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Toynbee

TOYNBEE LOOKS FORWARD TO OTHER HISTORIES

Earlier this year Arnold Toynbee completed proofreading the tenth (and final) volume of his monumental A Study of History, and as soon as he had sent the corrected pages off to the Oxford Press his thoughts turned to other histories that he wants to write. One is a book that he planned long ago, but put aside to make way for the work which has occupied the main track of his thinking since June of 1920. From 1920 to 1954 is a considerable stretch of time to devote to one writing job, and the editor of the Oxford Press asked Toynbee how it felt to be at the end of that long row. In response the author wrote a brief essay on the question, and kindly sent the Foundation a copy "for your Study of History file." With his permission and that of his publishers, we print it below. The studies of Professor Toynbee, who is associated with Chatham House in London, have been the subject of Foundation grants through both the Division of Social Sciences and that of the Humanities.

What Does It Feel Like to Have Finished  
A Study of History?

By Arnold Toynbee

What does it feel like to have finished writing these ten volumes? It is the end of a very long journey on which this work has been my constant companion. I passed the last page-proof of the errata page in the tenth volume one day in April, 1954, and it was in June 1920 that I made an unsuccessful first shot at finding my way into the book. So the time that it has taken me to do this piece of work has been 33 years and ten months - just over one third of a century and nearly half a standard life-time. It takes less time than that to bring up one's children or to saw through a redwood tree. I have never tried my hand at this sawyer's job; but I imagine that, when at last the big tree suddenly falls, one must feel what one does feel, as I know from experience, when one's children surprise one by suddenly being grown-up.

When parents stand looking at the baby in its cradle and talk about bringing it up, the vista stretches away beyond the limits of their mental

horizon. It is difficult to imagine this job ever coming to an end; and this goes on being difficult after the child has wriggled out of its cradle and stood upon its feet and gone to school and then gone on to the university. At each successive stage of a child's growing-up, the process still feels to the parents as if it must be everlasting, till suddenly, one day, they find that it is over, while the vista of the parents' own lives still goes on stretching out ahead. The Californian sawyer's experience is, I suppose, much the same; for, however high-powered may be the Diesel engine that drives his Sheffield blade, his job must feel just as interminable as if he had been going at it with a hand-saw. For ever so long, the only effect of scraping into the massive trunk seems to be just to make the monster press down with ever greater weight and catch the saw-blade in a vice. Nothing seems to be really happening till the trunk is nine-tenths sawn through; and then, all at once, at the saw's nine-hundred-and-ninety-ninth scrape, the giant tree totters and crashes.

What happens next? For, when the felled trunk has been hauled out of the forest and carted away to the mill, that might seem to be the end. But, no; for there is never a last chapter in real life. The removal of the tree has made a clearing; and, where the light now streams in again for the first time since that far-off date when the felled giant was still a sapling, young green shoots are already beginning to spring up out of the patch of ground that has so long been overshadowed by the big tree's intercepting branches. New life for old! One loses one's children as children to gain them as grown-up friends and to find them again in one's grandchildren. And it is something like this that happens, too, when the long job has been, not sawing through a tree or bringing up a child, but writing an elephantine book.

Anyway, this has been my personal experience in finishing A Study of History. The last bundle of its page-proofs was no sooner on the shelf than latent other books began to come back to life in me. I am thinking, for instance, of that history of Greek Civilisation for the Home University Library. Gilbert Murray commissioned me to write it in 1914, and by the beginning of the August of that year the notes for the whole thing were on paper and the first two chapters in draft. Here they are, at this moment, on my table, after having hibernated for forty years. A couple of world wars and ten volumes of A Study of History have kept this dormouse book of mine asleep for all this time. Yet, to-day, nearly forty years on, Gilbert Murray is still an editor of the series, and, for the second time in forty years, I have sent him a sketch of my plan. It is not the same plan as before; if it were unchanged after forty years, it would not be worth reviving; but in a new shape the old book is now again alive and stirring - and I find myself full of zest for it. After having perpetrated an elephant, what fun to produce a mouse!

Here, too, are my notes for Religio Historici; and this is something unforeseen; for, when I started writing A Study of History, religion was not a prominent feature in my mental landscape. I was then still in the callow stage of disbelief in the traditional form of the particular religion in which I happened to have been brought up; so I fancied that I

had thrown religion itself out of the window. In writing my Study I have been constantly surprised to find religion coming back to fill an ever greater place in my thoughts and feelings; but it took me several volumes to learn the truth that every one of us has a religion all the time, and that what looks like a spiritual vacuum is merely one of religion's protean epiphanies. To slough religion off would be to slither out of human nature, and that feat is not within any human being's power. So, when A Study of History is finished, the historian's religion remains. And what does the universe look like from the historian's angle of vision? From this angle it looks as if everything in the universe were on the move either towards its Creator or away from Him. I have ventured to talk about this in two courses of Gifford lectures at Edinburgh, and, like other Gifford lecturers, I am writing a book on my subject.

Meanwhile, I can already foresee A Study of History coming round again on to my desk; for, while these last four volumes are still in the press, archaeologists all over the World, from Mexico to the Indus Valley, are continually making exciting additions to our knowledge, while philosophers are continuing to discuss what the nature of historical knowledge is. It was this perpetually creative activity of indomitable human minds that moved Saint Augustine, late in life, to re-consider his published works and to write his retractationes; and Saint Augustine's example is good to take to heart.

The truth is that one single piece of work can never be the whole of anyone's life-work, even when it is a piece into which one has put all one's heart and mind and strength. And what is even the whole of any single human being's life-work but one tiny contribution to mankind's vast work for God's glory?

The tiny contribution that I have a personal concern to make is to help my contemporaries - even if ever so little - to begin to see history with new eyes in the new light of a revolutionary change that has overtaken mankind in our day. In our day, for the first time in history, the whole habitable surface of our planet has shrunk together into 'one world'; and this means that in our day, for the first time in history, the whole of history can be seen synoptically as a unity. God 'hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the Earth, and hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation.' When Saint Paul declared this truth to his Athenian contemporaries, they did not pay much attention, though they and he were then living in one of those oecumenical empires that have been anticipations of a future world-state. This Pauline unitary view of history is the vision that has led me into writing my ten volumes; but I was already following the visionary gleam long before June 1920 - indeed, long before I became conscious of having any master-aim - and, though my work on A Study of History is now behind me, I still find myself pursuing the same unending quest as eagerly as ever, and cannot imagine myself 'ceasing from mental strife' so long as I remain compos mentis.

Six of those ten volumes were written within sixteen miles of York; and, lying on a Bronze-age barrow on Slingsby Moor on inter-war summer

afternoons, I used to catch the voice of Lucius Septimius Severus giving the watch-word for his dying day as he lay on his death-bed in the Brigantian city. The Emperor's last word was laboremus, a lapidary Latin counterpart of eight soldierly Greek verses in the sixth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Laboremus - 'Go to it!' - was a magnificent profession of a life-long faith from the lips of a dying man. Ever since my inward ear first heard this watch-word being given, I have been taking it from Lucius every day. How many more of these days have I ahead of me? Well, I might still have my wits about me for another twenty-five years, or I might be run over in the street when I go out this afternoon. Meanwhile, let us redeem the time, however short or long our time may be going to be. During these remaining hours, weeks, or years, laboremus.