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The Nature of Explanation in History

I. The Area of Historical Concern

(a) *An Autonomous Past*: History is essentially a study of the 'otherness' of the past, which needs to be allowed a certain autonomy if it is to speak to us authentically. It needs therefore to be studied *whole* rather than to be subjected to an agenda imposed by contemporary man. It is salutary, here, to heed Brian Harrison's judgment that the attempts of some universities to make the study of history more relevant may involve the imposition of a 'scheme of historical study in which it is perhaps more difficult to acquire that particular virtue of the historian – the capacity to see how people could once think differently, the realization that problems of contemporary concern will not always be so, because they were not always so.'¹ Here also Acton's dictum that history must be our deliverer not only from the undue influence of other times but from the undue influence of our own, is relevant.

There are perennial difficulties here. It is almost as if the current demand for relevance in the teaching of history is the pathological converse to the old whig optimism: as against the whig view of past times, past men, and past institutions as a preface to the dawning of the liberal state, the contemporary cry is for an imposition of our problems, even our neuroses upon the past, so that, most unhistorically, medieval heresy is seen in terms of modern protest movements, even student protest movements; the Pilgrimage of Grace is written in the language of class, and Erasmus is cast as an ecumenical statesman out of time. In both ways of thinking the past loses its autonomy and the study becomes unhistorical. In like fashion, the passing of judgments on the past in terms of some ongoing ideology will obscure rather than illuminate the historical process: perhaps the best example here is the liberal condemnation of Calvin for his consent to the burning of the anti-

¹ B. Harrison, 'History at the Universities' in *History*, October 1968, p. 366.

Trinitarian, Michael Servetus, in 1553. But as far as the sixteenth century is concerned these are wasted words: it is much more important to realize that he was already on the run from the Catholic Authorities at Vienne, and to see how this shows the two-sided combat in which the Reformers were engaged – on the one hand a reform of Catholic abuses, but on the other hand a defence of orthodoxy against the radicals: Calvin's Geneva, above all, could not be seen to be soft on heresy. So, Butterfield's judgment: 'Real historical understanding is not achieved by the subordination of the past to the present, but rather by making the past our present and attempting to see life with the eyes of another century than our own.'² But that said we must play the game fairly – and be as generous to the predecessors of those who stand opposed to us, as those whom we see as our fathers in the Faith; indeed on them we may need to be more severe – for at least, as fellow-believers, we may pose the question whether Calvin, with an open Bible in his hand, ought not to have broken with the common practice of his times and acted otherwise to the defiant heretic; but this then becomes a theological and not an historical judgment.

(b) *A Personal Past*: Here it seems to me the historian must properly take his stand against the inroads of positivism for in our own century there has come into being a pretentious pseudo-scientific kind of history that covets the general laws and abstractions of the laboratory and steam-rollers the complexities of the human personality. Take for example the fashionable explanation of that historical miscreant, the Industrial Revolution. Here are theories which explain the beginnings of industrialization in terms of demography, improved communications, financial reorganization and reform, and in so doing minimize the importance of the personal factor – the curiosity, the daring, the endeavour of a Watt and a Boulton, a Kay and an Arkwright, a Telford and a Macadam. The point may be thought a common-place, but it is a common-place which has come under attack recently, especially in the context of more sophisticated techniques of quantification and

² H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London, 1931, p. 16.

more significantly, it is a common-place of great theological significance. Of a student essay concerned with nineteenth century imperialism, in all 6,000 words of which no person was mentioned, one of my colleagues reflects: 'I willingly concede that it was not possible to suspect, much less to visualize, the hand of God dealing with the Bessemer processes and over-production, the jingoism, nationalism and other tendencies with which the student peppered the historical landscape, because she never related them to free human action. And it was for the sake of individual men, not for the sake of abstractions, that the Word of God was made flesh.'³

For the historian an event can never be confined merely to action but must always be concerned with action and agent and this necessarily involves a discussion of motivation – for an account of the action without the agent and a description of the agent without the complexities of mind and emotion would not reflect any past reality – its only existence would be as an analytical abstraction of the present. History without persons is nothing.

