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SOME TENDENCIES IN HISTORY

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In this Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters it has been very exceptional that the president should be other than a scientist; and no presidential address has ever been delivered by an historian. Professor W. F. Allen was president, but died during his term of office. It is a matter of regret that he did not have occasion, from the fruits of his ripe wisdom, to make such an address. Except for the fact that there are so many here who knew Professor Allen intimately, while I have only admired him from a distance, I should feel it a privilege this evening to appraise his work and show the extent of our indebtedness to him. If the department of history at Wisconsin has won for itself an enviable place in this country it is very largely due to Professor W. F. Allen. A generation ago probably history was nowhere in America better taught than here. Frederick Jackson Turner, Professor Allen’s favorite student, acquired from him the inspiration which has resulted in noteworthy contributions to history. In this, a valedictory, the temptation is strong to laud the work of each of the three historians whose achievement and reputation brought me to Wisconsin, W. F. Allen, F. J. Turner, and Reuben Gold Thwaites. But the second has written in felicitous phrases of the last, and I feel my own inability. The thought of the work done by these men, each one a pioneer in his field, has led me to choose as my subject Some Tendencies in the Study of History. Not that all of these tendencies are new; many of them are old; but a survey of the field will bring out the present day point of view, which may be interesting to this audience of men working mainly in other fields.

In any discussion of modern historiography, we naturally begin with Edward Gibbon. At the centenary of his death,
the President of the Royal Historical Society declared that
the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was the "grandest
historical achievement as yet accomplished on this planet."
Frederick Harrison wrote, "It is no personal paradox, but
the judgment of all competent men, that the Decline and
Fall of Gibbon is the most perfect historical composition that
exists in any language." The statements of these scholars
are corroborated by the popular estimation of Gibbon's
work. Its vogue is extraordinary; more than a century and
a quarter after its first publication it is still one of the best
sellers.

What has caused this? Partly his grasp of the subject
and the style in which he presented it; surely not his defin-
tion of history, which he describes as "little more than the
register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind."
Yet this idea of history has persisted down to the present
day, and disasters are better remembered than great achieve-
ments of the human intellect which have made further progress possible. Many students can give the date of the
great plague in London, of which Defoe wrote:

"A dreadful plague in London was,
In the year Sixty-Five,
Which swept an hundred thousand souls
Away: yet I alive."

Some can recall that the great fire came the following year.
How many, even among scientists, know that these years,
1665 and 1666, were the date of Newton's great achieve-
ments, the infinitesimal calculus and the law of gravitation?
But Gibbon did not follow his definition; he wrote genetic
history, and he laboriously dug out the facts from the docu-
ments; so that his "superhuman accuracy" has become pro-
verbial. This delving after the actual facts distinguished
Gibbon in an age when the greatest writers were inclined to
deal with the philosophy of history.

The list of those who have written philosophies of history
is an imposing one: St. Augustine, Otto of Freising, Boling-
broke, Montesquieu, Herder, Hegel, to mention only a few.
This tendency also has continued to the present day. One
common form is "the assumption that a transcendent cause,
Providence, guides the whole course of events towards an
end which is known to God." As an illustration may be given
Charles Kingsley’s Roman and Teuton, where in one chapter, “the strategy of Providence,” the author tries to show how the Germans were led by Providence to form repeatedly a sort of flying wedge which hit the weakest point in the Roman line of defense. This style of interpretation has been and still is very popular; most of the church histories have been written from this point of view; and the tendency has survived among those who reject any theological bias. Many of the disciples of Hegel “tacitly assumed that every social fact has its raison d’être in the development of society—that is, that it ends by turning to the advantage of society.” “This,” as Seignobos says, “is the fundamental idea of... Ranke, Mommsen, Droysen, Cousin, Taine, Michelet.” In the same category is the “theory of the ideas which are successively realized in history through the medium of successive peoples; (following out Vico’s thesis “that changes in civilization could be interpreted according to an ordered sequence which has its moving force in the growth and change of the collective mind of mankind from generation to generation,”) the historical mission (Beruf) which is attributed to nations” such as the characterization of the Phoenicians as the missionaries of civilization, of Rome as the strong right arm which spread Greek civilization. This idea will long continue, however hard the historians may strive to introduce correct notions, for it is still a very popular conception that “Die Weltgeschichte ist ein Weltgericht.”

