites, I cannot think of men and women who did not in fact live in society. Even Simon Stylites descended occasionally from his pillar, and his dicta as Toynbee has pointed out exercised a profound influence over a society much wider than that of his contemporaries in the East Roman Empire. His society had a temporal as well as a spatial dimension, and his ideas contributed to the ordering of men's lives long after he was dead. It is because I see in history the story of men that I am profoundly disturbed by current trends in the newer universities, particularly in America and in South Africa. In the *schools* of both continents, the teaching of history has given place to pedagogic-all-sorts called social studies. Children are asked to study the world, physical and social, through adult eyes, and implicitly to accept two dogmas which I regard as pernicious. The one is that the story of progress is the story of man's adaptation to environment. If this were so, western man would seem to have lagged behind the Esquimaux who managed this much very efficiently centuries ago. The tradition of the west is not of adaptation to but of rebellion against environment, and as Toynbee has suggested, civilisation grows by successive responses to the challenge of environments identified and adapted by itself. The other dogma is more serious. It is the calm assumption that writers of text books can take their view of the present, arbitrarily select a few facts from the past, and then claim that an arbitrary definition is proven by an arbitrary selection. In the universities of both countries, I consider that there is a drift in the same direction, and, covered by the quasi-parliamentary privilege which this occasion has the sole merit of affording, I propose to speak about two features which seem to me to be crippling the study of the humanities, not specifically at Rhodes University, but in South African Universities generally.

The first is this. The tendency of university regulations is to make available to students with not even a rudimentary outline of history against which to balance it, a specialised approach to a specialised branch of historical study. If one can imagine such a dire calamity as that in a thousand years' time all records of civilisation in this country will have perished save only the university calendars, then one can picture posterity calling this "the land where the Jumblies lived". They, you will recall, went to sea in a sieve. That, I suggest is how Arts students are condemned to venture in our universities. We make a sieve with strands of many kinds of wire—ecclesiastical history, art history, constitutional history, history of literature, history of political ideas, history of native administration, history of economic ideas and institutions, and at no point secure that they

are woven into a good, strong life-saving cable. It is possible to study any or all of these things, without as it were a stout flooring of general history, and without any approach to the understanding of the historical process as made by the interaction of all these different emphases on the lives of men. This is educationally unsound, and since I decline absolutely to recognise departmentalised man, within the small amount of time allotted to the study of history, I endeavour to teach the full mocking profile of the human story, and not merely the legs of Ozymandias. I do not plead that more history should be taught, though I think it should, but I do urge that the study of the humanites should be so integrated, that homo sapiens, is recognised as the most complex of all created things, and not partitioned unto the  $n^{\text{th}}$  power of academic regulations. Almost any study on the Arts side, pursued steadily and integrated broadly, can give a richer interpretation of man, than successive bites at his fictitious intellectual anatomy. It may be that we should revert to an intermediate examination, and thereafter allow students to do one or two things well. For I venture to think that the first university in this country which makes possible liberal, which necessarily means thorough teaching in any one of the humanities, will not only attract students, but make a positive contribution to the problems of this land. It is not my province to advance solutions, but it is my province as a historian to state my belief that academic regulations in this country are making of studies in the Arts, a thing of shreds and patches, and to reiterate my known belief that on the wise teaching of the humanities may well depend the future of mankind itself. I am minded, as I say this, of Collingwood's provocative Essay on Metaphysics; in particular of the concluding and characteristic thrust: "When Rome was in danger, it was the cackling of the sacred geese that saved the Capitol. I am only a professional goose, consecrated with cap and gown . . . but cackling is my job, and cackle I will".<sup>(5)</sup>

The second thing which perturbs me, and others more able than I to express it, is the growing tendency to approach History much as the Victorian school teacher might do in an object lesson: to demonstrate that it shows or teaches that, or illustrates some mechanistic law of historical locomotion. Unlike the school teacher, who, given a lump of iron ore, did not attempt to demonstrate that it was clay, the modern theorists are given to taking history and moulding into their own lay figures. With the possible exception of A. J. Toynbee's *Study of History*, all theories, or philosophies of history, however conflicting the philosophical premises from which they severally start, have

<sup>(5)</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford, 1940.

certain features in common. The theory is evolved and expounded as a philosophy before history is examined. Secondly, with the spotlight, often admittedly, the brilliant spotlight of the theory, they probe about the moraine of history, looking for hard spots that will support the theory. What stands is labelled proof; what does not, is by-passed, logically, as irrelevant and almost irreverent. Thirdly, because the examination is either from effect to cause, or some effects to some causes, for growth which is erratic, they substitute a chain of human development wherein each link determines its neighbour. Fourthly, having established an operative system in the past and the present they claim the necessary extension of it into the future. Men are given a broad hard-metalled road to tread, their sole liberty being to vary their pace or close their eyes. They do not stray because they cannot stray. They have ceased to be men and have become part of MAN, propelled by mythical forces summed up as History. On such a track, there is no GIANT DESPAIR or SLOUGH OF DESPOND, equally there is no HOPEFUL and no ENCHANTED LAND. On the one hand these theories give us a feeling of almost God-like power, because in accepting them we have solved the riddle of life; on the other hand they give us a tremendous easement of spirit for as individuals we are no longer responsible for what happens. We have not, each one of us to test ourselves on a Pilgrim's Progress but merely to stumble along on a pilgrimage where the tail of the past logically propels the head to its destination. If superstition be defined as the belief that things outside man interpose to control men, surely this is superstition.

