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HISTORY AS PAGEANT

I

By "history", I do not mean words put down on paper to describe and account for actions, events or circumstances but the actions, events or circumstances in themselves. Their translation into writing measures the degree of success of the translator and this must always fall short of perfection. It may be that the idea of history as pageant will contribute to the success of those who attempt to write history.

Innumerable metaphors may be conjured up to aid in clarifying the difficult term, history. The writing upon the subject is endless. There is nothing new under the sun. We do not, nevertheless, tire of looking at the same sun-illuminated landscapes. A statement conceivably may be neither novel nor aesthetically pleasing, but if it is honestly personal, it may yet have some value.

History is a stream, it is the ocean of life, it is our poor sad humanity stumbling over the same old stones age after age. So the metaphors go. Comparison to a stream suggests the idea of pageant: history may also be handled as a pageant, or procession—the procession of humanity through the ages. "Stream" or "river" has its interest, too, a deep interest. Rivers come from some mysterious upper country, or countries, whose nature often is not known. They flow, visibly moving past the stranger on their banks. They change as he watches them. They may be in flood, tearing at their banks. They may meander peacefully, looping backward and forward across the valley floor in endless, apparently unmoving "oxbows". In sound and fury they may hurl themselves down cliffs, cliffs sometimes so high that the water of the river, like one of those immense scenic falls in the mountains, sprays out into a mist and seems to disappear—until gathered together at the

base, it once more moves on in its course, a river again; almost, in its unity and direction, a being. However lofty his vantage point, eventually the spectator can no longer see the course of the river. It disappears. But he knows it goes on. Goes on where? He can only surmise. "All the rivers run into the sea". That is a well-attested fact for physical rivers. But into what sea does the river of history run? Who would dare to say? There was a time, not so long ago, when good people thought they knew and they pictured the goal, albeit always in hazy terms. Today we know we do not know, and our surmises gives us cold comfort. It is not pleasant to think of the sun growing cold or suddenly exploding and roasting us all. So we, man, that is, close our minds to that far-off time. We do not ask to see the distant scene, we take refuge in an ancient faith:—"it will last our time".

If the river will float a boat, we can get into that and go downstream. There are two limitations to boating on the river of history:—we can never launch our boat at the source, for the source is either lost in innumerable little rills or it is too small to float the smallest of boats, in either case unobservable, and secondly, having got into the boat, we can go only one way, downstream. And the river is so long that the longest lived of us must die with only tiny segments of the voyage completed. But other travellers step in as we are carried out and so, life after life, the story of the river may be built up. There is no necessary continuity, for man does not necessarily speak to man across the generations. But by one device or another, he may so speak—by habit, custom, tradition, the inherited memory of peoples. Above all, of course, by artifacts, mostly stones, often metals and, in the lower reaches of the river, paper with marks on it, that is, writing.

The difficulty with the metaphor of a river is that, relative to the observer in the boat, everything else is stationary. He may describe things "as they go by". But they do not go by. He does. It is the observer on the river bank who sees things go by. And the observer cannot be both the observer and the observed. So it may be best to abandon the metaphor of history as a river and look at history as pageant. Pageant is not the most exact of words: it carries suggestions of a set piece, something contrived. Perhaps "procession" would be a better word—history as a procession. "Procession" fits in more neatly with the concept "observer". The observer may be considered as

stationary with events (that is, the procession) moving past him. But this subtracts as much as it adds, for the observer in the boat floating on the river is himself part of the river, whereas the observer watching a procession is in no sense part of the procession. It is the dilemma of all social studies: the observer is also the observed and the observed is also the observer. The detachment which at least formerly is not today marked such a science as physics cannot obtain for the student of society. The limitation also marks some of the non-social sciences: biology, for example, and more emphatically psychology, the so-called "life sciences". However much they may seek to escape the infinite variety of life by establishing "laws" based upon its less complex manifestations (as, for example, white mice), biologists can never be sure that they have made a precise repetition of the experiment. Biological "laws" are no doubt more accurately established than are social laws, but it is not likely that biologists would contend that they are irrevocably and eternally established, established beyond all possibility of amendment. The same considerations must hold for attempts to establish "laws" for what, for want of a better term, may be called "intelligence" or "the mind". In this area, the margin of error must be much greater than in biology. The bizarre results that may emerge from attempts to make "laws" for human behaviour, especially human behaviour in the mass, are writ large in the text books of "social psychology".