Fortunately the French Revolution directed men to a study of constitutional history. Some were eager to destroy all the foundation of society and to rebuild; many zealous reformers set to work on a priori notions, in a way that is familiar to us all. But the thoughtful were keen enough to know that it was necessary to study the past and to build in accordance with the stubborn facts; that rash innovations bear in themselves the seeds of their own destruction. Consequently the disorders of revolutionary Europe led to a study of the forms of government and therefore laid the greatest emphasis upon political and constitutional history.

This movement found especial acceptance in Germany, which led the way in this field of history, as in so many others. Emerging from the crushing ordeal of the Napo-
leonic wars, the Germans began a systematic study of their own history, and in particular, of the period of German glory, when the Holy Roman Empire was dominant. The formation of the Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde was one of the patriotic achievements of Stein and his associates, and resulted in the publication of the stately volumes of the Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Ranke’s seminar trained a host of able men to investigate the sources, and its influence, through direct apostolic succession, may be noted in universities in every civilized country. In company with hundreds of others, I can say that I was a student of one of Ranke’s students; his inspiration is spreading in constantly widening circles of waves, which will eventually reach the most distant shores.

With one group of the Germans we are especially concerned at the present day, the so-called Prussian school, represented by Droysen, Sybel, and Treitschke. Their work was the blending of history and politics and, in the case of the last especially, making history a vehicle for patriotic teaching. Freeman became the great exponent of this idea for England and the United States with his favorite phrase displayed on the walls of the historical seminar at Johns Hopkins, “History is past politics; politics is present history.” With such god-fathers, it is no wonder that this conception has had great currency, although comparatively few historians could be found now who would consider the statement either sufficient or satisfactory. We are more inclined to agree with Burke, who wrote a century ago: “Political arrangement, as it is a work for social ends, is only to be wrought by social means. Mind must combine with mind”; or with Oliver Cromwell, who said, “What liberty and prosperity depend upon are the souls of men and the spirits—which are the men. The mind is the man.”

During the first half of the nineteenth century there were improvements in methods of work, due especially to Ranke’s leadership, a change of conceptions on account of the rise of romanticism, which resulted in a new idea of the Middle Ages; a growing interest in the middle class, especially voiced by Guizot; and some very promising attempts to include new material in the scope of history. But, on the whole, histories were written along some one or other of the general lines laid down above.
In the second half of the nineteenth century new tendencies became prominent and older ones took on a new form. For various reasons history became popular; consequently many attempted to write history who had no qualifications for their task except their own ignorance. But these we can neglect, in order to consider some of the new tendencies which were to transform the concept of history and to some extent to denature it. One of the influential factors in England and America was the work of Henry Thomas Buckle, who published, in 1857, the first volume of his *History of Civilization in England*. Almost immediately he became famous. "His first volume went through three editions in a little over three years." "His works have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Dutch, and Russian." He was hailed as a prophet and guide, because he attempted to place history on a scientific basis. His thesis outlined very briefly, is that: It is the historians' task to discover the laws of history, The supreme principle is the law of progress. Progress rests upon knowledge. Intellectual progress is greater than moral progress; but intellectual progress is possible only through accumulation of riches, and these depend upon soil and climate. Therefore, the physical agents are the first conditions of all progress. Much of this was not new, but it was new to English readers. After Buckle's death in 1862 his fame began to wane and historians showed his inconsistencies and his indiscriminate choice of material. Lord Acton wrote: "Mr. Buckle, if he had been able to distinguish a good book from a bad one, would have been a tolerable imitation of M. Laurent."

Possibly Lord Acton's judgment is too severe, and recently many have consciously or unconsciously imitated Buckle. His disciple and biographer has claimed that he was the first to show that history could be interpreted only through political economy and statistics, and economists have often followed in his footsteps. But the economic interpretation of history really goes back to Adam Smith and his *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. In this work Adam Smith attempted to trace the "rise and fall of nations to their economic and commercial equipment and policy." This idea was restated as early as 1845 by Karl Marx who "maintained that the only sound and ever valid explanation
of the past must be economic.” This point of view has often been promulgated since and is held by many. One historical student writes, “Few, if any, historians would agree that everything can be explained economically, as many of the socialists and some economists of good standing would have us believe”; “But in the sober and chastened form in which most economists now accept the doctrine, it serves to explain far more of the phenomena of the past than any other single explanation ever offered.” After such a statement as this, it is refreshing to read the words of one of the leading economic historians, Werner Sombart, who declares that the economic interpretation of history is no more true and no more false than any other single point of view in the interpretation of history. With this we will gladly agree.

