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What Use is History?

NOT ALL of us agree about the benefit to be had from studying the past. People who believe its experiences should be used today and passed along in trust to their successors rub elbows with those who think that tradition and precedent are a ball and chain hindering progress.

What a pity it is that this should be so! The vital beliefs and good practices of our western world rest on the fulcrum of historic knowledge. There is no basis for our society save its past. There is no guide to business decisions except that given by experience. There is no personal maturity that is not built upon reflection on events of yesterday.

The record of things to be recalled is contained in books, in the minds of parents, in universities, and in business files. What are books but the thoughts of people of their time put down in type? What has a university to proffer except what it has absorbed of the past, to be communicated to every new generation with interpretation and adaptation? What has any mother to pass on to her children except the accumulated wisdom of mothers of the past and the lessons of her own experience? What is the purpose of all our office work from the clay tablets of Babylon to the punched tape of today's electronic machines except to provide the history of transactions?

There is one qualification to be made: we must use only what is true, significant, and applicable. We must, as Jean Jaurès, French statesman, philosopher and orator said: "take from the altars of the past the fire — not the ashes."

For some reason there has been a tendency since World War II to turn again to history.

It may be that we are returning to the ancient conception of history as philosophy teaching by experience. We want to know how human beings have behaved under circumstances similar to our own. Different though the crises of today may appear, there are at the centre of men's experiences simplicity of cause and certain basic principles.

We may have decided that there is no need for us

to go through suffering so long as we can draw upon and profit by the experiences of others.

Economic history tells us how our forefathers produced their livelihood; social history tells the progress they made in developing a better life.

Our debt to the past

We may be disappointed by the apparently small social progress we have made. We may think that the advancement has not lived up to our opportunities. Dr. W. F. Collier's *Outlines of General History*, published at Edinburgh in 1868, has as its first chapter heading: "Adam to Babel". We may comment cynically that no further chapters are needed because we have not yet progressed past the age of confused talk.

But the extent of our success or failure does not affect the necessity we are under to use any possible means to keep our balance in these slippery days. We are always coming up against the emphatic facts of history in our private, business and national experience. When we can pluck an example from the past and use it to help us today that is a very practical use of history.

Even fables and stories have their uses. One after another we come face to face in our life's adventures with every fable of Aesop, of Homer, of Chaucer, of Scott, and verify them with our own heads and hands.

All the fictions of the Middle Ages, that seeming pause between about 500 A.D. and the revival of learning toward the end of the 15th century, reveal themselves as masked expressions of what the minds of people toiled to achieve. Their magic stories may appear childish to us, fit only for juvenile story books, but only because our science has made their fantasies come true: the shoes of swiftness, the power of subduing the elements, of using the secret virtues of minerals, of speaking across continents, of sailing over mountains and seas on magic carpets.

We are forever indebted to the past. It is the source of our very identity. In the present moment, which changes as we live it, the past is all we know.

Our forefathers

By telling us what our forefathers did, history inspires us in two directions: to respect their achievements, great in their day, and to strive to equal their resourcefulness and courage.

Children take many things for granted. They do not marvel over automobiles, airplanes, radio, television, the telephone. Many things seem to us very simple because someone ages ago or a half century ago was clever enough to think of them.

It would be a healthy custom to pause, every once in a while, to pay a memory tribute to the explorers and inventors, the enterprisers and the artisans and the farmers, who laid the foundation of our prosperity. They blazed trails through the forest and over mountains, trails which we have widened into highways and along which we have laid railway tracks. They paddled their canoes along unknown rivers and lakes where we have developed a seaway. Their deeds inspire us not to allow the active bravery of the first rough age of Canada to change into a passive acceptance of benefits.

Beyond our ancestors of the past two or three centuries stretches a line of people who were already old as nations, who were already wealthy and civilized, when Canada was a handful of tepees inhabited by stone-age hunters.

We have all those past ages open to us. Everything is in our history to tell us how we arrived at today's comforts and sorrows: the efforts, actions and sufferings which wrung our civilization and culture out of chaos.

That is one use of history. It is the record of societies of men and women, of the changes which those societies passed through, of the ideas which determined their actions, and of the material conditions and forces that helped or hindered their development. Arnold J. Toynbee, one of the foremost historians, has chosen selections which demonstrate his theory that all civilizations pass through similar transitions and that we can better understand our own times through a study of the past.

We can use history to give us binocular or stereoscopic vision, so that we see all around today's problems. Life in the present takes on a deeper meaning in the larger context of time. When you put a picture of history into the viewer alongside one of a similar event of today, you get a roundness. The picture enables you to judge the necessity and importance of proposals for action today. It even provides examples of the results that may be hoped for, and warnings about the failures.

Therein lies the secret of a rewarding use of history. We are not seeking to put history under a microscope, to cut it into slices for critical examination. What we do want is to apply the experiences of the past to events today. A spark from another age may illuminate our problem, and help us to plot our course.

Open-mindedness

Nothing can be more precious and useful to anyone than open-mindedness. The hide-bound politician cannot become a statesman; the one-idea business man cannot become a great captain of industry; the bigoted man or woman cannot enjoy the fullness of satisfaction that life proffers.