To a certain extent, historians are to blame for the trespasses they have invited, inasmuch as they themselves used to claim that history was an exact science, that in due course they could establish an objective structure of facts about the past, and thereby make available all there was to know about the past. If historians were, as some claimed, infallible, there was some prospect that laws of history could be built up, not a priori but empirically. They overestimated the evidence and underestimated the difficulties of interpretation. As a result, they did more than expose themselves to the logicians; they made themselves vulnerable to counter-attack which the historians launched against the logicians. The historicists, or, as I noticed them recently described 'the aggressive subjectivist-presentist-relativists'<sup>(6)</sup> argue that all history is contemporary history, and mean thereby a variety of things since each is not only his own historian but

<sup>(6)</sup> Quoted in a footnote to article in *American Historical Review*, April, 1950, by C. M. Destler, from W. S. Holt's article in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, June, 1940.



his own psycho-analyst. Of their dicta these seem to be the most significant. They claim that our awareness of the past depends on our contemporary experiences, and that these condition at once the things we want to know about the past, and the way we know them. Secondly they assert that changes in historical interpretation are not as the historian deludes himself, due to the discovery of fresh evidence, but to changes in the contemporary social complex and their reaction on the mind and experience of the historian. Thirdly they claim that a fixed and finished past with its points objectively mapped is inconceivable since it depends on present evidence organised by present experience. Changes in the interpretation of history are then due to successive reorganisations of successive social complexes, in the minds of successive historians. There is not time, nor is this the occasion to trace in detail, as perhaps I should do, the varying inflexions of historicism given by each of the historicists. They reach a *reductio ad absurdum*, in Becker's lively and stimulating book, "Every man his own Historian."

"It should be a relief to recognise that every generation, our own included, will, must inevitably, play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own piece of mind."<sup>(7)</sup> This is but a grand way of formulating the London street cry:

*"Tuppence coloured, penny plain  
Try your luck and come again."*

Each man has his private view of the past. But whether one uses the language of the Patrician or the Plebs, the various theories of historical relativism which have behind them the weight of Croce, Dilthey, Mannheim and Beard, and in somewhat more disciplined form the philosophical system of Oakeshott's "Experience and its Modes" cannot lightly be brushed aside.<sup>(8)</sup> But I think we should not brush aside either the experiences of Benedetto Croce himself. For the complex of social ideas to which Croce's experience was related, was a liberal one: the complex of social ideas to which Mussolini related his thought was Fascist, and as Mussolini by a political coup, threw the force of the State behind Fascist ideas and Croce was driven into exile, Power was the arbiter.

In this country, the theories of relativism present problems which no teacher of history, and indeed no citizen dare ignore. If by society, the relativists mean as they claim, those in the midst of whom the historian lives in the sense that he shares their ideologies, then on that reckoning, there are three societies and not one in this country. If historical relativism were pushed to its logical conclusion in South Africa at a minimum estimate,

<sup>(7)</sup> C. L. Becker, *Everyman his own Historian*, p 253.

<sup>(8)</sup> M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its modes*, Cambridge, 1933.

there would be three schools of historical writing: Nationalist, British and Native. Each would be equally right in relation to his respective society, for, to paraphrase Croce the false is simply that which does not respond to the effective demands of intellectualised social experience. At the moment, in all our universities in this country, there are traditions of scholarship which are relative only to an absolute concept of what is true. University lecturers do not substitute an autobiography of their intuitive processes for an honest academic study, and they refrain from treating history as a functional relative. In the schools, the position is not so firm. In my opinion two concessions have already been made to a concept of education as functional and relative to a social group: the one is the Bantu Education Act; the other is the substitution of Social Studies for History and Geography in the schools.

In America, the new theories of Historiography, and the increasing emphasis in the schools on social studies certainly have moved in parallel chronological planes and would seem to be related in what may come to be regarded as the Plasticine Age of Modern Thought. In 1946, the Report of the Committee on Historiography, (Bulletin No. 54 of the Social Research Council) was drawn up by a team of American Historians, and the opening chapter by Charles A. Beard is to be taken as the official point of conversion in America. This made explicit what had been implicit in much of American writing for more than a generation; since 1946, relativism provides the key, not yet to all, but certainly to much American speculation. On the one hand American opinion seems to demand that historians should work with the social scientists to define social values, on the other hand that they should relate their writing to social values which theoretically have still to be discovered. This looks like the modern version of the chicken and the egg. I do not like it. For if History is to survive as functional and relative to society, we have to ask whose society? and which? We have to ask whether this is not "old priest writ large" and whether we are not going to get in all thought a series of geocentric universes. More, when men speak of society as the gravitational centre of thought, they mean the state which alone has power to enforce if necessary social ideas which it identifies with itself. In practice to speak about the social relativism of the historian, is to think about the political relativism of the historian, and I shall only believe to the contrary when some American Universities sponsor as their text "History of the American Frontier", written by a Red Indian in the light of his social complex, a "History of Political Persecutions in Democracies",

written preferably by a Virginian, and a "History of American Capitalism", written by a Marxist. The early intuitionists began by extending to history their theories of aesthetics: they visualised the historian as artist and poet, free to create in his own right. But their successors, who with a smattering of physics, delved into social relativity without a prior injection of moral philosophy, need to think again.<sup>(9)</sup> It is one thing to accept that there is a subjective element in all thought, and to accept that the experience of the individual is enriched by his social milieu, it is another thing to state that all historical thinking is subjective and relative and that the only society is the contemporary society into which the historian is tossed by fate. If one is going to go the whole hog in relativism, it is just as sound and probably wiser to argue that when I read Ovid I belong to a Roman world, and my ideas, or to be truly relativist, my experience, is then illuminated by the Augustan world of Ovid. Why not go further, and argue, as is possibly correct, that since I can think about Ovid while I drink a cup of tea, I am twice blessed — with the joys of the Augustan and the comforts of modern society!