Those who seek to explain history by geographical or physiographic factors are also, to some extent, imitators of Buckle, although Michelet has been far more influential in emphasizing the importance of geography in history. In the hands of masters the physiographic interpretation has added largely to our knowledge of the course of history, and no historian now would neglect the study of geography. Unfortunately some of the enthusiasts in this country have been led into exaggerations; so that there have been battles royal in which Professor Burr of Cornell has been the protagonist for history. He answers some of the exaggerations in the following passage: “When the historian Buckle sought to reduce all history to geography and maintained that civilization must begin where facility of nourishment leaves most ample leisure, it was the great geographer, Oscar Peschel, who exclaimed against the wildness of his reasoning, and who pointed out that there is a land (New Guinea) where there exists a plant (the sago palm) which is almost solid nutriment, and where the labor of a man can in one day win him food for eighteen, leaving him the other seventeen for the development of the civilization in which the Papuans should accordingly have led the world. It was another great geographer, Friedrich Ratzel, who organized into the new science of anthropo-geography what Mr. Buckle sought to make the basis of history, and protested that in this science one must never speak of geographic necessity, but only of
possibility, or at most of probability. And there is hardly one of the younger European leaders in geographic science who has not taken occasion within the last dozen years thus to protest against wild assertions as to "geographic influence."

Teaching history as a patriotic task found many advocates, even before it was given such standing by the members of the Prussian School. Napoleon naturally thought of this as the chief duty of the historians in his empire, and expected every university lecturer to pay a tribute to him and his work. Bancroft's History of the United States was written largely from this standpoint and found, and still finds, many imitators. Some of the states insist upon having their own state history taught for this reason.

If time permitted, it would be possible to enumerate other modes of approach to history. Professor Dunning in his presidential address before the American Historical Association said: "In these days no science is sure of its footing until it has proclaimed its special interpretation of history. The economic, the sociological, the metallurgical, the pathologic, the meteorological, the astronomical, the geological, and for aught I know, the geometrical interpretations are in heated rivalry." It is not necessary to follow out all of these "sundry philosophical interpretations" of history to indicate how greatly its field has been broadened, and confused, by the workers in other branches. Possibly each one has added something of value; possibly amid the chaff some grains of wheat may be gleaned. Let us hope so!

But now we must turn to the present status of history and plot the course which the student must steer. What is his goal and how is he endeavoring to reach it? What freight has been added to his cargo from the other sciences and which are the most precious commodities? What instruments of precision has he for directing his course or determining his position? Only a partial answer can be attempted this evening.

The first point which forces itself upon our attention is the present interest in general history. While nationalism and therefore national history were dominant in the first three-fourths of the nineteenth century, the expansionist tendencies which became influential towards the close of the
century have had a profound influence upon the study of history. It has become necessary to include the whole world in its scope. At the International Congress of Historical Studies in 1913, Bryce, in his presidential address said: "The world is becoming one in an altogether new sense. . . As the earth has been narrowed through the new forces science has placed at our disposal . . . the movements of politics, of economics, and of thought, in each of its regions, become more closely interwoven. Whatever happens in any part of the globe has now a significance for every other part. World history is tending to become one history." Realizing this, scholars have joined in preparing authoritative general histories of various types, such as the Oncken in Germany, the Lavisse and Rambaud in France, The Cambridge Modern History and The Cambridge Medieval History in England. In this country, because of our poverty in historians, it was necessary to meet this need by translating and revising a German work. But the United States has felt this influence and has provided for a richer opportunity in the elementary and high schools and for a greater variety of instruction in the universities. The development of the European field has been the most striking feature of the historical work in our universities in the last quarter century. Recently Asiatic and South American history are being added. In the study of our own history, the same influence has been felt, especially in the colonial period. In this field the work of our own Professor Root is significant. No one of his students will ever believe that our history can be understood as that of an isolated section; the necessity of studying the administration and history of other English colonies in order to understand our own has been made so clear.

