

CHAPTER VIII.

HISTORY.

506. History is **one of the noblest studies** to which man can devote himself. Cicero styles it :

“The witness of ages, the light of truth, the life of our memory, the teacher of our lives, a messenger from the distant past” (*De Or.*, ii. 9).

Frederick Schlegel remarks :

“History constitutes the apparently easy and first elements of all instruction ; and yet the more cultivated the mind of a man becomes, the more multiplied opportunities will he find of applying it and turning it to use, the more will he discern its richness and divine its deeper sense. Indeed, no thinker is so profound as to be able to anticipate with accuracy the course of history, no scholar so learned as to think he has exhausted it, and no sovereign so powerful that he may with impunity disregard its silent teachings” (*Lectures on Modern History, I.*)

507. The **kind of instruction** that history affords is most precious, for it enables us to gather with comparatively little trouble that knowledge which others have acquired by long, and often bitter, experience ; it enables one man to profit by the lives of millions. As he travels in mind through various lands and successive ages, he observes the customs of diverse nations, their manners of worship, of government, of warfare, of commerce, and of agriculture ; their cultivation or their neglect of the liberal and the useful arts ; and he becomes acquainted with the characters of men and the workings of the human pas-

sions. Thus his mind is enlarged, his views are extended, and he gathers wisdom for his own conduct, learning what course of life leads to success, and what other course leads to destruction.

ARTICLE I. NATURE AND GENERAL LAWS OF HISTORY.

508. **History is defined** as the narrative of past events for the instruction of mankind. Instruction, then, is its end or purpose. Should this instruction embrace all the information that can be drawn from the study of past ages? Macaulay would require this (*Essay on Mitford's Greece*) ; but in doing so he departs from the approved way and he aims at what is visionary and unattainable. He acknowledges that such an historian as he desires has never existed ; and Prescott remarks : “Such a monster never did and never can exist” (*Essay on Irving's Conquest of Granada*).

The historian who strives to compass more than he can will necessarily neglect some part of his task ; and the danger is that he will neglect what is less attractive but more truly important.

509. There are two classes of details which **the historian will properly omit** and leave to other writers :

1. Whatever affords **mere gratification of curiosity** rather than valuable information. Such matters, as Macaulay acknowledges, are usually left to the historical novelist :

“Mr. Sismondi publishes a grave and stately history, very valuable and a little tedious. He then sends forth as a companion to it a novel, in which he attempts to give a lively representation of characters and manners. . . . We manage these things better in England. Sir Walter Scott gives us a novel ; Mr. Hallam a critical and argumentative history. Both are occupied with the same matter” (*Essays*, “Hallam”).

Macaulay has striven to unite both elements, but with little success. His *History of England* has all the charms of a novel; but "it is not a student's book, and could no more be quoted as an authority than Shakspeare" (*Dublin Review*, June, 1856, "Hallam"). "Everybody reads, everybody admires, but nobody believes in Macaulay" (*Blackwood's Magazine*, August, 1856).

510. 2. What is of no importance for the general student, but **interesting to specialists only**, should not overload the pages of a general history. There are special histories of painting, music, commerce, etc.; but history proper deals with such matters in so far only as they are intimately connected with great events and lessons of wisdom, which are the specialty of history as such. For history is not a collection of universal knowledge, but a special department of study.

511. What knowledge, then, or **what special instruction is the historian to impart?** We answer, the knowledge of the great events and important changes which have affected mankind, in as far as the knowledge of these increases the wisdom of succeeding generations. This is what the greatest historians have endeavored to record, and for the proper recording of which they have been considered as great historians. Tacitus troubled himself very little about "rummaging the old-fashioned wardrobe" of Tiberius—a task which Macaulay would impose upon the historian—but he unmasked the hypocrisy of that prince and showed the world how he destroyed the liberty of Rome.

512. Among the great events and important changes that the historian is to record, **the principal are** those which affect religion and systems of government, military achievements, the progress or decay of liberty, of general enlightenment, or of the arts and sciences, and whatever is prominent in the civilization of a people.