On the one hand then, stand the logicians; on the other hand, the historicists, prepared like the saplings of Sinis the Pinebender to pull and rend the historian asunder. So far he has proved a tough victim. Most of the people who write about the nature of historical speculation do not attempt to write common or garden history. They dabble in archaeology or the history of ideas, and eschew drudgery and its attendant discipline. I should state my own position like this. The study of history, like any other academic study, is a quest towards truth; unlike other studies, its chief concern is with the thought and actions of men in the past. I make this distinction between thought and action because I disagree with Collingwood's supposition that action is the product of and therefore the clue to thought.<sup>(10)</sup> To the contrary, action may be the sport of chance; it may be the reflex movement of habit or the wild gesture of rage. Time for the Historian is the fixed firmament of his thinking. The procession of events is not a logical sequence, but a series of causal sequences which may or may not, in whole or in part, encapsulate<sup>(11)</sup> into a causal sequence. What has been completed in the past, is for all time irrevocable. The men whose deeds and writings have left the traces which we call evidence, have perished. Shakespeare was not Homer on a repeat programme,

<sup>(9)</sup> C. L. Becker, *op. cit.* p. 252: "The form and significance of remembered events, like the extension and velocity of physical objects, will vary with the time and place of the observer".

<sup>(10)</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, "Epilegomena", Oxford, 1946.

<sup>(11)</sup> Term used by Collingwood in his *Autobiography*, Oxford, 1938, p. 98.

nor was Napoleon a re-incarnation of Alexander the Great. But though the authors of actions perish, some of their actions which for good or ill reacted on the lives of their contemporaries, flow into a causal sequence. This is nevertheless an open inheritance which their successors can accept, modify, reject, or perish in rejecting. True, the majority of men accept out of habit and without thought, but there never has been a time when someone or other did not kick against the traces of the past. Even in complex modern societies we do have an element of choice: with our superior scientific techniques and economic resources we have indeed potentially a wider margin of choice than our predecessors. For instance, if we wanted to do so, and I think I could make out a case for it, we could build Pyramids for our Prime Ministers. If we wanted to we could sell all that we have and give to the poor; or like Schliemann we could save all we earn and seek to discover Troy or some other Holy Grail. "It is in ourselves that we are thus and thus."

The historian then, has not one but three kinds of evidence. Firstly evidence or traces which describe happenings at point *x* in time. Secondly, dependent on one, beginnings without endings, or more properly without survival, by this I mean institutions or ideas which did not mature but were stunted at some point in their development. These are the lost expeditions of human enterprise, or in Spencerian idiom, "dead bones and skulls of men whose lives have gone astray." They are often the most fascinating part of history, interesting to the historian by virtue of their mortality; interesting to all men because to dwell on the charms of the might have been is by imagination, the heritage of all. Thirdly, and also dependent on *one*, the historian has endings and beginnings, that is to say, institutions and ideas which have survived into the living present. It may be argued that the survival and continued growth of institutions is itself evidence of their merit or social utility, that society is judge of its own needs. But what the judge says, however wisely, is not evidence, and this kind of evidence, no less than in class II is incomprehensible, and in that sense unknowable apart from the evidence in class I. The problem for the historian is not *how* the steam engine in South Africa works, but why the steam engine, which was invented in England comes to be in South Africa, and why the steam engine is here, and not some other things. But if the steam engine were not here, it would still be the historian's duty to follow up the evidence of the invention of steam engines discoverable in class I. This, to his credit, is also the interest of the man in the street who enjoys lost causes quite as much as present results. I recall for instance, one of the many delightful passages in A. J. Toynbee's "Study of

History". He describes how a cultural relations officer, sent by Mussolini to America, in the thick of the Abyssinian War, was politely frozen out by the student audiences he was called upon to address. American officials worked hard to provide an antidote to his discomfiture, and amongst other things took him to the Museum and showed him a rare treasure, an early 18th Century Bible translated into Indian dialect. For the first and only time, the Italian smiled pointedly and asked the one embarrassing question, "But where are these Red Indians now?". I recall too one of the S.M.T.<sup>(12)</sup> bus drivers on tour from Edinburgh to the Trossachs who, after a gory and gloating and painfully accurate account of the Battle of Bannockburn which he told with much glee to his Sassenach passengers, concluded his narrative thus, "Aye, and it's a strange thing, there's more English than Scots in Bannockburn the noo." Invariably a Sassenach rose to the bait and was goaded into uttering the kind of Ah! which implies that the verdict of history is indeed a just verdict. The delighted driver would turn to deliver the last word as only a Scot can deliver it, "Aye, under the ground."

I suggest then, that a society if indeed it can ever know itself as a society, certainly cannot know itself by current analyses of existing institutions, and that for posterity, what is *not* in our present will be as significant as what is. I think that what I have called the first class of evidence, is basic to historical thinking, and that the dead ends of Class II are as important as the live wires of Class III. Granted then that written evidence of the past is that without which there can be no history, what is the quality of that evidence? The historicists deny its objective existence and the possibility of its objective exploration. I do not propose to go into the contortions of discussing either theories of vision or theories of knowledge, but to state the common sense presuppositions and disciplines of my craft.

