

PAPERS.

Methods of Historical Research

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[Read at the Inaugural Meeting of the Society on 18th August, 1913.]

It has been well said that "the care which a nation devotes to the preservation of the monuments of its past may serve as a true measure of the degree of civilisation to which it has attained." The greatest nations of the world have set apart large sums of money, have erected large buildings, and maintain large permanent staffs for this purpose. Documents of historical importance are carefully preserved, catalogues and indexes are published, and every possible assistance is given to research students in their work. The older countries have recognised the importance of the study of history. The present is the product of the past. The long development which has produced the nation of to-day is studied. Valuable lessons are learned; present mistakes are avoided by comparison of circumstances with past causes and effects. No education is considered complete which does not include a knowledge of the national institutions. The great crises through which the nation has passed, the revolutions, the invasions, and the tyranny of kings have all left their mark on the temper of the nation. The slow evolution of industrial relationship between master and man, the economic problems of past centuries, the difficulties which have beset the Government, the means which have been taken to overcome them, all have their lesson for the citizen and statesman of to-day.

Although one nation may learn much from the history of another, may avoid its errors, and imitate those parts of its policy which have been crowned with success, the differences in national temperament make the past experiences of foreign countries less valuable to the statesman than the past history of his own. Each nation studies the past of other nations, but the surest guide is its own past experience. From this it may be thought that it is sufficient for Australians to study the history of Britain, but this is not the case. The different conditions which prevail in Australia, the effect of climate upon national temperament and character, render it of supreme importance that Australians should study the history of Australia. It is almost 150 years since the expedition of Captain Philip arrived at Botany Bay. Since 1788 a definite Australian character

has been evolved; the wide spaces, the huge distances, the freedom of the individual, and the sparseness of the population have all been influences working to produce the national character. The Australian differs from the Englishman. He is the product of his environment, and he demands a different treatment. Australian statesmen and Australian citizens must study the history of their own country; the one in order to appreciate the country's needs, the other in order to obtain a knowledge of his duty as a citizen. The history of Australia has not yet been written, and before it can be written a great deal of preparatory work must be done. Brilliant literary men have attempted to write history. The results of their efforts have often been valueless, because their facts were wrong. Their authorities were unreliable; they did not make use of original sources of information. They depended upon secondary authorities; men who did not write disinterestedly; men who were not inspired by a love of truth. The consequence is that their work, while being literature, is not history. History must be true; the past must be correctly described, conditions of living must be clearly analysed, and correct conclusions must be drawn. If this is not the case the history is more than valueless, it is positively harmful. Truth is essential, but it cannot be arrived at without the aid of original documentary evidence. All attempts which have been made to write the history of Australia so far have failed. Either the evidence of contemporary documents has been insufficiently made use of or the historian has allowed himself to reflect a distorted view of the past, and a view the truthfulness of which has been destroyed by his own partiality.

It is time that Australian history was taken seriously by Australians. A great field for valuable research work lies waiting to be explored, and the explorers should be men who have received a sound historical training. It is the work of the universities to give this training, and up to the present the training given in Australia has usually been insufficient. The mistake has been made of ignoring the value of original research. When I say original research I mean research that is really original. The honours course of the university which provides for the so-called original research into printed documentary evidence lacks the most valuable portion of historical training. The student is given printed documents, arranged and edited by master historians. Everything printed is of value; everything which is worthless is excluded. Footnotes, introductory chapters, and indexes guide the student in his search for material for his thesis. He does not have to search through roll after

roll of musty papers; he does not read letters, diaries, accounts, parliamentary papers, and reports. The exhilaration of the explorer is not his. The thrill of joy of the discoverer is impossible of realisation to him, for has not the work been done before by men better qualified for the task. His originality is not developed, his critical faculty is blunted, his judicial faculty lies dormant. Moreover, of what use is such work to Australia? It is true that in this way a valuable training may be obtained; it is true that experience may be gained; but should not a university do more than merely cover the ground already explored? It seems that to justify its existence every university must contribute something to the sum of human knowledge, and in Australian history schools that may best be done by research work into the history of Australia. It would be useless for us to attempt to investigate modern, mediæval, or ancient problems, which can be and are being investigated by European scholars. The results would be meagre, and practically useless to Australia; on the other hand, the history of Australia, its economic development, the spread of population, and the questions of government offer a field from which valuable results might easily be obtained.