513. There is one line of thought in which modern historians are expected to improve on the ancients. We attach more importance now to **the welfare of the people** than to the splendor of public exploits, and justly so, because we understand better than the ancients did that the true end of government is the happiness of the governed. The modern historian must therefore take more pains to point out what measures led to the happiness and what to the sufferings of the common people. This task is more important than the descriptions of battles and sieges, which make up so extensive a portion of ancient histories. On this point Macaulay is correct:

"The circumstances which have most influenced the happiness of mankind, the changes of manners and morals, the transition of communities from poverty to wealth, from knowledge to ignorance, from ferocity to humanity—these are for the most part noiseless revolutions. Their progress is rarely indicated by what historians are pleased to call important events. . . . The upper-current of society presents no certain criterion by which we can judge of the direction in which the under-current flows. We read of defeats and victories, but we know that nations may be miserable amidst victories and prosperous amidst defeats. . . . We have read books called histories of England, under the reign of George II., in which the rise of Methodism is not even mentioned" (*Essays*, "History").

514. Since the purpose of history is instruction, **the great law for history** is that it shall impart sound knowledge, giving us true facts, faithfully presented and correctly interpreted. Truth is to the mind what food is to the body—an essential requisite for its proper development and healthy condition. For the absence of truth from histories nothing can atone—no style, however beautiful; no name, however popular.

515. Still, **all errors are not equally important.** If an historian is somewhat mistaken about the number of men who perished in a given battle, about the armor of certain

troops or the name of their commander, such errors do not seriously interfere with the lessons of wisdom which the reader is expected to learn. But those errors are most pernicious which affect practical conclusions; above all, when those conclusions regard the highest interests of mankind. Thus Hume, who so misrepresents many facts as to instil infidelity; Gibbon, who labors to undermine Christianity; Macaulay, who incessantly carps at Catholicity; and Bancroft, who, while patronizing all religions, inculcates indifferentism to all positive teaching—far from instructing, lead men astray on subjects which it is their highest interest to understand aright.

516. It is not here supposed that all these historians have set themselves deliberately to work to misrepresent what they knew to be the truth. **The critic** deals with the literary productions themselves, and with the motives of the writers in so far only as they throw light upon the value of the works. As for the **student of history**, he ought to inquire before reading whether the author is a reliable guide, whether he is sound on the first principles of reason and revelation. If he is not sound on these he will be sure to mislead. "Can the blind lead the blind? do they not both fall into the ditch?" (Luke vi. 39).

ARTICLE II. SOURCES OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE.

517. *Rule 1.*—In gathering materials for a history the writer should, as far as possible, **consult the original documents**, and not be satisfied with taking statements at second-hand. Lingard's conduct in this respect is worthy of imitation:

"To render these volumes more deserving of public approbation," he writes in his preface to the *History of England*, "I did not hesitate, at the commencement of my labors, to impose on myself a

severe obligation from which I am not conscious of having on any occasion materially swerved: to take nothing upon trust; to confine my researches, in the first instance, to original documents and the more ancient writers, and only to consult the modern historians when I had satisfied my own judgment and composed my own narrative. My object was to preserve myself from copying the mistakes of others, to keep my mind unbiassed by their opinions and prejudices, and to present to the reader from authentic sources a full and correct relation of events."

518. It is owing in great part to the **neglect of this rule** that misconceptions and misstatements are handed down from one historian to another. For instance, how often do we not hear of the cruel dungeon in which Galileo is supposed to have been incarcerated, when in reality he was simply forbidden to leave for some time the halls and gardens of a magnificent palace? (See the collection of original documents regarding Galileo in the *Dublin Review*, vol. xvii., New Series. On the transmission of false statements from one historian to another, see an interesting chapter in Cardinal Newman's *Present Position of Catholics in England*, pp. 226, etc.)

519. The original **documents to be consulted** are not only books, deeds, journals, chronicles, memoirs, official records, private letters, etc., but even such relics of the past as buildings, tombs, coins, paintings, tools, and so forth. Lately much light has been thrown on some portions of history by the study of such relics. Still, we must distinguish between the real facts which these studies have discovered and the mere theories which historians and scientists are ever inventing to fill up the void left by the facts.

520. **The Holy Scriptures** are, of course, the most venerable and the most reliable source of historic knowledge: besides being inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are, even from a human point of view, the most ancient and the most

authentic documents. (See Southwall's *Recent Origin of Man*, Preface.) Vain men are ever building up theories, and exploring every remnant of former ages, with the view to find contradictions between God's word and the records of time. But the highest authorities in antiquarian researches, such as the two brothers Rawlinson, Lenormant, Chevallier, and others, have sufficiently shown that there is no real conflict between science and revelation.