Firstly, it is true, and the historian admits it, that the surviving evidence is incomplete, and its survival or otherwise is often due to sheer chance. Secondly, the evidence, that is the traces of past activity, has an objective existence which is quite independent of my thinking about it. The wording of the Albert Memorial no less than the monstrosity itself, would not otherwise so stubbornly have defied the thoughts of three generations of Londoners. In the same way, evidence of title deeds to property in Grahamstown purchased in 1854 was evidence in a law suit in the 1920's. It was objective in that neither the contemporary thinking of the plaintiff nor that of the defendant, could, without physical act, alter the statements inscribed on these deeds. Thirdly, there are rules for testing whether a document is or is

<sup>(12)</sup> Scottish Motor Traction Company.

not what it purports to be. The process is highly technical and it is scientific. Fourthly, there are also established procedures for gauging with reasonable certainty whether what is written or printed on the document, is or is not credible. Here the procedure is analogous to that of the law courts, and it is as infallible, at least, as the process of the courts, which when confronted with six conflicting versions, nevertheless return one verdict and not six verdicts. True, the historian cannot cross-examine, but having very often more evidence than that available at the time to contemporaries, is often in a better, not a worse position than contemporaries to judge. For instance, only last week I came across a verdict, or more correctly an official opinion of the Attorney General at Cape Town on land titles at Salem, which he would certainly not have given had he had available to him evidence which is available to me.<sup>(13)</sup>

These four things: the admittedly fortuitous survival of evidence, its objective existence, the science of testing, and what I may presume to call the forensic of assessing, I take to be the disciplines of my craft and I assert that they not only make it possible to reconstruct what occurred, but have become so much a part of the historian's thinking that they emancipate him from the hypnosis of social forms. There are many kinds of contemporary thinking and experience, but any significant thinking is that of the individual. Society is a concept. The individual is real. When Society can write symphonies and paint frescoes, then Society may consider that it can write history and not before. And when I find that a society has an objective existence which can survive the removal of every individual from it, then and then only will I concede its translation from concept to concrete (in which it will probably be then embedded).

But, it will be argued, the historian must do more than reconstruct a narrative from the evidence, he must trace cause and effect, he must interpret. Narrative, the historicist argues, is mere chronicle, real history is intuitive, like water divining (the metaphor is mine). Here my answer is clear. The historian is bound by a *Trinoda Necessitas*. The basic job is to get the facts straight, and narrative is prior to interpretation in every sense of the word prior. Then, and only then can the historian venture to interpret, and where possible to relate cause and effect. His task is to express but not to dictate judgments which can never be more than the decision of one mind which however highly trained, and because highly trained, will never masquerade either as the omniscience of God, or as a camouflaged social conscience.

<sup>(13)</sup> Cape of Good Hope Blue Book, *Respecting a Separation of the Eastern and Western Provinces*, Cape, 1947, pp. 151-2.

I should like, if you will bear with me, briefly to illustrate these three points. Let us look at a common or garden narrative. This vacation I have, through the courtesy of the City authorities, been looking into the records of the Municipal Commissioners, who from 1837 onwards, began the organisation of municipal life in Grahamstown. The records are complete, and afford a perfect articulation of the administration of the town. Here was a small group of men, storekeepers and tradesmen in the main, who met weekly to handle civic business. Civic sense did not descend like a pentecostal gift; neither did the Commissioners find it easy to cope with dilatory colonial officials, evasive rate-payers, muddle-headed market masters, and the eight ward masters whose zealous listing of complaints made up a good part of each week's business. It was an onerous, often a disheartening business. The total income to be expected from rates at 1/- in the pound, was if everyone paid, of little more than £700, so that for any large ventures, like the water tank in Bathurst Street, subscription lists were opened. There was a small-pox scare in 1841, a war scare in 1842, and war with a vengeance in 1846 when Commissioner Joshua Norden was killed in action at the farm Begelly. By the middle of 1846, all the clerk could do was to enter in the minute book "every source of municipal revenue is now closed." But in the midst of alternating prosperity and panic, the day to day jobs had to be done. The water supply for example was such a difficulty that it almost flows through the minute book itself. Water ran along open furrows with tanks and wells at convenient points. Householders had to be warned not to run off channels for their private supply without paying the fee of a pound. Women especially in the upper end of New Street had to be warned not to wash clothes in the public streams, and butchers had to be taught not to be so casual in the disposal of their offal. It was not until 1846 that the butchers came to heel and agreed that their offal was to be removed to the high ground 300 yards from the Vlei north of the burial ground.

It is small wonder that every effort was made to substitute a pipe line for the open furrows. After much hesitation at so large a venture, tenders were sought. Three inch, cast iron pipes could be bought from Levick and Sherman in Cape Town, but the 6 inch pipes for the main leads had to come from an English foundry. Negotiations were opened with Theophilus Richards of Birmingham with whom the Commissioners continued henceforward to deal. The immediate problems were not merely to raise the money, but to transfer it with the minimum expense. It was finally agreed to place Wesleyan or Glasgow Missionary Society Bills within three months of the contract—a neat little example this of the unsuspected role of the missionary in the economic

development of the Province. Laying the pipes when at length they arrived nearly stirred up a hornet's nest, for the Commissioners proposed to place the first line along the South side of High Street. Immediately the North side of High Street petitioned against this, and the frontier war of the pipes was only solved by the formula of Solomon, they were placed fairly and squarely in the centre of the street.