The historian is at least free from the quackery which the search for "law" so frequently produces. He knows he is both part of the river and observing the river, that he changes with the river. And the river with him. He consequently just does his best with the senses that nature has given him and with whatever aid he can avail himself of from others who also have the senses that nature has given them, in whatever formal fashion they may have built up the observations made through and with those senses. The historian—the man drifting downstream in the boat—is also well aware that his observations, what his senses convey to him, are no better or no worse than those of other persons in his position and with his capacities, whether they are upstream of him or downstream. And he has no means for going against the current or faster than the current. He has just got to sit there and use his eyes.

II

The figure of history as a river appeals to an imagination with a dash of the mystical about it but it is anything but completely satisfying. A river is, after all, water and it does not make life much fuller to be able to record that an occasional log goes drifting by or a fish jumps. The figure of the procession seems preferable. Necessarily, no figure is entirely adequate.

One of the outstanding marks of any procession is order. "History orderly?" the reader exclaims, "history is intrinsically disorderly—a jumble of this, that and the other, without apparent point, without beginning, middle or end, just time going on. To cap the indictment, it is, to use Shakespere's words 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'."

There is no way of disproving the indictment. We shall have to wait until after eternity to find out, a long wait. But there is also no way of proving the indictment correct. No amount of arguing or discussion will clear up that point. The only way of handling the difficulty is to curtail the field of inquiry. The most splendid procession gets boring if it goes on too long. And so it is with the course of things. That must be cut down to manageable proportions. Our parade will become boring if it begins with the creation of the universe and subjects everything since then to the same minute inspection. Minute inspection may indeed be legitimately applied to any segment of the parade and someone will examine that with interest. But segments must, so to speak, be rationed.

Yet here we are, with the parade not yet organized and already uncertain about what is to go into it, its route or its order. The uncertainty is recent. In the 17th century, Bishop Usher, who fixed the chronology of the Bible, decided that not only was the world created in 4,004 B.C., but that the very act of creation occurred at twenty-five minutes past four in the morning. We have long since abandoned that kind of certainty. The parade began long before 4:25 a.m., 4004 B.C. When did it begin? We do not know, and never will know, for to fathom that mystery is to fathom the mystery of infinity.

The historian is not called on to address himself to ultimates. He is the observer at a parade. He has many fellow observers, some of them stationed much closer to the starting point than himself. Adjoining him

but up a little closer to the starting point is the archaeologist, then next to him the anthropologist. Next are the geologist and the astronomer. And next again, possibly, the physicist. Highest up of all are the men without tools, without laboratories, without documents, without anything but their own minds. They may be called philosophers and theologians. Their business is to speculate upon the origins of the parade, its objectives and its goal.

Each class of observer formulates his own rules of observation, the criteria by which he will describe the parade. All would agree that a common thread runs through their concern. The thread is that which pervades the mystery. The thread is *time*. *Time* may be the ultimate mystery—or at least, *time* and its companion, *space*. Speculation on their nature is not for the historian.