Abroad it has been much more marked; e. g., as Professor Kune Meyer has recently stated here, the study of Celtic history and literature received a strong impulse from the German scholars; and they have been studied as part of the general European history. Byzantine history, which was long left mainly to Greeks and Russians, received a new setting from the English Finlay, and now is studied by a host of scholars, especially in Russia, Germany, France, and England. It has been found advisable to establish a special
periodical, the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, in which articles in any language can be published. Another interesting illustration is the *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, founded toward the close of the last century, to serve as a medium for the study of all the inter-relations of history and allied subjects. In fact, we are all interested now both in general history and in history in its broadest conception. When we study any episode, although we may have to isolate it partially for the purpose of study, we are not concerned with it as an isolated phenomenon, but for the light which it may throw upon the whole course of events.

In the present status of history man is the center. As Lord Morley says, “To leave out or lessen personality would be to turn the record of social development into a void.” This may sound like a truism; but in the “sundryological interpretations” of history this has not been recognized. Some have attempted to make geographical influences the center; others, society rather than man; still others have chosen this or that factor to be emphasized. Moreover, the man whom we study is not “the economic man,” that much used figment of the imagination which never existed anywhere. We hold that man is not a mere creature of economic necessity, and that the pursuit of wealth has never been the exclusive motive of men’s exertions. This again is a truism which everyone knows, but plausible presentations of other points of view have obscured it, and some books receive great commendation which derive all our institutions from the economic needs of man, entirely neglecting his complex and ever-varying motives and ideals. Moreover, we have not realized sufficiently man’s own creative work, by which each generation is being shaped anew; the action of man upon himself, which Michelet summed up in the phrase, “Man is his own Prometheus.”

Our aim then is to study the life and activities of men. There is nothing new in this general statement. “The Romanticists (in the early years of the nineteenth century) grasped the cardinal truth that the historian had to reconstruct the life and achievements of the peoples.” Ranke wrote, “History must not be content to exhibit the outward succession of events, each in its own figure and coloring, but it must pierce into the deepest and most secret movements.
of human life, it must discover what in every age the race has struggled for and attained; and this not by the way of philosophical speculation but of the critical study of facts.” The point mainly to be insisted upon is that the men must be studied in their own environment from the standpoint of their own age, not from the point of view of our age. This may seem self-evident, but it is only recently that this idea has been accepted, and as yet it is not generally followed. Motley would have been indignant at such a notion. Lord Acton in his inaugural address at Cambridge twenty years ago urged his hearers, “Never to debase the moral currency or to lower the standard of rectitude,” but to judge men of all ages and countries by the final maxim which governed their own lives, “to suffer no men and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong.” “If we lower the standard in history we can not uphold it in Church and State.” In his presidential address before the American Historical Association, Mr. Lea answered his friend, Lord Acton, and stated that, “The historian should so familiarize himself with the period under treatment that, for the time, he is living in it, feeling with the men whose actions he describes, and viewing events from their standpoint. Thus alone can he give us an accurate picture of the past, making us realize its emotions and understand the evolution of its successive stages.” Professor Dunning a few years later again emphasized this standard. “The business of the historian who studies the sixteenth century is to ascertain the scope and content of the ideas that constituted the culture of that period. Whether these ideas were true or were false, according to the standards of any other period has nothing to do with the matter. That they were the ideas which underlay the activities of the men of this time is all that concerns the work of the historian.”

These ideals and aims make history a difficult subject. As man’s life is so complex, and his actions are determined by such varying motives, history must necessarily be complex. The causes of events are not easy to ascertain, and frequently must be sought in the far distant past. A man’s statement of why he himself did something must be interpreted from his whole mental attitude, which was partly the product of his education and environment, and partly of his own indi-
viduality. In our attempts to understand the men of a past age we lay stress upon their habits and daily life, but also more and more upon their ideas and ideals. "What it is important for us to know with respect to our own age, or every age, is not its peculiar opinions, but the complex elements of that moral feeling and character, in which as in their congenial soil opinions grow." "No presentation of history can be adequate which neglects the growth of the religious consciousness, of literature, of the moral and physical sciences, of art, of scholarship, and of social life." It is significant of the trend of our interests that the last two presidents of the American Historical Association have emphasized in their presidential addresses the necessity of studying the spiritual motives by which men have been actuated. In this field of endeavor Ranke's warning must be heeded, these factors must be discovered not by the way of philosophical speculation, but by the critical study of facts.