By small shifts, sober finance, but no flinching from public needs, by 1847, in the very year when in Britain the shocking revelations of the Health of Towns Commission Report were exposing the defects in sanitary conditions and water supply in the great industrial centres there, Grahamstown laid its iron pipes.

Now no great philosophic principles are involved in this; no epic gushes from iron water pipes. That I will readily concede. I am quite prepared to allow this to be labelled by the historicists as mere chronicle, for so as presented it is. I am not though prepared to be informed that I do not really know it happened. Nor am I prepared to have it explained to me that my process of thinking was dictated by contemporary experience. I know perfectly well why I went to the City Hall. I went firstly out of curiosity because I am interested in documents, secondly I went to find out if there were any traces of Robert Godlonton's activities in the municipal records. There were. Quite amusing ones. Having studied the documents I also think I am entitled to state that in their way, they are just as fascinating a record of the past efforts of men as is for instance, van Riebeeck's Journal which I know and possess, and also that life in South Africa as it is today has many and not one single point of origin.

Or consider, however briefly, the second task, that of seeking to relate cause and effect. Clearly the historian cannot proceed as a laboratory technician, by trial and error, or by planned experiment. For every event is a unique happening and every actor a single creation. There may be analogies. There can be no repetitions. There are challenges to thought but no complete symmetry in the answers which the historian gives to the questions he confronts. More. "Cause" and "Effect" so often posed as Siamese twins seem to me to have for the historian neither a single nor a conjoint existence, or even an identity save as a notion. One cannot picture causes on one side and consequences on another, since they flow through events, and events are but the actions of men, and often quite irrational. History is not an equation, but drama, now comic now tragic with the varying pitch and tension of life as we know it. I do not know the causes of Leonardo da Vinci, and I certainly should not care to state the consequences of John Calvin. Truth is I



cannot teach text book history very well, for it always boils down to a horrid little jingle in my head.

*One, two, three, four, five  
Reasons why he was alive  
Seven, eight, I'm out of breath,  
Consequences of his death.*

And since further, without being didactic and tedious, I cannot analyse here an epoch of history, I will reduce my problem to its simplest form. Imagine that I have discovered and tested documentary proof that King Alfred did in fact burn a batch of cakes at 2 p.m. in a peasant's hut. It would be legitimate to ask what caused Alfred to burn the cakes: Possibly the woman's fire was too hot; possibly the woman stayed out gossiping too long; possibly Alfred preferred to eat burned cakes and did it deliberately; possibly he was tired and went to sleep; possibly at that time he had a streaming cold and could neither smell nor see very well. All these are possible reasons for the burning of cakes as you may test in any kitchen. Suppose that in my passion for exactitude I went further, and worked out a statistical analysis of the causes and incidence of cake burning, and with due calculation and allowance for probable error, I ascertained that  $x$  burnt cakes were due to this factor, and  $y$  to that etc. That moreover, 12.40 p.m. was the time when the greatest number of small cakes was burned and 3.30 p.m. the time when big cakes were most likely to be burned. Should I get any nearer to an infallible answer to my problem: Why did King Alfred burn the cakes at 2 p.m.? I think not. Suppose further that unconvinced, I explored the possibility of a cyclical movement in the incidence of cake burning. I could recall that in America, there was an institution known as the "Foundation for the study of cycles"; and that it had discovered that "atmospheric ozone as measured in Paris and London, varies in what appears to be the same cycle as that of tent caterpillars, salmon, lynx and deaths from heart disease in U.S.A. and Canada."<sup>(14)</sup> If I were able to tack cake burning on to the lynx, the caterpillar and the salmon would I then be nearer to a solution? I think not. It would be wiser and rational to argue like this: from other written evidence, we know that Alfred was conscientious, that he respected other people's property, that he was courteous; we know that at the time this incident occurred, he was gravely perturbed about his Kingdom and the probability is that he forgot the lesser in the greater worry.

You may feel this is absurd. Certainly I intended it to be so. I also intended it to show what seem to be the limitations of a great deal of social research, excellent though it is. I do not

<sup>(14)</sup> E. Huntington. *Mainsprings of Civilisation*, 1945, p. 492.

think the historian's task will alter, though in many respects it will be easier when, in hypothetical years to come he looks back on our time with its wealth of economic and social data. The historian will still want to ask what manner of men thought like this, and why with all the wealth of data, men still continued to act like men and not like that Caliban of the calculators, a rational animal. What will social researchers do with the data they compile? Will they stand back like Pontius Pilate and wash their hands of it? Or will they see in their researches a possible key, one on a bunch, not a master key, to the problems which in the last resort, are problems of human relationships created by human fallibilities? To the historian, the apparatus of social research is a phenomenon worthy of exploration, its conclusions a problem rather than a solution.

