

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

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FROM: RWJ Robert W. July, Asst. Dir.

DATE: July 28, 1959

TO:	CBF		
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COMMENTS:
Very good.
DR

MAY 22 1963

SUBJECT: SOME OBSERVATIONS REGARDING BARRACLOUGH AND THE CONSERVATIVE VIEW

The ideas put forward by Barraclough in his Times Literary Supplement article are in fact the most recent expression of criticism which began to be leveled at the historical profession about fifty or sixty years ago. What he is saying is that history has not lived up to the expectations of its Nineteenth Century practitioners as a means for giving mankind a greater insight into the world and its problems. The old notions of scientific history, of devotion to minute detail, of tracing events back to antiquity have failed to illuminate the contemporary scene and make us more capable of dealing with its complexities. Instead of developing historians of breadth and insight who utilize their special skills and knowledge in ways that are relevant to problems that surround us, the traditions of historical scholarship have led to sterile specialization and professionalism practiced by drudges anxious to withdraw from the world of affairs and to produce only academic treatises for one another's benefit. He urges, therefore, a new type of historian who is capable of imagination and freshly conceived perspective, who can step for the moment outside the profession to see what history can offer the rest of the world, and who is not merely content with resifting old evidence and extending old narratives another fifty years or so for ^{the historian's} ~~their own~~ exclusive edification.

Over a generation ago this position was most eloquently argued by Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson with their doctrine of the subjectivity and relativism of history. What they said was that at best the historian was exposed to second-hand random evidence of past events and that he was forced to study these materials through the filters of his own education, background, and point of view. All this being so, there was no such thing as objective history; ^{i.e.} it was all subjective, all relative. - /subject to individual judgment and relative to absolute truth. The best thing the historian could do was to recognize these limitations and make the most of them. This meant accepting the personal interests and values of the historian and their role in choosing the historical theme and the appropriate evidence which bore on that theme. It meant using history in a practical way to emphasize neglected but important events and points of view which would help to give a better understanding of contemporary movements and issues. Here is what Robinson said in 1912 in The New History:

Historians have not as yet set themselves to furnish us with what lies behind our great contemporaneous task of human betterment. They have hitherto had other notions of their functions, and were they asked to furnish answers to the questions that a person au courant with the problems of the day would most naturally put to them, they would with one accord begin to make excuses. One would say that it had long been recognized that it was the historian's business to deal with kings, parliaments, constitutions, wars, treaties, and territorial changes; another would declare that recent history cannot be adequately written and that, therefore, we can never hope to bring the past into relation with the present, but must always leave a fitting interval between ourselves and the nearest point to which the historian should venture to extend his researches; a third will urge that to have a purpose in historical study is to endanger those principles of objectivity upon which all sound and scientific research must be based. So it comes about that our books are like very bad memories which insist upon recalling facts that have no assignable relation to our needs, and this is the reason why the practical value of history has so long been obscured.

Curiously, the Beard-Robinson position of the subjectivity of history is widely held among historians in the United States today, yet the problem of getting them to connect their researches with the world in which they live remains undiminished. Judging from Barraclough's remarks a similar problem obtains in Britain. I shall presently return to possible reasons for this but first there is DR's question of quotations to illustrate the conservative view that lies opposite to Barraclough's position.

The story goes back to the Nineteenth Century with its faith in scientific method and the idea of progress. As scientific method began to be understood, the historian felt that history too could be dealt with scientifically, its facts studied and arranged in order and its laws induced from these facts. Out of this grew the doctrine of historical objectivity - the notion that the historian had only to dig out the facts and set them down in their proper order to produce definitive, absolute historical truth. The authorship of this position is generally ascribed to Ranke with his hope of writing history "as it actually happened," and his writings reflect this point of view:

There are really only two ways of acquiring knowledge about human affairs: through the perception of the particular, or through abstraction; the latter is the method of philosophy, the former of history.... Nevertheless those historians are also mistaken who consider history simply an immense aggregate of particular facts, which it behooves one to commit to memory. Whence follows the practice of heaping particulars upon particulars, held together only by some general moral principle. I believe rather that the discipline of history - at its highest - is itself called upon, and is able, to lift itself in its own fashion from the investigation and observation of particulars to a universal view of events, to a knowledge of the objectively existing relatedness.

Here then was the notion that minute attention to detail would reveal a pattern, a universality, something akin to scientific law. In the words of

Albert J. Beveridge, "Facts when justly arranged interpret themselves." Along with this idea of universal history emerging from facts justly arranged, was the feeling that one must go back to the beginning in order to see the total picture and to understand fully the present in terms of the past. Here is the French historian Fustel de Coulanges writing in 1862:

History, I think, fulfills its task only when it covers a long series of centuries. If one restricts one's study to a limited period, one can tell a story full of anecdotes and details which will satisfy the curiosity and occasionally amuse; this would be a pretty picture, a charming tale, but I find it difficult to convince myself that it would be true history....