Where can the facts be ascertained? At first historians trusted almost wholly to the writings which had an avowed historical purpose, especially histories and biographies; Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, Plutarch, Suetonius, Bede, Villehardouin, Clarendon, and similar authors. And the tendency was to follow the author who wrote in the most pleasing or striking style; for centuries William of Tyre was followed for the first crusade with practically no attempt to get back to the sources which he used, although the latter were easily accessible in print. Gradually, however, scholars began to consult annals, chronicles, constitutions, treaties, letters, monuments, coins, weapons, and other historical remains. But still the preference was given to the written account, especially chronicles and memoirs, or recollections. This was natural, because it seemed possible to use these without much preliminary criticism. Careful scholars generally ascertained whether the author was a contemporary, whether he intended to be truthful, what his sympathies were, and summed up their criticisms, as Pothast did, in brief formulas: e.g. "trustworthy"; "very naive"; "written in barbaric, but sincere language"; "full of meat and remarkably well-written." Little attention was paid to the rules of evidence.

Later a reaction set in. Historians began to realize that recollections were seldom accurate, that the human memory
could not be trusted, that every writer colored the events, consciously or unconsciously. They demanded that history should be reconstructed from the more objective records, especially the documents, inscriptions, and similar historical remains. This tendency was of the greatest possible import, because such sources required much deeper study and more skill; the methods employed in the criticism of these reacted favorably upon the use of chronicles and memoirs.

Certain classes of sources came into special favor because they could be tested more thoroughly and the facts which were obtained had more objectivity. This was especially true of the legal documents. In the words of Mr. Henry C. Lea: “The history of jurisprudence is the history of civilization. The labors of the lawgiver embody not only the manners and customs of his time, but also its innermost thoughts and beliefs, laid bare for our examination with a frankness that admits no concealment. These afford the surest outlines for a trustworthy picture of the past, of which the details are supplied by the records of the chronicler.” Here, as often, Mr. Lea avoided the extreme views held by partisans and stated effectively the truth, that the records of the chroniclers are necessary for the completeness of the picture, although the legal documents are a more trustworthy guide for the general outline. It is noteworthy, too, that Mr. Lea was seeking to know “not only the manners and customs,” but also the “innermost thoughts and beliefs.” This was his lifelong interest, and in his zeal he examined many sources which he was the first to use.

Historians are working towards this goal and literally everything which has reached us from the past is a source to be used in our study. This evening I want to illustrate this general statement by laying stress upon one class of sources which has been somewhat neglected: what we may call, although inexacty, literary sources. These are especially valuable to those historians, an ever increasing number, who are seeking to discover what in each age the people have struggled for; the ideas which were going out and those which were coming in; the motives and aspirations for which men have been willing to live and to die. In this search, literary sources can not be neglected. “For literature is the wisdom of man and the history of man. ‘It acquaints the
mind,’ I am quoting a man of affairs, the President of the United States,—‘by direct contact with the forces which really govern and modify the world from generation to generation. There is more of a nation’s politics to be got out of its poetry than out of all its systematic writers upon public affairs and constitutions.’” “A literature is but the means by which the aspirations and ideals of a nation find expression in an abiding form.” “No literature is merely fortuitous or accidental, but springs from the very heart of the nation in which it lives.” A wide acquaintance with the literary sources of any given period will enable the historian to enter into the life of that age and to realize its wonderful complexity. He will not be likely to select any single one of the sundry philosophical interpretations of history, but will soberly try to discover which ones from the many divergent ideals actuated the leaders and how far the masses were responsive, and thus to determine why events took the course that they did. He will also learn incidentally many facts about the daily life and actions which will enable him to understand more fully the conditions of the age. A study of the Fabliaux, the laughable stories told in verse in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, will illuminate the rise of the merchant class, the decline of the lesser nobility, the growth of opposition to the Church, the decay of feudalism and chivalry. Moreover, it will make the student realize that these unnamed and unknown merchants were real men, with a sense of humor and a point of view, in some respects, curiously like that of our own west in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Caution is necessary. Literary sources have been used more frequently and more fully for classical history than any other, mainly because until recently Greek and Roman history have been given over to scholars better versed in the literature than in other sources. Their treasure trove has been rich, but their writings have often needed correction from the other material which has been preserved. The Monumentum Ancyranum, with its bald statements, is as necessary for the understanding of the Augustan Age as the great masterpieces of Vergil and Livy. Literary sources have been less used in the study of medieval and modern times, although not by any means wholly neglected. Pro-
Professor Turner has often illustrated the Western spirit in the United States by the literary efforts of the people who have made the West.