521. *Rule 2.*—Distinguish carefully between **reliable and unreliable documents**. Not every document, however ancient, is truthful; nor is it enough that a writer is a contemporary of an event to be a reliable witness of it. The historian must know how to sift his evidence with acute discrimination, as a judge must do with conflicting testimony. Within this century there has been considerable earnestness displayed by leading historians in discovering the truth on many points which had been misunderstood for ages. Niebuhr has made important discoveries bearing on the history of ancient Rome. Voigt and Roscoe, though not Catholics, have restored the honor of Gregory VII. and of Leo X.; Hallam and Ranke have labored zealously in the cause of truth, though both are prejudiced witnesses; Maitland has, to a considerable extent, changed the views of the learned in favor of the middle ages; and the Catholic historian Digby has set forth the true grandeur of those Ages of Faith. (On Hallam see *Dublin Review*, vols. xix., xx., New Series. See also Maitland's *Reformation*, Essay I. "On Puritan Veracity.")

522. As examples of unreliable documents from which writers have often drawn gross falsehoods, we may mention the two historians of the Spanish Inquisition, **Limborch** and **Llorente**, who have supplied Prescott with most of his misrepresentations on that subject. Both are utterly unreliable writers, as is proved to evidence in Archbishop M. J.

Spalding's *Miscellanea* (pp. 216, etc.; see also Balmes' *European Civilization*, appendix). Prescott admits the extravagant exaggerations of Llorente; but unfortunately he has thought it proper to consign this important admission to a foot-note which he puts near the end of his work (*History of Ferdinand and Isabella*, vol. iii. p. 492), while he takes special trouble to exalt the authority of Llorente in the chapter on the Inquisition (vol. i. p. 265), to which he purposely appends a sketch of Llorente's life.

523. Late historians owe much of their reliability to the fact that they have gained more free access to authentic documents than was granted to their predecessors. For instance, Agnes Strickland in her *Lives of the Queens of England and Scotland*, and Lingard in his *History of England*, have been allowed to consult the English State papers; and now the Vatican archives have been thrown open to all comers.

ARTICLE III. QUALITIES REQUIRED IN AN HISTORIAN.

524. The *first quality* which an historian will need in collecting his materials is **industry**—hard, long, and persevering labor. Lucian, in his *Treatise on the Manner of Writing History*, correctly remarks:

"This is not a task for fluent writers or careless compilers; but more than any other species of literature it requires much thought, if the historian wishes to produce what Thucydides calls a treasure that will endure for ever" (ch. v.)

525. Of industry **the ancients** have given us bright examples. Herodotus travelled over the greater part of the then known world. Thucydides began to collect his documents at the beginning of the war of which he intended to become the historian. Polybius travelled much

to visit those places with which remarkable events were connected. From him we have this celebrated maxim: "Truth is to history what eyes are to animals. As animals are of no use without sight, so history without truth is only amusing and unprofitable narration."

526. Most eminent **historians of modern times** have displayed no less industry. Prescott's laborious research is unquestionable.

"He has thoroughly examined," says Archbishop M. J. Spalding, "and seems to have carefully sifted all the original documents relating to the Conquest [of Mexico]. . . . He obtained no less than 8,000 pages of unpublished documents. He was also greatly aided in this task by men of distinguished talent in Mexico" (*Miscellanea*, p. 252).

527. David Hume, on the contrary, is notoriously deficient in research. He wrote before the critical school of history began; he consulted no original documents; he did not weigh his second-hand authorities; he simply wished to write a pleasant narrative in a faultless style. Hence the *North American Review* says of him: "That any instructor in our day should place Hume's work in the hands of a youth, leaving him to suppose that it contained the truth, is to us a matter of no little surprise." (See a thorough criticism of Hume in the *Dublin Review* for May, 1842.)

528. The *second quality* needed by an historian is **impartiality**. This does not consist in being indifferent to justice and injustice, good and evil, as the infidel critic Taine pretends to be.