The section of the parade which is left to the historian to observe is a relatively short one. He does not deal, as does the geologist, with the years in their millions. He may pass over the fossils. He is not concerned with the forms of life on earth which preceded man. He is not concerned with primitive man: primitive man in his varieties is for the anthropologist. He is not directly concerned with the nameless, ruined cities of the past: these are for the archaeologist. The historian is concerned with the identifiable, namable individual man, with, as it were, John Smith. There are many monuments with lettering upon them which cannot be read. They are not the concern of the historian. He must wait until someone else comes to his rescue. Before the transliteration of the Rosetta stone opened up the wealth of Egyptian documents to us, the life of the Nile valley did not concern the historian, it concerned the archaeologist. With documents that could be read, the Egyptian John Smith, theretofore just a mummy, came to life. He began to talk to us across the centuries. History as a consequence added to its domain a large stretch of time: the section of the parade that came under the historian's observation was dramatically extended.

It could be that other decipherments would add still other segments. They have already filled in for us some of the details. A few years ago the decipherment of the "linear B" script opened up glimpses of the history of the ancient civilization of Crete. The 19th century had already added in considerable detail the history of the Euphrates valley.

It may be that some day the cipher that shrouds the stories of Central America or Mexico will be broken. Such achievements will add to the clarity with which the observer sees the parade, but they will not increase the length of that portion of the parade antecedent to the observer. That we know to be impossible; for a point is reached at which man's evolution had not yet conferred upon him the gift of writing, that is, of record-keeping, of what might be called "frozen thought". There is some representation of human figures in the ancient cave paintings. This is of enormous interest to anthropologist and archaeologist, but it is not material for the historian. It is not the portrait of "John Smith". Until "John Smith" appears, the identifiable individual, there can, properly speaking, be no history—just the passage of time, time organized by various experts under this heading or that, but still, just the passage of time. When "John Smith" appears and begins to tell us something of himself and his fellows, his loves and his hates, his entrances and his exits, then history strictly so-called, also appears.

It is evident that there is nothing in the intrinsic nature of the "Parade" to warrant its division into these segments, geology, anthropology and the rest. These are all man-made, subjectively applied devices for organizing the almost unorganizable *time*. *Time* itself is not affected by the names which man applies to its periods. Time just goes on. "Time", as the hymn writer says, "on its ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away". In fact, the hymn-writer, basing his lines on the Psalmist, puts the position as succinctly and as clearly as it well could be put, here or hereafter:—

Before the hills in order stood
Or Earth received her frame
From everlasting Thou art God
Through endless years the same.

The historian will readily admit that as the parade draws abreast of him and then disappears down the road into the distance, he cannot tell what is happening to it. He can assume that it will still be going on, not much altered. But he cannot foresee. In other words, at the present point in time, exact knowledge ends. Forecast is not knowledge. Forecasts can turn out to be accurate, and often, as time goes by, their

accuracy can be checked and verified. But forecasts involve the assumptions of continuity—even such forecasts as eclipses of the sun. For practical purposes it is right to assume continuity and life could not go on without assuming it. But forecasts are forecasts. Until the scroll of time has actually unrolled, we do not know what is written on it.

III

Men speculate upon the nature of the parade, its length, its variety, its meaning. Most men are simply absorbed by the passing spectacle it presents. We all love a parade. Why not? It is a dramatic spectacle of life that is passing by us.

And that is possibly as good an explanation as may be found. We all love a parade—the appeal lies deep. If a person passes along in front of our house as we loll on the veranda, our eyes follow him, but he does not otherwise excite our interest—unless he presents something out of the ordinary in his appearance, such as peculiar clothes. If two persons pass, the degree of interest scarcely heightens. But if four people come along, two and two, walking more or less in step, or expressing purpose in their walk, then our attention is really aroused. If now the sound of a band is heard in the distance, we wait expectantly for the procession to appear. Any procession will get an audience. It may be only the Salvation Army band that has struck up. It may be the first echo of some magnificent occasion, such as a coronation or the funeral of a great man. From the small to the great, the attention will mount, mount, mount, the crowds in the streets increase. But the feelings of each and every individual present will be the same—curiosity, expectancy, delight. Delight—especially in a funeral, for the sense of the presence of death, safely remote, heightens the pleasure in being alive. There can be no doubt about it, a procession appeals to something in us very deep and very primitive. It appeals as strongly to the civilized as to the savage, to the sophisticated as to the simple. It has a universal appeal. Since the figure I am using is history as a procession, the wide-ranging appeal of history can be grasped—and understood. It can solace the discouragements of the historian.