If you recall, I sought leave to give you three illustrations of the limitations and possibilities of historical speculation. I have sought to show how narrative is prior to interpretation, how uncertain the historian feels about separating causes and consequences, or even relating them in too solemn a didactic. Thirdly, though I have stayed too long, I should like to show that looking steadily at a past may and should compel us to think, though it cannot dictate our judgments. Let us examine a society. It is one where tribal structure has broken down and society is in process of re-formation. Men live in groups of kin, but without a rigid family structure.<sup>(15)</sup> They can with permission of the communities move from one group to another, or, in other words they can migrate.<sup>(16)</sup> Their means of subsistence, apart from some spoils of war including slaves, is farming; part pastoral, part tillage. Cattle, sheep, pigs, are individually owned, but pasturage is common. One bull serves the cows of three villages and there is therefore a very heavy fine for absconding with the bull.<sup>(17)</sup> Land is plentiful fortunately, since tillage is by primitive hoe and a wooden plough tipped with iron. No one has yet discovered how to yoke a horse or ox without half closing the animal's windpipe. Livestock is constantly stolen, sucking pigs, sheep, cows and occasionally the bull are lifted over night, and are as invariably pursued by day; "If any man traces cattle to another man's land, he who owns the land, shall if he can, follow the trail until it passes beyond his boundary"<sup>(18)</sup> . . . "if he cannot he shall pay the value of the cattle and the whole case shall be settled by the two districts in common."<sup>(19)</sup> Huts are burned down over the heads of the occupiers; slaves are stolen, women

<sup>(15)</sup> Salic Law, Title XLII. E. F. Henderson, *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, p. 189.

<sup>(16)</sup> *Ibid.* Title XLV, p. 183.

<sup>(17)</sup> *Ibid.* Titles II and III.

<sup>(18)</sup> Attenborough, *Laws of the Earliest English Kings*. Athelstan. Cap. 2.

<sup>(19)</sup> *Ibid.* Athelstan, Cap. 8. 4.

are raped, maidens are kidnapped by the dishonest and purchased by the honest who are however entitled to the return of money paid, if the bride herself prove dishonest.<sup>(20)</sup> Further "if anyone buys a wife, and marriage does not take place, the bride's guardian shall return the bridal price."<sup>(21)</sup> And if a widow is left with children the husband's family shall pay each year six shillings, a cow in summer and an ox in winter.<sup>(22)</sup> There is, we notice some sense of social responsibility, left over from tribal days.

But it is a violent society where custom yields readily to conflict, and the blood feud has not been forgotten, though it is frowned upon. "He who kills a thief shall be allowed to declare with an oath that he whom he killed was a thief trying to escape and the kinsmen of the dead man shall swear an oath to carry on no vendetta against him."<sup>(23)</sup> Crime, usually violent, is met by a tariff of fines meticulously calculated. "If any person strike another on the head so that the brain appears, 30/-". "But if it shall have been between the ribs or in the stomach, 30/- besides five shillings for the physician's pay."<sup>(24)</sup> Although witchcraft is listed as a crime even more serious than homicide or cattle thieving,<sup>(25)</sup> witchcraft is common and the physician in return for his five shillings uses magic quite as much as medicine. The fever of wounds he dispels by this formula, "take a snail and well clean it. And take the clean foam, mix with human milk. Give to drink. He will be better."<sup>(26)</sup> There is little difference between physician and witchdoctor: one is open the other secret.

True this society is ruled by a King, but the monarch whatever his regalia, proves his ability to rule the people by behaving like them on a more majestic scale. Massacre, murder, pillage are the weapons of what we call policy. This is a scene familiar to many of us here, but it is not set, as it might well be, against an African, but against a European background. This is a picture of European society in the late 5th Century and early 6th Century, and I do not see that one can call it other than it was, barbaric.

It was into that society that Christian missionaries, monks and scholars began to penetrate. In 496 Clovis, King of the Franks was converted. In 597, Ethelbert, King of Kent, and royal conversions were accompanied by mass baptisms. It was

<sup>(20)</sup> *Ibid.* Ethelbert, Cap. 77.

<sup>(21)</sup> *Ibid.* Ine, Cap. 31.

<sup>(22)</sup> *Ibid.* Ine, Cap. 38.

<sup>(23)</sup> *Ibid.* Ine, Cap. 35.

<sup>(24)</sup> Salic Law. E. F. Henderson, *Documents of the Middle Ages*, Tit. XVII, 3,4.

<sup>(25)</sup> *Ibid.* Tit. XIX, 1.

<sup>(26)</sup> J. H. G. Grottan and C. Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, p.193

not till the late 7th Century and 8th Century that Christianity made significant inroads in Holland and Germany. Utrecht, the first diocese to be founded in Holland, was set by Anglo-Saxon missionaries and their Irish brethren in a sea of barbarism. More than one English missionary was martyred in the Frisian mission field. Yet in the midst of peril, missionaries, emancipated from the limitations of their social milieu, by the ratio of their faith, not only talked, they worked. Line upon line, fingers cramped by cold, they copied in careful Anglo-Saxon hand the classical as well as the Christian texts. To Utrecht,<sup>(27)</sup> for instance we owe what is now known as the Vienna MS. of the early books of the Fifth Decade of Livy; to Hersfeld one of the oldest MS. of Tacitus.<sup>(28)</sup> Now and again they flinched. Even a perilous sea passage seemed better than the monotony of doing good, and in the margins of their manuscripts, they left traces like this."

*"—if but Christ would give me back the past  
And this white head of mine were dark again  
and that first strength of days  
I too might go your ways.*

*All those far seas and shores that must be crossed  
They terrify me:—  
Go to the land whose love gives thee no rest  
and may Almighty God,  
Hope of our life, lord of the sounding sea  
of winds and waters, lord.*

*Give thee safe passage on the wrinkled sea  
Himself thy pilot stand  
Bring thee with mist and foam to thy desire,  
Again to Irish Land."<sup>(29)</sup>*

Those missionaries laid the foundations of Christianity and Civilisation; they were the architects. And when Charlemagne pushed the frontiers of the west from the Rhine to the Elbe, it was the missionaries who added assimilation to conquest. It was not always a gentle process. To the contrary, Charlemagne's frontier wars rank among the bloodiest and most brutal in history, just as the subjugation and conversion of the Frisians

<sup>(27)</sup> The Vienna MS. of Livy is the sole MS. to give the first five books of the fifth decade of Livy. It belonged to a Bishop of Duurstede near Utrecht in the 8th Century. W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the 8th Century*, 1946, pp. 62 and 144; cf. also Sandys, *History of Classical Scholarship*.