Possibly the general thesis can be illustrated most easily by taking the recent period, with which you are all familiar, and suggesting some of the writings, which are equally familiar, which will be useful to the future historian trying to understand the age in which we have been living. For the religious interests of the age he must take note of the encyclical of the popes, the works on modernism, the literature of the missions, and the devotional books which have appeared in such great numbers, including Science and Health; but also he must read Mark Twain's writings, The Warfare of Science and Theology, Robert Elsmere, The Case of Richard Meynell, The Inside of the Cup, articles in the religious periodicals, and some of the sermons published in the Monday papers,—by no means an easy task. For the social movements he must read works on suffrage, feminism, the sex problem and eugenics; muck-raking articles; writings on the peace movement and war poems; biographies of working men;—these are only illustrations from a vast mass. To understand our complex problems of sectionalism, such books as Tillie, a Mennonite Maid, Letters of a Homesteader, The Country of the Pointed Firs, The Leopard's Spots, the writings of Bret Harte, Richard Malcolm Johnston, George Egbert Craddock, and others. By taking these few illustrations for a few problems, I have probably succeeded in one point at least, and that is in bringing out the complexity of the subject; and this complexity is not peculiar to our own age, but is true of every period in history.

This is now recognized by historians and the result is a realization of the necessity of a long preparation. We need not dwell upon such elementary requisites as the knowledge of languages, geography, economics, and psychology. For different fields of history various auxiliary branches must be mastered; archaeology, philology, epigraphy, paleography, chronology, diplomatics, genealogy, numismatics, sigillography, heraldry; fortunately all of these are not necessary in any one branch of history. But all students need to study bibliography and criticism or historical method; for the first excellent tools have been provided, especially in the last
twenty years. After Mr. Lea had examined Langlois' *Manual of Bibliography*, he said, "If I could have had such a book fifty years ago, it would have saved ten years of my life." The catalogues of manuscripts which are being published by carefully trained archivists save many students months of useless searching. The work done for the Carnegie Institute by Professor Fish in Rome, Professor Paxson in London and other workers in Spain, France, Germany, England, Holland, Mexico, and other countries has revealed the existence of much new material for the history of the United States. This work and the labors of Professor Burr as historical expert for the Venezuela commission have shown that a man may need a knowledge of philology, paleography, chronology, and diplomacies to study American history. In the case of the Venezuela dispute, the work of the trained expert was of the greatest utility in enabling the commission to reach a correct decision. (It may be of interest in this connection to recall that our own Tank library of Dutch history was exploited in connection with this question, although most of the work was done in the Dutch archives.)

Training in historical method, in the rules of criticism, is indispensible. Ranke's seminar with his three criteria of criticism, precision, and penetration, did much to establish standards of workmanship. Since his day, methods have greatly improved. Rules have been established which make it relatively easy to teach the art of criticism. But it is only by long practice that the art can be mastered, because our natural tendencies lead us astray. "For historical criticism is antagonistic to the normal bent of the mind." "It is not a natural habit; it must be inculcated, and only becomes organic by dint of continued practice." "Many centuries and whole eras of brilliant civilization had to pass away before the first dawn of historical criticism was visible among the most intellectual peoples in the world." Moreover, this criticism demands detachment; it has been peculiarly depressing in the present war to see how many eminent historians in different countries, even our own, have stultified themselves by neglecting the most ordinary rules of historical method.

This last thought leads to a consideration of some of the present tendencies which are dangerous. First we may note
the disposition to laud the most recent history as pre-
eminently worthy of study. This theory has been widely
accepted by pedagogues and unfortunately has been advo-
cated by a large group of historical students, one of whom
“declares roundly that he has no real interest in anything
that happened prior to 1870.” He does not realize that he
can not really know the truth about any of the international
complications, or about many of the other events, since
1870. The documents in the archives of the various nations
can not be consulted, because each nation establishes “a
dead line,” usually about fifty or sixty years back, and
allows no access to the material since. In connection with
the present struggle several of the warring nations have
published books of some color, white, orange, gray, etc.,
giving a part of the diplomatic correspondence prior to the
outbreak of the war. Each is carefully edited in order to
produce the desired impression, and any trained observer
notes at once the incompleteness of each collection. Some
supplementary material, real or fictitious, has come to light
since the publications, but the whole mass is inadequate
and probably no one of us will ever have access to the sup-
pressed material. Our grandchildren will be able to form
a more correct idea of the causes which precipitated the
conflict. Studying the diplomatic history of the last fifty
years is like studying the nervous system of an animal
without having access to the spinal cord or brain.