History...cannot be content to examine a single period in minute detail, to recount a brilliant biography, to select, in short, those events whose recital will delight or move us the most. One must go back to antiquity, one must understand the institutions of peoples that have ceased to exist, one has to breathe life into the ancient generations that are no longer even dust. Where history has no written records, it must force dead languages to yield their secrets; in their grammatical forms and in their very words it divines the thoughts of the men who spoke them. It must probe the fables and myths, the dreams induced by man's imagination, all the old falsehoods beneath which it must discover something very real - the beliefs of man. Wherever man has lived, wherever he has left some feeble imprint of his life and his intelligence, there is history. History should encompass all centuries, since it is the traditional book in which the human soul inscribes its variations and its progress.

And, here is J.B. Bury speaking in 1902:

History ceases to be scientific, and passes from the objective to the subjective point of view, if she does not distribute her attention, so far as the sources allow, to all periods of history....If we recognise the relative importance of the modern period for our own contemporary needs, we must hold that the best preparation for interpreting it truly, for investigating its movements, for deducing its practical lessons, is to be brought up in a school where its place is estimated in scales in which the weight of contemporary interest is not thrown.

This was the prevailing view of history, its practise and its nature, among historians of the Nineteenth Century. In the United States this led to a tradition of rigorous and exacting graduate school training which insisted on absolute thoroughness in research methods and complete respect for the individual detail no matter how minute. Here is the method as described by John W. Burgess:

We seek to teach the student, first, how to get hold of a historic fact, how to distinguish fact from fiction, how to divest it as far as possible of coloring or exaggeration. We send him, therefore, to the most original sources attainable for his primary information. If there be more than one original source upon the same fact, we teach him to set these in comparison or contrast....We undertake...to teach the student to set the facts which he has thus attained in their chronological order, to the further end of setting them in their order as cause and effect.

At the time that Burgess was writing (1880's) history was just beginning to be a profession in the United States. Only a few university chairs of history existed and there was little in the way of tradition and methodology to guide a growing body of historical practitioners. The notions of historical objectivity, scientific research methods, and historical continuity which were imported from Europe took deep root and were widely practised and preached in American graduate schools. Indeed the deference to fact and to thoroughness in research continue to be cardinal principles in historical training and I suspect contribute much to the traditional resistance which Beard and Robinson felt in their day and which Barraclough is experiencing in his turn.

In any case Beard and Robinson, along with Carl Becker, made their successful attack on what came to be recognized as the naive and unsatisfactory premises of scientific, objective history, and in the end most historians agreed that historical evidence was relative and subjective and that interpretation was inevitable. At the same time it was quite properly felt that each scholar must continue to strive for objectivity even if unattainable. Paradoxically this did not lead to imaginative, incisive, well documented history which had something to say to and about the contemporary world. The proliferation of graduate students being subjected to rigorous graduate school training brought rather a growing professionalization of historical teaching and research, the accumulation and exhaustive analysis of data, greater specialization and fragmentation, and an increasing reluctance to deal with the present or to speak to any audience other than that of the historians themselves. Doctoral dissertations tended to become dreary exercises in research techniques and their subjects were chosen generally because they had not been done before and because they contributed to a seminar professor's magnum opus. Small wonder that most

graduate historians continued throughout their careers to write larger and more formidable histories on the dissertation pattern. Along with this preoccupation with detail went (in America at any rate) an unwillingness to deal with larger questions of the meaning of history, the nature of historical knowledge, the ultimate uses of history, or even the bases for choosing research subjects.

I have myself in recent years talked with a substantial number of able historians, many of them good friends of mine who could be counted on to hold nothing back, but I have generally been treated to the conservative view when questions of historical knowledge, or contemporary relevance have been broached. The attitude invariably is that the nature of history is something for the philosopher to puzzle over. Leave the historian alone to write his history in peace. The following remarks by Richard Hofstadter, one of the best of American historians, are quite typical:

It would be good if every historian gave some thought to the fundamental problems of historical knowledge, but it is not by the same token good that many should feel impelled to write about History instead of writing histories. I would urge upon my fellow historians at least a brief moratorium on abstract speculation in this field, which may well be left to those philosophers who are most concerned with it. The problem of historical knowledge is neither unimportant nor uninteresting, but dealing with it effectively does require some special philosophic gifts. Mr. Strout quite rightly remarks that "the historians' ideas at the practical level of research and writing are of a different order from, and may even be better than, his ideas at the theoretical level of reflection." Beard's books of substantive history, even when the current deflation of them has run its course, will still have more enduring value and interest than his once useful but inept efforts to popularize Croce, Mannheim, and Riezler. Becker's contribution to quickening the sense of wit and style among historians will be more valuable than his historical speculations. The same is true of the historians of the earlier era, who played with theories of "scientific history." I would rather have written any one of the nine volumes of Henry Adams's great history than all the speculative essays on the problem of historical knowledge that have appeared in the United States since George Bancroft first put history en rapport with God - including, by the way, the nonsense that Adams himself wrote on this subject.

Along with this go Hofstadter's ideas on the issue of how the historian decides which facts to emphasize and which subjects to choose for investigation. Here are my diary notes on a conversation we had in 1956:

H feels that far too much of the history written in the United States today lacks theme and thus degenerates into mere exhaustive fact gathering. He blames this on the standard type of graduate training now in force with its emphasis on thorough research methods and its neglect of fundamental questions dealing with the function, the purpose, and the limits of history. H's own experience and observation indicate that resourceful historians choose their research subjects on the basis of present interests - for example, some of H's own recent attention to Progressivism stems from his concern over the McCarthy phenomenon. Nevertheless he finds that he is usually not precisely aware of these connections between past and present interests until after he is well embarked on his research. In any case H cautions against too insistent utilitarianism since it is often impossible to determine in advance what sort of ultimate value a piece of work will have - how it will in time be used and who it may eventually stimulate to additional study of importance.

This brings me to a last bit, a quotation from an old letter written by another friend and an excellent professional among historians. After a long debate on the question of choosing between important and unimportant facts, he finds he cannot take the plunge. "Everything is relevant," he writes, "[which] means almost anything may turn out to be relevant, so be careful."

I have the feeling that I am being overly critical of what may be called the conservative view of history and I do not mean to be for there can be much merit in this position. When it is presented with intelligence and imagination, it really doesn't differ very much from what the Beards and the Barracloughs have to say. A good case for it is contained in A.L. Rowse's excellent little volume, The Uses of History, in which the author points to the many ways in which historical training is of value to individuals engaged in various phases of national life and how absence of a sense of history among people in high place

can lead to very serious consequences. Rowse cites examples from the British experience but in the American context one cannot help but think of Harry Truman. Here is one last quotation from another eminent historian, Pieter Geyl, which also puts forward the conservative view with some force:

But if I ask myself which are the purposes that I suppose most modern scholars will place first when put on our mettle to justify our calling and our work, there present themselves in answer, first, the enrichment of civilization by the reanimation of old modes of existence and thought,...second, the cultivation of the historical attitude of mind,...third, the elucidation of the present and its problems by showing them in perspective;...

...The present is not elucidated merely by connecting it with trends in the immediately preceding period, from which it may be seen to issue. The whole of history will help us understand the world we live in. A mind that has established contact with forms of life remote and unfamiliar, that has come to know great events and personalities of some particular period, pondering motives and evidence, watching the ever surprising shapes in which greatness and character appear, or studying the curious changes of social habits and the impact of economic factors - such a mind is likely to see more deeply into contemporary phenomena and movements, be it of culture or of politics. This is what Burckhardt meant when he said that history will make us wise; for although Bacon had said the same thing three centuries before, the great Swiss historian gave to the word a somewhat different connotation by adding, "Wise for always; not clever for another time." He meant, of course, that history is not to be searched for practical lessons, the applicability of which will always be doubtful in view of the inexhaustible novelty of circumstances and combination of causes, but just this, that the mind will acquire a sensitiveness, an imaginative range.

Yet undoubtedly the history of the recent past of one's own country or the group of countries belonging to the same sphere of civilization and power politics offers, for the purpose of understanding the present, a special and irreplaceable interest. There is here by universal consent an immediate and practical use of history for anyone trying to find his way through the politics of his own or of a foreign country, or, of course, through international politics. The same might certainly be said of virtually every field of cultural or social or economic activity,...

This one last remark may beg the whole question, but I wonder if Barraclough's problem in the end does not rest in the vast increase in numbers

of historians during the past 75 years and the inevitable falling off in quality that this has brought. When Herbert Baxter Adams, Henry Adams, Von Holst, Burgess and others began their work, they were only a handful and they were outstanding men. Today there are still outstanding historians but they are a few among thousands who are not outstanding. Whatever their views on scientific history or historical relativity or utilitarianism, they are not likely to produce anything that is above the average which they represent.