"What matters it," he writes, "if Peter or Paul is a rascal? That is the business of his contemporaries; they suffered from his vices, and ought to think only of despising or contemning him. Now we are beyond his reach, and hatred has disappeared with the danger. At this distance, and in the historic perspective, I see in him but a mental machine, provided with certain springs, animated by a

primary impulse, affected by various circumstances," etc. (*English Literature*, vol. ii. p. 407).

This is an absurd indifference, which can only be justified on Taine's own theory: "Vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar" (vol. i. Introduction). Still, such indifference is not seldom exhibited by writers of unsound principles.

529. The impartiality required of the historian is the absence of such **prejudice** as would prevent him from discovering or from acknowledging the truth. For instance, a person raised in a mercantile community and destitute of a liberal education is apt to appreciate no enterprise which does not add to the wealth of the nation. He may readily be blinded by prejudice to such a point that he will judge a grand enterprise like the Crusades by no other rule than that of cold utilitarianism.

How far prejudice has affected historians in regard to religious questions is ably explained by Cardinal Newman in his *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (L. i., etc.)

530. The *third quality* needed by the historian is **discrimination**, which will enable him to determine:

- (a) What documents are reliable;
- (b) What is the real meaning of obscure passages in reliable documents; and
- (c) Which is the true or the most probable among conflicting testimonies.

The ancients did not generally manifest this critical spirit. Still, even Herodotus takes care to distinguish between what he witnessed and what he heard, between what he considered as probable and what as fabulous. In the present century history is become much more critical than ever before; but it is far from perfection as yet. For instance, Fra Paolo, alias Pietro Sarpi, continues to be

quoted as an authority about the Council of Trent, though it is clearly proved that he wrote under the dictation of passion and bitter hatred.

Judicious discrimination supposes in the historian a keen insight into the characters and the passions of men, so as to discern the selfish motives which may impair the value of his authorities.

ARTICLE IV. HISTORY GENERALLY RELIABLE.

531. Mankind has exhibited in all ages a high appreciation of fidelity in historical records; and historians have, as a rule, striven earnestly to discover and transmit the truth. It may, therefore, be safely asserted that **history is generally reliable**. Several reasons contribute to make it so:

1. Man is naturally desirous of discovering the truth on important matters;
2. It is a principle of Ethics that men do not deceive wantonly when important interests are at stake; and, therefore, even questions of life and death are unhesitatingly decided by the testimony of proper witnesses;
3. When historians have gone to great trouble to discover the truth with regard to events, they are not apt to trifle with knowledge so laboriously acquired;
4. If one is tempted by special considerations to misrepresent some weighty events, others will unite their testimony to contradict him, and thus no gross errors are apt to be universally received.

532. What, then, must we think of the well-known saying of Sir Robert Walpole to his son Horace, "Quote me not history; for that I know to be false"? This means that not every assertion found in a history is to be at once received as decisive. Thus understood, the caution is a wise one. We should **read history with a critical spirit**, with careful discrimination between reliable and unreliable au-

thors. When history is thus read it will be found that the vast majority of past events are agreed on by historians, and therefore it would be folly to refuse credence to them. It will appear, besides, that falsifications concurred in by many historians are confined to special classes of events. If copious streams of error have been poured out upon the earth, those streams can be shown to flow from certain sources and along determined channels which it is quite possible to distinguish from the general currents of reliable information.

533. Against our thesis, "history is generally reliable," it **may be objected** that so great an authority as Count de Maistre has said: "The history of the last three centuries is a general conspiracy against the truth." And our Supreme Pontiff, Leo XIII., in a late encyclical letter on historical studies, writes: "Now, if ever, it may justly be said that the art of writing history would seem to be a conspiracy against the truth." But it must be noticed that both these authorities speak of special departments of history, of such as bear upon the Catholic Church.

534. That the **history of the Church** should have been greatly misrepresented by her opponents need not surprise us. Christ had foretold that His Church should be persecuted. "If you had been of the world, the world would love its own," etc. (John xv. 18-22). The persecution of the sword has ceased, but other methods of attack are continuing in all ages.

"It was natural," says the Pontiff, "that those who were attacking the Papacy by every means in their power should not spare history, the witness of such great facts. They have tampered with her integrity, and that with such persistent art as to turn into weapons of offence the very arms that were most suited to the purpose of warding off aggression. The Centuriators of Magdeburgh made themselves conspicuous by their adoption of this system," etc.