<sup>(28)</sup> Minor works of Tacitus preserved solely in a Hersfeld MS. of the 9th Century. W. Levison, *op. cit.* p. 144.

<sup>(29)</sup> Colman, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, trans. by Helen Waddell, p. 85, and cf. *ibid.* p. 315.

and the Saxons ranks as the most thorough and constructive. Whether Charlemagne would have managed better if he had first consulted a team of historians, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, I cannot tell. Certainly no one asked whether the Saxons and later the Vikings should be kept as a social museum piece, and no one thought other than that Europeans must either civilise or be destroyed. For five centuries, not one, the little core of half-civilised countries, stood at bay against heathendom; they survived because they had two weapons in their armoury: the capacity to fight and the capacity to civilise. If then I am asked, can barbarians be civilised? I can only answer, "In certain circumstances, yes." Europe was civilised, but so very gradually that as late as the 12th Century, Church penitentials condemned "Whosoever shall pollute New Year's Day by magic enquiries into the future"<sup>(30)</sup> and "whosoever shall believe that good or evil comes to him from the croak of jackdaw and raven, or from meeting any priest or animal whatsoever."<sup>(31)</sup> It was not till 1215, more than six hundred years after the conversion of the barbarian Kings, that ideas about justice had been sufficiently diffused for trial by ordeal to be abolished. As for witchcraft the persecutions of witches survived, to be exported to America in the 17th Century as current social practice, and to provide the Victorian Buckle<sup>(32)</sup> with ammunition for his magnificent if one-sided denunciation of Scottish Calvinism in the same century.

What kind of conclusions can emerge? I should say I am entitled to make three statements and to ask one question. Europe was barbarian, that is to say we have come up from barbarism; our forefathers whatever their nationality were barbarian. Secondly they were civilised chiefly by missionaries and our heritage of learning was preserved mainly as a result of missionary effort. Thirdly it is clear that it was a slow task; for men cannot be changed in the twinkling of an eye, particularly in a society which is economically backward, primitive and illiterate. The question I am bound to pose is this. Have we taken this evidence into account in making our current assumptions in South Africa? I freely admit that South Africa in the 20th Century is not Europe in the 5th Century. Civilisation has many new techniques. The gap between civilisation and barbarism if more easily bridged, is more stark. Ours moreover is a complex industrial economy, inter-related by commerce of ideas and goods, with other competing civilisations. Our problems are global not manorial. Our heritage too includes that other European inheritance, the colour bar, which seems to have originated in the 17th Century at the moment of impact on

<sup>(30)</sup> Quoted from G. C. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages*, v.1, p. 34.

<sup>(31)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>(32)</sup> H. T. Buckle, *History of Civilisation*, v.3, *passim*.

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<sup>(32)</sup> H. T. Buckle, *History of Civilisation*, v.3, *passim*.

alien societies. We cannot argue that because civilisation triumphed through faith in the 8th Century, it will triumph in the 20th Century; nor can we prove that our new techniques ought to be applied to the same ends; nor even can we be confident that our faith measures up to that of the past. Nevertheless I think the facts of the past are significant, and are part of the total evidence that no man can ignore in formulating his duties and obligations. The facts of history do not tell any man what he ought to think now, certainly they do not assume that we all think alike. They do mean that every man and woman ought to think afresh and ask whether we are going the best way about the only task we do agree upon, namely, the preservation of Western civilisation: Because I teach history I am forced to ask, what is that civilisation which in South Africa we are pledged to preserve? What is it that two years ago South Africa helped to defend, not on the Fish River, not the Limpopo, but in remote Korea?

Nor can I flinch from formulating my private answers to these questions, for they are the assumptions which, after more than a quarter of a century of study, have come to be part of my philosophy of life. Here in South Africa we are professedly a European and a Christian community whose VALUES as distinct from whose POWERS antedate the machine age. We live in the year of our Lord not in the year of our Ford.<sup>(33)</sup> Hitherto Western Civilisation has been characterised by qualities such as these: a quest for truth about all things, which stems back to the Greeks; a respect for law as based on a reasonable interpretation of a concept of Justitia, reconciling the rights of the individual with those of his fellow; a respect for the individual by virtue of his humanity and concern for humanity by virtue of Christ's teaching; a desire to organise the kind of communities in which those ideals can find day to day expression, taking men as they are; and a capacity unequalled in recorded history to translate its SCIENTIA of which modern science is part, into practical devices to serve human ends. No civilisation has been so interested as the west in the story of its own making, in all good or ill that has forged or stunted its growth. That too might rank as a characteristic trait: it implies a certain integrity, an anxiety to meet the obligations of its inheritance, and to master its current resources towards their fulfilling.

<sup>(33)</sup> Phrase coined by A. Huxley in "Brave New World."