It is, as I have just said, a dramatic spectacle of life that is offered by every parade, even the simplest. The analysis may go further. People strolling by the house alone are individuals. People going by in groups

are in some measure organized. If they march, keeping in step, the spectator responds to the marching time; he is, though at some space away, caught up into the group of marching men—so much so that he is under temptation to get up and join them. Small boys often do just that: they fall in after the band, especially after the drums. Our language is full of metaphors drawn from the procession, especially the military procession: “the sound of the drums”, “following the colours”, “the vile squealing of the wrynecked fife” (from a hostile point of view), “Onward, Christian soldiers”. No set of men honours the power of a parade more deeply, more familiarly, than the military. What power have well-intentioned pacifists against the sound of the bugles?

But surely it is absurd, says someone, to think of the course of human existence as a procession, a real, well-organized event, calculated, orderly. Yes, it is absurd, that is if man has not become anything more than other animals. Yet quite apart from “the immortal soul in him”, that is, apart from the traditional Christian view, it is plain that he has become something more than other animals. It is this something more that has got him into most of his troubles. It is this something more that organizes the parade. The men in the bands, the troops following the bands, fall into step, the bands play in time, all in obedience to some inner command of the individual participants. The procession of history is not the passing of a mere mob. How long organization, order, the cohesive discipline of the group spirit, has been asserting its imperatives, is anyone’s guess. Possibly even before man actually became man. At any rate, it is a matter of a long, long time. Man himself, while part of it, has made the procession orderly: he has himself given some rhyme and reason to his history.

Man has also stood aside from the procession as it has passed, tried to avoid being worked upon by its magic, resisted it, criticized it, suggested how improvements could be made in it, “in the future” although he has always known that there could be no “re-runs”. This objective attitude towards the procession, that of the observer, no doubt has often described portions of the procession as orderly that have been essentially disorderly; that is, it has sought to impose a greater pattern of rationality than the phenomena will stand. Every human mind, up to its limits, does this with everything. “If I were he, I

would act thus and so", we say. That word "if" is constantly on our lips. If we were to banish it—there it is again!—we would have mentalities quite different from what we do have. So it may be allowed that the pictures the observer takes of the procession—they are never more than snap-shots—minimize some details, magnify others and in general distort. That is probably the best that our present mental cameras can do. History, as represented—however represented—will always be different from "what actually happened". Let us hope that the cameras can be improved as time wears on. Of one thing, however, we may be sure—the pictures they take will never lose their interest!

"But", someone interjects, "cameras, physical and historical, have been enormously improved, especially of recent years". They have indeed. Behind them stand all the resources of our civilization. For actual photography we have the marvels of television. Writing his *Brave New World* as recently as 1930, however, Aldous Huxley had to agree that some of the elements of reality could not be recaptured mechanically, for when he introduced one of his "movies" of the future, he had to bring into it something that has not yet been invented—a "feelie". We may very likely get "feelies" for the delectation of the masses—we could probably have "smellies" at any time, and smells are most important (and conspicuous) components of reality—but would all of these mechanical devices give us "the real thing"? Ask any young man if he would be content with McLuhan's "Mechanical Bride".

Still, adjuncts are better than nothing. It is the adjuncts of monument-making and writing that have given us memories longer than the personal, and no historian can object to those memories being clarified as time wears on. The whole business of the writing of history lies in those words "clarifying memories". To aid in the task, the writer of history, the observer of the procession, has not only his own two eyes, a pen and a notebook, as Mr. Gibbon had, but he has vast libraries, with their arsenals of typists, photostats, xeroxes, *et al.*, and beyond such things, the constant careful re-editing and publication (in readable form) of necessary texts and documents. He has also the assistance of his colleagues in cognate disciplines, especially, the archaeologists.