It is here that the Historical Society of Queensland can play an important part. At present the mass of original documentary evidence which undoubtedly exists is in a state of chaos. There are no complete files of newspapers; valuable diaries and private letters are being destroyed through ignorance and neglect; even the records of the public offices are unavailable to the student. There is no doubt that greater care has been taken of the public archives than has been devoted to the care of private documents, but even in the case of the Government records insufficient care is taken for their preservation. Are they arranged in a methodical way; are there indexes and catalogues which will direct the student to the information which he seeks; are they protected from every possibility of destruction by fire and damp? But a short time ago invaluable public documents were destroyed by fire in South Australia, and the danger is as great in every State while no archive or public record office exists for their preservation. What is more, at present no provision is made for the use of public records by authorised and responsible students. This, of course, opens up an important question. We know that all communications of the Colonial Office are available before a certain date, but Queensland has been established since that date, and all the permission is useless to the Queensland student. Even if this were not the case, it is not

suggested that every public document should be open for inspection by every curious individual. Such a practice would undoubtedly be followed by evil consequences. Some selection must be made. Some documents are essentially confidential, but it does not seem that the clear-cut division marked by a definite date is satisfactory.

It has been suggested in America that:—

- (a) Archives which represent completed incidents which carry no sequence may cease to be confidential as soon as the incidents are closed.
- (b) Archives which relate to political events may be open to general inspection when the danger of inflaming public opinion by their revelations has passed.
- (c) Archives which contain personal information affecting individuals may cease to be confidential after two generations have passed.
- (d) Archives which pertain to international relations must remain confidential as long as they relate to pending negotiations or if they contain information which would disturb or lessen international good feeling.
- (e) Archives furnishing information which might be used against the Government interests should remain confidential.

This seems to be a more practicable solution of the difficulty.

Of course, it is not necessary to adopt these suggestions without alteration. Conditions in the United States differ from those which prevail in Australia. This country is a portion of the British Empire, and imperial interests may demand that certain information be withheld, but even with such reservations there is an enormous amount of material of great historical importance which could be made available to students without danger. It is the duty of the Commonwealth, and of the States, to see that this is done. The Government of New South Wales began the work when the first volume of the historical records of that State was published. The Commonwealth Government intends to carry on the work, and the Commonwealth Record Office has

been established. This is a step in the right direction, but it is not sufficient. In every State capital a similar record office must be established, and when this is the case the official history of Australia can be written.

Another suggestion by an American scholar points out the duties which should be undertaken by these institutions. "The archives," he says, "once classified and filed, it becomes the duty of the archivist to make them accessible for administrative and literary purposes. Four classes of publications naturally suggest themselves—general guides, inventories or check lists, calendars, and collections of texts." The general guide without going into detail should indicate the subject-matter contained in each group or series of records. The inventory should contain a short account of the contents of each series. The calendar should contain a short summary of each document, while the selection of documents for publication should be left preferably to responsible historical associations.

This work is essentially work which must be performed by the Government, but the archives are not the only original documents which are of importance to the research student. For official history and for the official view of events they are invaluable, but history cannot be written from them alone. The diaries of early settlers and private letters, old newspapers, accounts and publications dealing with the early stages of Australian development, cannot be neglected by the historian.

The Historical Society can do valuable work in this connection. It is surprising to observe the ignorance which prevails in this matter. Documents of great value and significance are constantly being destroyed. They are thought to be interesting, but practically worthless, and unless some organised effort is made to preserve these memorials of early colonial history the research students of the future will be seriously handicapped in their attempts to write the history of the country. In other States the seriousness of the question has been recognised and societies similarly constituted to that which has its official birth to-night have been established. In Queensland as yet nothing has been done. It is deplorable that no attempt has been made to collect diaries and letters which deal with the early days. It is deplorable that the newspaper files have not been preserved. The official view is made clear in the archives, but the popular feeling finds expressions in private letters, in diaries, and in newspapers. History cannot be written

without taking these into account. The difficulties experienced by the early colonists, the picturesque accounts of individual settlers, the personal element which is of such importance in small communities during the earlier stages of development can only be found in private papers. It should be the work of the Historical Society to collect these papers, to classify them, to issue catalogues and indexes, just as the Government must deal with the official records of the State. The difficulty which confronts a student who is desirous of engaging himself in the work of historical research in Queensland to-day is great. Practically no material is available for his use, and the work of the history school at the university cannot be considered satisfactory until this evil is remedied. The way can only be made clear by the collection and the organisation of material which undoubtedly exists. Until it is possible to set students at work on really original research the training which they receive must continue to be inadequate. I do not mean to say that historical research can only be conducted by a student who has received a university training, but it is probable that a great historian will be produced by a university rather than by an independent historical society. To be permanent, history must be literature as well as history; but, as we have seen, literary genius in itself does not constitute an historian. Macaulay and Carlyle were men of great literary genius, they possessed the imagination and the gift of expression which alone could make their work permanent, but as historians they failed. Their statements are often unreliable; their conclusions are often false. This is due to the neglect of original authorities and to the lack of impartiality. The true historian does not form a theory and then search for facts to justify his opinions. He reads everything that has been written on the subject under treatment—contemporary authors, secondary authorities, and modern critics. From the facts and opinions placed at his disposal by other writers he forms his own conclusions, and justifies them from contemporary sources. All historical research should be constructive to be of real value. The false or careless statements of previous writers may be largely ignored; it is not necessary to enter into interminable controversies. A statement of facts, a reference to authorities is usually sufficient to destroy the wrong impression created by the writer who has neglected to verify his information.