History contributes to open-mindedness. It shows that people holding widely different views of social, political and religious matters have lived worthily and contributed their share to achievement in the arts, letters and sciences.

Mature thinking is aided by history. The student of history is less likely than others to believe that any opinion is altogether right, that any purpose is altogether altruistic, that any calamity is altogether deplorable. He is less likely than people ignorant of history to pin derogatory labels on people; to emphasize differences so as to stir angry emotions; to allow prejudice of race, creed or caste to dictate his association with people around him.

A knowledge of history begets prudence. Throughout the years there have been people trumpeting the end of the world. We are constantly under the feeling of crisis. Sometimes we become exasperated, but a better way would be to look back over the record.

Such an examination will show us how some peoples mastered their difficulties by making well-directed efforts in a united way, while others were defeated by difficulties because they refused to recognize them or depended upon someone else to resolve them.

Culture and maturity

History is essential to the thinking of a cultured person. It is a necessary ingredient of maturity.

To prove these statements it is necessary only to think back upon the difficulty of making conversation with a person who has nothing in the past with which to compare or to which to relate a matter of immediate significance. There is nothing more exasperating for educated people in the society of the uneducated than this restriction of conversation by the limitation of their mental world.

Our Canadian culture has its roots in many lands. When we follow those roots back we find that what we are today is part and parcel of all humanity. It is only through our history that we can become completely conscious of ourselves.

But in order to benefit fully we need to read history across the frontiers instead of reading our history as ours and foreign history as something external. We need to accept the fact that other ways of behaving exist as well as our own and that they serve the needs of other human beings. Many Canadian problems can only be understood when placed in a general world setting.

The facts of history are connected by skeins of consequences in every direction. We are part of a civilization, as well as being a nation, and that

civilization grew out of and exists alongside other civilizations. Realizing this, we are warned against rash, unjust, narrow and selfishly one-sided action.

Official international policy, expressed through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, favours the improvement of history teaching in schools so that it will more effectively contribute to international understanding. A UNESCO handbook seeks realization of the fact that human beings are everywhere sufficiently alike to be thought of as virtually members of one family; that they have everywhere the same sort of problems, for example to feed and protect themselves, to bring up a family, and so on; and that everywhere they admire beautiful things and aspire toward fine and noble things, even though their standards of beauty and nobility may differ.

It is not sought to exclude the teaching of national history, but to explain it in the light of general world history. National history gains added significance by being placed in a large setting.

Truth in history

History is made up of the living issues of the day in which it is made. Its laboratory is the world we move about in. It is added to daily by trivial happenings. The problem is to decide between the relevant ifs and might-be's of history.

Like all the sciences, history seeks truth. It must be as true to facts as human fallibility will allow. It is not history if it is written by gossip-mongers and propagandists. If the actions it records are honourable actions, they demand nothing more than truth. Where embellishment shows itself, suspect the report.

Some chapters that masquerade as history were written in defence of a special cause or in support of particular beliefs. The writers wanted "history" to support their passionate politics as a weapon in party strife.

We should be glad today if our young people could be given the story of the past in such a way as to convey the facts. This is no time for maintaining ancient hatreds. They cloud our understanding and befog our judgment.

To tell the truth in history does not necessitate being dull. Great historians are interested in reporting events as they see them.

We can become quite excited by the story-telling skill of Herodotus, the dramatic flourish of Thucydides, the seductive phrases of Macaulay, and the colour of Carlyle. None of these writers had a commonplace style such as you would expect to find in the diary of a soldier.

Man is something more than a doer of deeds. The story of his life need not be a dreary chronicle of unrelated events, but should be a marvellous drama of thought, feeling and action. Marc Antony and Cleopatra found making history a most exciting business: it would be an injustice to tell their adventures dispassionately.

Sir Winston Churchill's history writing, as the *New York Times* reviewer describes it, is "Personal and proud, judicious and illuminated by a long historical perspective, rich with the grandest and most stately prose written in our time."

There is still a great field for good and able popularization on the elementary levels. Sir Walter Scott in his novels, and Jane Porter in *The Scottish Chiefs* have used fragments of the truth which pedantic historians scornfully threw behind them.

Does it matter whether or not King Alfred let the cakes burn; that Sir Francis Drake finished his game of bowls before going out to scatter the Spanish Armada; that Wolfe recited Gray's *Elegy* as he approached the Citadel? These stories serve to illustrate the character of the men. History does not consist only of the great events that mark the years and centuries but of the thoughts that guided and inspired people.

History may be learned in a most congenial way by reading biographies, the actual drama of men and women. Sometimes people pressed their way to the front of events, but more often they just happened to be there at the right time, like the little Dutch boy who saved the dyke by plugging a hole with his finger. The story of how they came to be there, what they did, what impelled them, and what the results were: that story is history.

Stories in stones

We are altogether too likely to overlook history that lies outside history books, history that is written in our buildings, our art, our handicrafts, our folk-songs. Look at the diversity of their history left us by the Greeks: civil history, epic and lyric poems, drama, philosophy, architecture, sculpture. All these — an ode of Pindar, a marble centaur, the stately columns of the Parthenon — tell the spirit and life of a people. Every brass tablet in Westminster Abbey, every bust in the French Academy, signifies something that influenced the preparation of today's environment.