Between archaeology and history, it is often difficult to draw a line. The archaeologist often makes a relatively complete job of reconstructing a former civilization. He can tell a great deal about ways of life, means of living—nearly everything that pertains to externals. He can also infer much about internals—the nature of the religion, for example. But as remarked above, he cannot find “John Smith”; John Smith, the individual. The moment, however, he comes upon something with writing upon it that can be read, along comes John Smith.

An excellent example of the close relationship of the two disciplines is afforded by Roman Britain. The literary sources are relatively few and they have all been carefully worked over. But the soil of the island of Great Britain south of the Antonine wall covers a multitude of Roman remains, only some of which have so far been carefully examined. Examination yields exact knowledge of military installations—camps and forts—of the floor plans of houses, the lay-out and extent of cities. Coins and pottery establish chronology. Above all, tombstones and memorials give names, ages, family and official relationships and infinite other data of a personal nature. Being in Latin, such survivals are easily read and understood.

A further illustration (one in which I myself personally participated) may be offered. On the eastern outskirts of the town of Folkestone, England, there were uncovered a few years ago, the remains of a Roman villa. It stood near the coast and may have been the residence of one of the officers known from record to have been in charge of the fleet maintained on the south coast to ward off the Saxon pirates. The town authorities have since seen fit to cover up the site again and have built a golf course across it. But not far away, there are “allotments” for citizens desiring to grow vegetables. On one of these some digging, casually undertaken, revealed Roman remains—such objects as quern stones and bits of pottery. The site probably had been a “dump” behind the villa. Such objects possibly could have been dated. But then a piece of Roman tile was found with letters on it—letters as easily read today as the day they were made. These letters were arranged thus $\begin{matrix} \text{C} \\ \text{BL R.} \end{matrix}$. Their interpretation needed no expert. Clearly they were meant for *Classis Britannica*, “The British Fleet”. A little historical knowledge of the period fitted all this together. The tile was the equivalent of the modern British “Broad Arrow” , the mark traditionally used to

identify government property. No doubt it had been affixed to something belonging to the Roman fleet. A few similar tiles have been found at other places on or near the south shore. Taken by themselves, they are not overly important sources of historical information, but they fit into the solution of the enormous jig-saw puzzle on which archaeologist and historian between them have cast so much light—Roman Britain.

Another example from the same period of the combination of the two disciplines is offered by the picture that can now be given of Roman London. The city can be fairly fully described, its walls traced, its street plan partially mapped, the sites of some important buildings located. Its size, its place as a port, the general nature of its life inferred, all this without important literary material. In the case of Roman Britain, as in many other cases, this combination of historian and archaeologist has had the happiest results. It has enabled the observer to see with great increase of clarity the details of the procession.

But here is the procession itself! As it passes the point at which the observer has stationed himself, his eyes "glued" to it, how, he asks himself, is he to describe it, its infinite variety? "Age cannot wither it or custom stale its infinite variety". How convey such qualities, imaginatively, vividly, yet soberly, not grandiloquently or sentimentally? The words used must be "colourful", yet sharp; in a sense exuberant yet restrained. How bring home to persons not present the dignified stride of the leaders, the attitudes of the participants as they march by, the clang of the cymbals, the boom of the drums, the sound of the footsteps rising and falling in time, the colours of the uniforms, the floating of the ensigns as they stream out bravely to the breeze, the gilded chariots and coaches, the noise and clatter and roar of the orderly hub-bub?

It is impossible, of course, to create reality by the spoken word, still less on the printed page. Every attempt to describe the procession must fail. The historian knows this well enough. He has before him the attempts of the masters of his craft. They all fail. But the wonder is, is it not, that within the limits of human capacity, they so magnificently succeed?