In this way we can all do a valuable work for the history of Queensland. Every paper that is written, every discussion which takes place will be of assistance to the

future historian, but again a word of warning is necessary. Authorities must always be quoted, and they must be verified as far as possible, otherwise a great amount of useful work will be wasted. We may not have the literary qualities which are necessary to make our work of permanent interest, but everything which we do will be of use to the literary genius who will ultimately undertake the work of writing the history of Australia. Apart from the advantages which can be afforded to university students by the Historical Society, there is another which is much wider in its effect. In Australia there is no traditional governing class. The average member of an Australian Parliament does not belong to a family which possesses what may be called the parliamentary instinct. It would be well were these men afforded greater opportunities for studying the development of their country, its internal affairs, its economic growth, its external relationships. Such knowledge is really essential to good government, but it is not only the leader of men who requires to be educated in this way. The ordinary citizen must know his country too.

The Educational Workers' Association in England has shown by its tutorial classes that the desire for knowledge for its own sake is not yet dead. The regularity of attendance at the classes has shown a real desire to study economic problems. An attempt is being made to extend the movement to Australia, and this makes the need of a thorough study of Australian development more necessary. The Australian worker will not be content to know the industrial history of England. He will want to study the economic development of his own country. It is encouraging to see this manifestation of a real desire for knowledge in these days of technical training and utilitarianism. The prominence of these is doubtless due to the spirit of the age, the prevailing spirit of industrialism; but no education, however perfect it may be from a technical point of view, can be called complete if the broader human studies are neglected.

A nation which thinks only of its own material prosperity, which ignores true education, cannot hope for real prosperity. Technical knowledge may be necessary, but an education intended to create a wider human sympathy is more necessary still. The danger which seems to threaten education in Australia is here apparent. The great demand for technical skill has led to the establishment of numerous technical colleges, and their importance has been exaggerated; knowledge of facts has usurped the place of

learning, skill the place of wisdom. It is unnecessary to enlarge upon the evils attendant upon such a system. The Historical Society of Queensland can do something towards keeping alive the true academic spirit. If that is done its existence is justified, but, as we have seen, much more may be done.

It is said of truth that al buyldyngs are masoned and wrought of dyverse stone, and all great ryvers are gurged and assemblede of divers surges and sprynges of water. In lyke wyse al sciences are extraught and compyled of diverse clerks, of that one wryteth another paraventure is ignorant. But by the famous wrytyng of auncient auctours all thyngs is ben knowen in one place or other.

So wrote Froissart in the prologue to his chronicles. Individual members of the Historical Society may not be able to erect the whole building of Australian history, but they can each contribute one stone. The greater the care bestowed upon each stone, the more skilled the workmanship employed, the more perfect will be the completed structure. The master builder will take the stones we fashion, he will place each in its natural position, and we can be satisfied that we have contributed something towards the work.

There is romance in Australian history, there is progress and development. Some day the story of our country will be written. Historians will tell our children of the settlements which clung tenaciously to the coastline. They will trace the expansion of those settlements. They will show how indomitable explorers crossed the continent from south to north, from east to west. They will tell of the great gold discoveries, of the ships lying idle in the harbours, of cities almost empty, deserted by their inhabitants, mad with the lust for gold. They will show the more orderly penetration of the country, the gradual settlement of the interior, the establishment of Australian industries. They will tell of the attempts made to solve the economic problems of the country; they will describe the development of a national character. All these, but perhaps most important will be the gradual growth of an Australian national spirit, a nationalism which has not broken with Imperialism. This work will remain undone until the man of imaginative power, the man endowed with the gift of literary expression, undertakes it. We can clear the way for him, we can set marks for his guidance along the road by which he has to travel, and so his progress will be easier; he will not stray from the main path, and he will thank us for what we have done.