The history of Canada has been written in wampum-belts, earth-mounds, stone-heaps and totem-poles; in Chambly Fort and Fort Garry; in poetry, folk-songs and legends; on forest trails and river portages; in churches, town halls and houses.

We need imaginative eyes to see it all. Toynbee tells us that toward the end of the 18th century "the living generation in the Middle East were squatting among the amazing ruins of extinct civilizations without being moved to inquire what these monuments were."

It would be well for Canada if we were to make sure that no ancient building can be torn down, no ancient map or record destroyed, until competent people have examined its worth as part of our history.

Canadian history

It is time that Canada became actively interested in her history. We cannot be politically mature without

an intelligent awareness of our past. Yet, said Dr. Hilda Neatby in a paper prepared for the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences: "We have as yet no national history, and no genuine consciousness of the past." Even our political biography is sparse, because "Canadian statesmen have succeeded in shrouding themselves in obscurity."

The work so far done by scholars is of a high order, but it is fragmentary and local. Two things are needed: to bring our history together on the scholarly level, so that we shall have our past in a connected story, and to bridge the gap between that scholarly history and the man-in-the-street.

Professor W. L. Morton summarized our need in his essay for the Royal Commission: "What is needed is positive direction by national agencies in all fields of historical work, archives, libraries, publication, exhibition and commemoration." This can be brought about by legislation, grants and national associations.

Textbooks should be free of biased interpretations, and should present what all Canadians have in common. The Hon. Ernest Rinfret said in an address some years ago that it is inconceivable that different Canadian histories are taught in French- and English-speaking schools. "We are simply raising our children with prejudices... No wonder Canadians are not united as they should be."

The basic factual content in Canadian history textbooks should be the same in all provinces, in the opinion of the Committee for the Study of Canadian History Textbooks, a committee that reported to the Canadian Education Association in 1944. The genius of the author of such a history would lie in preserving the book from becoming a pale and featureless mass of facts.

Provincial and local achievements should be given their deserved place, but every textbook should tell about the great swells in history that affect all Canadians. There is nothing in the stories of Wolfe and Montcalm, of Champlain and Cartier and Mackenzie, of Dollard and Cornwallis, that does not belong to all of us. We should benefit by including in all textbooks the exploits of the English explorers, the United Empire Loyalists, the Hudson's Bay Company, as well as those of Madeleine de Verchères, d'Iberville, and the French fur traders.

While we are at it, we might pay attention to the study of national history textbooks used in the schools of Canada and the United States, prepared by people on both sides of the boundary in 1947. This report was published in *Canadian Education*. It probed the quantity and quality of chapters devoted in each country to the history of the other. It recommended that "a more determined effort should be made to present a clearer picture of recent economic, social, and cultural interrelationships between Canada and the United States. Attention should be devoted to both similarities and differences in these areas."

Much material to be used as the basis of books on Canadian history will come from the Archives, organized in 1872. Here are to be found manuscripts, maps, pictures, and original documents telling our story from pre-Confederation days. Constant efforts are being made to retrieve from inactive departmental files all the documents that are worthy of perpetual care.

The collection of all inactive files of public records in one place where they will be under proper care, accessible to government officials, scholars and the public, is the ideal sought.

History need not depress

Some people may avoid reading history because they become depressed by the slowness of the upward curve they see in the record of human affairs. But if there is much folly in the record, there is also much greatness; if there are many mistakes revealed, there are also great moments of inspired action.

We need to pay attention to the significant things, and avoid wrangling over the trifles. Even if we find that we were mistaken in setting the creation of the world at so recent a date as 4004 B.C., it is at any rate better to look back that far than to see no farther back than Confederation. If we become confused by the fifty different reasons given in various books for the outbreak of the two world wars, yet we have a better understanding of the cause than if we assumed there was only one reason, or no reason at all except Fate.

When we read the story of mankind we find that there has never been a period which has not been regarded by some of its contemporaries as critical. History seems to be made up of one crisis after another. Ours appears to be more serious because we are in it.

Familiar refrains about the "breakdown" of Western Civilization may obscure, unless we read history, the extraordinary creativeness that has made this civilization the richest, most dramatic spectacle in history. It has, says Herbert J. Muller in *The Uses of the Past* (Mentor, 1952), maintained a high level of creative activity over a longer period of time than have previous societies. We are inheritors of knowledge, skills, arts, ideas and ideals, of enduring things that we should not willingly give up, but which we are apt to forget because we take them for granted.

A person without history is like a sleep-walker who finds before him in the morning what he has done in his sleep. The nation that neglects to know its own history is limited to the short present of the now living generation. The business enterprise without records is bedevilled by the rush to catch up with developments that records would have enabled it to anticipate.

On the broadest plane, what reason is to the individual, history is to the human race. By virtue of reason, man is not, like the brute, limited to the narrow present, but also has available to him the incomparably more extended past with which the present is linked and out of which it has proceeded.