

THE UNIVERSAL HISTORY OF

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History Must

AFTER THIS glorious century of education, "1066 and all that" whirls in a disorderly commotion around our untrained recalcitrant memory. The Quattrocento, Pericles, the Mayas, Dante. Just when were they? Twenty-three civilizations went by. Why 23? In which order? Goethe, Shakespeare, Michelangelo — probably all to do with the Renaissance. And this is history. Our perspective is one billion years backwards and one moment forward in time. So many beginnings, ascents, aspirations and a catastrophe at the end disproving any final meaning of it all.

☞ In the meantime, we relish the anecdote that Hoover and Roosevelt did not say one word to each other at the inauguration in 1933, that Churchill when caught in Adamic innocence by our President, with great presence of mind joked, "You see I have nothing to hide from you." We feel sorry for John Quincy Adams when he doubted the existence of a just God after Jackson cut down the trees Adams had planted near the White House. We tremble when we read of Eisenhower's helplessness towards the Russians in the occupation of Germany 1945, and we are encouraged when we witness the successful improvisation of our gigantic war effort from North Africa to Berlin, from New Guinea to Tokyo. On the other hand we feel humiliated by the defeat of the Tenth Corps in Korea.

☞ From all this it is obvious that there are two kinds of history. They do not differ so much because one is nightmarish, the other bright. No, the difference seems to be that one is humiliating or elevating, but always getting under our skin. The other is too big and too far distant for both reactions.

☞ Could it be that this strange dichotomy is the result of a confusion in our minds? We do not seem to be sure where history belongs. Is it a rubbish heap of facts? Is it a tree of which we ourselves are either leaves or buds, seeds or fruits?

☞ In the United States, the first response to this confusion has been a new emphasis on American history. American history seems to offer a way out. As far as it is history, it can be treated scientifically. And in as far as it is American, it appeals to our sympathies and our fears, our hopes and our gratitude. From the huge desert of historical facts as listed in an encyclopedia, American history has emerged like an oasis, in which the earth of hard facts and the heaven of strong convictions are able to meet and to look for their reconciliation.

☞ Of this wholesome relation to history, the listener should be aware, for then the desert of a hostile, meaningless history may change its aspect. The whole history of the race, whose innumerable branches have met in the New World, cannot be viewed as a graveyard of bygone civilizations, as a museum of artefacts, let alone as a desert.

☞ But, perhaps, history is the power to distinguish desert and oasis. Perhaps, it is neither knowledge nor sympathy, neither curiosity nor fear. *What if it were an increase in power?* Power, we are told, we all crave. I am not at all sure this is true. However, I am sure that the rattling bones of the historical past will make us feel feeble and unstable unless they cease to be either facts and artefacts or anecdotes. History which is not harnessed as more power to you remains a nightmare indeed. The record tries to tell when history is transformed from a nightmare into more human power.

☞ How is it done? The recipe is not hard to construe, for don't we all know how people differ with regard to their own presence of mind? We

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know how few people take the moment in hand and rise to the occasion. Most of us know afterwards what we should have said or done in a trying situation. Later we think of the witty repartee, the stern rebuke, the enthusiastic acceptance which would have been the right response. We all, then, have a treasure house of missed opportunities for making history. Presence of mind is a condition for entering history today. Without it, we, although apparent contemporaries, miss out on our own time's history. But nobody has missed the bus of historical opportunity always. Some bright light permanently transfigures those hours in which we were up to the occasion. These hours are unforgettable. Our memory preserves them with an effortless certainty. These then are our own historical experiences, and they, and nothing else, should form the starting point for any mature person's dealings with history in general. Any moment in which you have risen to the occasion is one point in time which sustains for you all the ingredients of an historical event. It would be a fantastic detour to approach history in general without leaning on your own experiences of some presence of mind, some missed opportunity, some rising to the occasion.

As soon as you have the courage to face your own successes and failures of making history, you immediately understand that history cannot help enlarging these experiences of the unforgettable presences of mind, of re-presenting more and more such lived experiences. All history cannot do better than you yourself. Only, it can apply your own power for the unforgettable to more and more processes of life. Which is the power you derive from your own unforgettable moments? It is the power that keeps you from regressing behind these moments. The platform reached in these situations of opportunity and decision constitutes the level of your personality, the degree of your human dignity, the height of your stature. Below this platform you cannot fall without lasting hurt. We create our own rank by the presence of mind shown in the various entanglements of our existence.

If this is true, then all history cannot do anything else. All history gives you degree and stature, height and level below which we cannot fall without permanent hurt.

Every other question about history depends on this last tenet. History does not deal with a bygone past as though it was the past. It deals with those events in which we can exercise ourselves our power of a presence of mind. That which cannot be represented as an exercise of our own power, may be considered unimportant, yes, unhistorical.

All the tools and tricks, skills and labors of the historian center around this task of exercising our own power on an ever widening present. My lifespan of seventy or eighty years does exercise my powers of the presence of mind and of making history. But the historian offers to add to these seventy or eighty years whole centuries, whole millennia. They become present parts of my present, thanks to the historian. Not the past as the past, but the past transformed into a present experience, we should call history. This is the only defensible purpose of history. This alone explains the character of history writing. This illuminates the proceedings of all great history, which must set us ablaze with the excitement of an opportunity missed or availed of, an occasion mastered or thrown away.

And recognizing this purpose of history to give you power over an ever enlarging present, you perhaps will listen to a disc on the ways of history in the hearts of men and women without the confusion: Why history?

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