Moreover, exclusive devotion to recent history is a denial
of the historical-mindedness which has been called the pre-
dominant characteristic of the present era. “An ironical
lawyer assures us that it would be better to be convicted of
petty larceny than to be found wanting in ‘historical-mind-
edness!’” This devotion is partly due to a pride in our
own advance and a contempt for the unenlightened ages
which have gone before. Far more true was the saying of
Bernard of Chartres, 800 years ago, “We are like pigmys
mounted upon the shoulders of giants, so that we can see
more and farther than they could; yet not by virtue of the
keenness of our eyesight nor through the tallness of our
stature, but because we are raised and borne aloft upon the
giant mass.” This tendency to study only recent history
is particularly dangerous, because it is in line with many
other ideas in education, and appeals to those who are seeking the line of least resistance. We are reminded of John of Salisbury’s criticism of his teachers in the twelfth century; he said that they might have accomplished good work, “had they stood as fast upon the tracks of the elders as they rejoiced in their own discoveries.”

I am not arguing that we should not study the most recent history. It is the history of greatest interest to us, and it is vitally necessary that we should understand it as fully as possible. But in order to do this, the background and remote causes must be mastered and our own period must be placed in its proper relation to what has gone before. Only the observer trained in the study of the past can hope to interpret recent events; and he will be very humble in doing so, because he knows how inadequate the sources are, and how great the chances of error. Each new fact necessitates a reconsideration of his hypotheses and frequently the abandonment of some of his tentative conclusions.

Closely akin to the interest in recent history is the over-emphasis upon the new facts that are gleaned by the use of instruments of greater precision than our fore-runners knew. It is very easy now to point out the errors made by the great masters in the past, to correct and amplify their statements by the use of better methods and of sources recently come to light. Great is the pride of the scholar who shows how inaccurate his predecessors have been. Yet his work is frequently like the extraction of gold from the tailings left by the original process of mining. The work is well worth doing, and the results are valuable; but the total output is usually small compared with the rich store of metal secured by the original worker. Too frequently the point of view expressed by the saying, “A poor thing, my lord, but mine own,” with the emphasis upon the last clause and not the first, has prevailed, and the emphasis has been laid upon the less important. Because of this tendency, many of the books on history, and some of the university courses, have been of little value. But probably history is not more afflicted in this respect than most of the other branches of learning.

Other misleading tendencies might be cited; these two have been chosen because they are especially likely to interfere with the progress of our study. The historian’s aim
must be to understand the past, to interpret it sympathetically, and to co-ordinate his results, so as to lay a firm foundation for future work. His attention must be directed to man and his achievements and failures. The study must embrace all the remains of men’s activity. In presenting the results, however, a careful discrimination must be made between the facts which are significant and those which are of little value. In this process the student shows his real ability; he may know all the rules of criticism, he may have mastered all the necessary auxiliary sciences, he may have exploited all the sources, but if he is not competent to judge which facts should be selected, what material should be used, he will never be a historian. If he has this ability and can present his results in a clear and attractive style, his work may live for a century, or more.

The last statement implies that we have not reached a final stage in our historical work. Most certainly not! This is the greatest inspiration to the historian! He can not tell what the next step will be; he can not tell whether it will be possible, as some hope, to frame “descriptive formulae, qualitative and quantitative,” which will enable us to make history more objective and more accurate. He has no means of knowing the sources whence new aid will come. In the last twenty years the unearthing of papyri in Egypt has enabled historians to begin a re-examination of Roman history with notable results. The recent development of statistics has furnished a more exact instrument for testing historical facts. The study of tribal customs and folk lore has added something and promises more. It is certain that each generation will re-interpret the history of the past. The historian can only hope that his own product may be of some use to the future worker; he has the consolation of knowing that if his task is done honestly he is helping in a work which will always interest and command the services of men of like mind, a goodly fellowship. As in his daily investigation he is associating sympathetically with the men of former ages and of by-gone civilizations, so by his written words he may hope to live in future generations and to aid them. Is not this the goal for which every sincere worker in any branch of knowledge is striving?