*For neither do we wholly know  
And neither do we all forget  
But those high things which once we saw  
And still remember, those we hold  
And seek to bring the truth forgot  
Again, to that which we have yet.*<sup>(34)</sup>

It implies that we are not at the terminus, nor even at the end of a tether, but transmitters and adapters of a series of concepts; that progress is a transliteration of values and not of skills; that western civilisation has grown by the progressive diffusion and constant re-evaluation of its concepts. There are many things in the 20th Century which, as a historian I find profoundly disturbing: one for instance is the tendency in the west to explain away and to minimise its differential qualities which seem to me to be superior to those of any other civilisation I have studied, and to have in them at their best, the quality of true universals. Violated, distorted, forgotten, as they have been many times in the past, their resiliency has proven greater than the wickedness of man, because in the west, the individual conscience, in the last resort, has been the arbiter of human conduct if necessary in the face of death. I doubt very much whether a democracy will be built anywhere, in isolation from western values, and I must say, reactionary though it may sound, I doubt whether playing noughts and crosses with ballot papers has any necessary, apart from convenient, relation to western civilisation.

But if I am gravely exercised in mind as to the risk of confounding civilisation with its political or its economical techniques, I am frightened and not merely perturbed at any picture of western civilisation as a graven image round which revolve the economic and political rituals of a caste.

We need then in South Africa to face the obligations of a western heritage, and to face them as living, not completed forms. We also need to face that part of our heritage which is South African. We are beleaguered by plausible ready-made solutions which from whatever angle of the House they are hurled, are allegedly based on the premises of a history, which, being as I know without a reliable narrative basis, reads for the most part like Gulliver's Travels. We re-live the myths of our history every day of our lives and we bring up our children to repeat them in the complicated social drill of the school structure. We distort our politics and call it history; we distort our history and call it politics and sometimes even policy. We speak of administrative, economic, social problems, when in part they are excuses for evading what are at root our honest intellectual and

<sup>(34)</sup> Boethius, "Quaenam discors foedera rerum", transl. by H. Waddell, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics* (adapted by change of pronoun).



spiritual dilemmas. It does no good *either* to oversimplify them *or* to evade them or to call them by other names. We cannot put the clock back; indeed no country has ever done that without breaking the springs of its growth. But we can and we ought to look back steadily; at least we shall see one thing, namely three hundred years of change, expansion and growth in a restless story of human endeavour. We shall find laagers thrown round encampments, only to be broken for a new trek forward. No man till now has said, we will make a laager for civilisation and here we will sit down behind a barrage of legislation.

The Greeks were perhaps never shrewder than in their myth of Clio, who was the muse, both of history and of epic poetry. They portrayed Clio with a scroll in one hand, and in the other a basket. It is of the scroll, that is the need for a constant process of revision, and the concept of history as depending on narrative or epic that I have spoken at such length tonight. The basket was for manuscripts. What is needed, before it is too late, is for more and more manuscripts, either to pile into that basket, or at least to leave recorded some trace of themselves and their whereabouts. I should like to see all over the Union of South Africa, but particularly in this Province where Bantu, Boer and Briton first lived side by side, every scrap of evidence of every kind, conscientiously and in good faith, made available to historians before it is too late. We might well do what has been done on the Continent and in Britain, that is attempt at least a Provincial Register of Archives. Voluntary local committees could list the local sources; especially diaries, letters, memoranda, business records. These could, if preferred be left in situ, but they should be regarded and handled as what they are: valuable clues to the thoughts of men. Again and again as one works one discovers clues which cannot be followed up, for lack of evidence; but there is enough evidence to show that both Theal and Cory if they were alive today, would hastily revise their writing on Clio's scroll. Nor, if we respect our traditions is this the kind of treasure which should be capitalised on the money market. To the contrary, if listed and used, it may well outlast our many monuments of stone. Whether we succeed or fail in meeting our challenges, it is on evidences that, looking back, men will estimate our difficulties and appraise our achievements. Far be it from me to encourage a merely parochial attitude to history; but if we are part of a wider world we are nevertheless a very distinctive part, and in some ways a distinguished part. We have potentially opened up Southern Africa to civilisation. We have made a great number of bungles; we have lost patience, and at times we have broken faith, but we

have never yet resorted to a policy of blind extermination, nor kept our Xhosa Bibles in museums. Nor, and we should not forget it, have our sufferings been as great as their shadows are long. It is to illuminate those shadows that we need now, before it is too late, to search our records of every kind. Paper perishes and ink fades, and I think you will agree with me, that the lines with which I propose to conclude this lecture, should not wane into oblivion. I found them in the daily log book of a sheep farmer who lived not so many miles from here. In the midst of shopping lists, crops to reap, sheep to shear and all the engrossing business of a large sheep farm, I came across an entry written as most of us have written in the heat of frustration and bewilderment. He did not write a tirade against the government. He did not write to the paper. He wrestled with it himself. If the average frontier farmer in the 19th Century needed the patience of Job, this one had the faith of Job, and the curious thing is that if I were to change the wording slightly, I could, did conscience not bid otherwise, ascribe it to St. Augustine at Canterbury or to St. Boniface at Utrecht. It is though written in the careful calligraphy of a practical farmer, who limited his writing to those things which were really necessary. If this lecture has the text I intended it to have, it is to be found in his handwriting and the words he wrote on March 31st, 1835: "O Lord, in the greatness of Thy mercy, save me from infidelity and unbelief, strengthen my staggering faith in the averting Providence of Thee my God . . . why those wicked caffers should be suffered to rob me of my three span of valuable working oxen I have with assiduity and care been for several years matching and training, and all those choice milch cows which supplied us with butter and my children and people with milk in abundance . . . ." There speaks a man of stature so bold as to know his limitations and to know the difference between being angry and bewildered and being right. That fundamentally is what South Africans are most in danger of forgetting.