(c) *The Chronology of the Past*: The caricature of history as solely concerned with battles, kings and queens and treaties, and their chronology has perhaps led to a reverse distortion of its nature in such rash generalizations as 'history has nothing to do with dates': in our universities, for example, the penchant for comparative studies calls forth from Geoffrey Elton the reaffirmation that 'history should study that which is long in time rather than broad in space.'⁴ In some measure this was part of the antagonism that existed between Namier and Professor Butterfield. Namier's *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*⁵ is a brilliant analysis of the intricacy of factional politics in 1760. But the word 'structure' is crucial for it is suggested that in his enthusiasm for socio-parliamentary analysis Namier discounts the dynamic element in history:

³ D. Nicholl, 'An Historian Calling' in *Downside Review*, 1958, p. 287.

⁴ G. R. Elton, 'Second Thoughts on History in the Universities' in *History*, February 1969, p. 61.

⁵ Sir Lewis Namier, *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, Rev. Edn. 1957.

Butterfield says of the approach of his school that it tends 'to block any real understanding of what we ordinarily call politics, the kind of politics that can only be told in the form of narrative . . . to block any desire to study the thing we call development'.⁶

The historian ignores the importance of chronology at his peril – whilst sociologists, scientists and economic theorists may treat it cavalierly, the historian may not. A new concern for the chronology of European expansion into Africa has, for example, recently revolutionized the explanation of the 'Scramble for Africa',⁷ and deposed a whole array of psychological, economic and political theories of Empire which simply did not fit the dates. History must finally be seen as a story and not an analysis.

II. *The Nature of Historical Method*

(a) *The collection of evidence*: The historians' starting place must always be his evidence, though, of course, there will necessarily be personal, ideological, and circumstantial reasons which determine where he begins his search for the evidence. In this search he needs to exercise a catholic spirit, collecting a rich diversity of material. Sometimes his difficulty will be the scantiness of that which remains, at other times its superabundance in the former situation he must always be ready to admit that the evidence is too incomplete to allow of any confident conclusions – and indeed the latter situation may also drive him to a similar silence. In my own field of nineteenth-century nonconformity, for example, the raw material consists of biographies, sermons, treatises, hymn-books and service

⁶ H. Butterfield, *The Listener*, 8 October, 1964.

⁷ R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, London, 1965, p. 472. 'The partition did not accompany, it preceded the invasion of tropical Africa by the trader, the planter and the official. It was the prelude to European occupation; it was not that occupation itself. The sequence illuminates the true nature of the British movement into tropical Africa. So far from commercial expansion requiring the extension of territorial claims, it was the extension of territorial claims which in time required commercial expansion. The arguments of the so-called new imperialism were *ex post facto* justifications of advances, they were not the original reasons for making them.'

books, minute books and tracts, public and denominational records, newspapers and novels, account books and baptismal records, not to overlook the non-documentary evidence of bricks and mortar, paintings and portraits and other of man's artefacts.

(b) *Testing, Contexting and Evaluating the Evidence:* The eliciting of evidence is not in itself sufficient: there follows the important task of evaluation. Who is the writer? What do we know of his attitude to life? What qualifies him to speak authentically upon the subject on which he has written? Is it corroborated by other evidence on the subject? And a host of similar questions. In particular, the historian will examine the consistency of the document from within – if it does not agree with itself then it may be suspect.

Or it may be as in the case of the Religious Census of 1851 that the methodology espoused within the document provokes doubt: few critical scholars now would commit themselves to the arithmetical precision of the estimates of Horace Mann, the Registrar-General's agent, in his calculation that of a population of approximately 18 million on 20th March, 1851, only 58 per cent were 'available' to attend church at any one time or in the calculation that 50 per cent of afternoon attenders on Census Sunday had not been present in the morning and that 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ per cent of evening attenders had attended neither previous service.⁸

The source under investigation has also to be tested by external evidence. An interesting example from seventeenth-century history concerns the so-called Ancient Chapel Book of the Crowle General Baptist Church, first published in the *General Baptist Magazine* for 1879. It all looked very pious, and showed in particular that the English Baptists had an origin in the last year of the sixteenth century and that John Smyth did not baptise himself, both conclusions of importance to nineteenth-century Baptists. Dr. H. M. Dexter, the Congregational historian, was, however, easily enabled to demonstrate that the record was a clumsy forgery not least because its creator had forgotten that in the seventeenth century the old calendar was

⁸ *Parliamentary Papers*, House of Commons, 1852–3, (1690) LXXXIX.

in operation and hence his sequences were wrong.⁹ If he wants to use a source, along with other like material, to suggest a general attitude the historian has then to decide how far the work is typical or eccentric. Many, for example, have used Edmund Gosse's description of Christmas Day, 1857, in his Plymouth Brethren home at Oddicombe, as typical of the home life of Evangelicalism.¹⁰ But you may wish to lay alongside that the judgment of a critical historian, widely read in Victorian history. Canon Charles Smyth writes:

'But the real strength of Evangelicalism lay not in the pulpit or in the platform, but in the home. To those who believe that the typical Evangelical sermon was about hell-fire, that the typical Evangelical layman is fairly represented by the father of Sir Edmund Gosse and that the typical Victorian parent was Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street, this may sound surprising but to judge from memoirs and biographies, the Evangelical families of England were conspicuously happy families, and it was in hearts of the Victorian mothers that the Evangelical piety won the most signal and the most gracious of its triumphs.'¹¹

And above all the document's own viewpoint must be assessed. All too often, for example, one finds that the descriptions of dissenting life and worship in *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* are taken to be verbatim descriptions of actual situations, rather than imaginative recreations thirty years after, by a man who in his own confession had gone through many psychological disturbances in the intervening years.¹² This document then seems to me to be a source for the reflections of the ex-orthodox of the 1880s rather than a description of the practice of dissent in the mid century.

In this process of evaluating the evidence disharmonies are bound to appear – they do not necessarily mean that the evidence is thereby rendered useless. In as far as this reflects a

⁹ H. M. Dexter, *The True Story of John Smyth, The Se-Baptist*, Boston, 1881.

¹⁰ E. Gosse, *Father and Son*, London, 1907, p. 71.

¹¹ C. Smyth, 'The Evangelical Discipline' in H. Grisewood (Ed.), *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, New York, 1966, p. 103.

¹² W. Hale White, *Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*, London, 1881.

divergence of view-point of an event it may indeed help to establish the historicity of the event. Trevor Roper's introduction to his *Last Days of Hitler* reveals an interesting example of this in the discrepancy that became apparent between the evidence of Hitler's guard and chauffeur as to the details of the burning of the bodies of Hitler and Eva Braun, though Trevor Roper makes this shrewd judgment: 'the truth of the incident is attested by *the rational discrepancy of the evidence*¹³ – a passage which might usefully be studied by more biblical critics.

(c) *Selection and Pattern*: Having examined all the evidence, the historian necessarily has to be selective, not in the sense of rejecting that which will not fit his theory, but of excluding the irrelevant and extraneous, perhaps putting them on one side for a future enquiry. At the same time he will need to bring to bear the impact of negative evidence – what could reasonably have been expected and which has not materialized, for this, alongside other kind of evidence, may well add a crucial dimension to the picture. By this stage a pattern – not in any meta-historical sense, but in the sense of a story to tell – should have emerged, which the historian may now begin to relate.

(d) *Interpretation*: Once this is undertaken, the whole becomes taken up in the question of interpretation, for nearly always the historian will not be content with a description of what occurred but will want to reflect the past in terms of an explanation of what happened, together with some assessment of the significance of different parts of his story. The explanation may be worked out in terms of *causal* connections ('A rise in population in the sixteenth century led to an increase in prices which presented acute financial problems to those who were dependent on fixed incomes, which group in England included James I and Charles I who were thereby driven to unconstitutional expedients in fund raising'). It might alternatively be *developmental* – the account being given in terms of the development of an institution, or a group or an industry, etc. (The development of the civil service, of the working class, of the mining industry). Or again the account may be written in terms of other significant intellectual patterns; the relationship

¹³ H. Trevor Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler*, 2nd Edn., 1950, p. xxvi.

between life and thought (the impact of environmental studies on social legislation); the definition of attitudes (the reaction of different religions, social and political groups to the Atomic Bomb); comparative studies of one kind and another (the different characteristics of the Chartist movement in different parts of England and Wales); and many others.

The point is that only at this fourth stage of interpretation does a description emerge which bears relationship to what happened in the past. In as far as the past itself is something more than a collection of documents – and this notwithstanding the current popularity of collections of documents as a means of describing the past – then the interpretation is crucial to the description of the fact, and is not a dispensable layer of theorizing with which to decorate the superstructure. That is, history moves not from the facts to a theory or law, but from the evidence by way of the processes I have described to the facts. The reconstruction which emerges represents a marriage between a variety of different elements: a diversity of evidence of different kinds, weighed in the critical hands of the researcher, who selects from it such material as enables him to construe a particular pattern of relationships, which he explains in terms of an interpretation which arises both out of the evidence and his experience and imagination.

III. The Techniques of Historical Inquiry

Anyone who dares to talk about the nature of historical explanation cannot overlook the revolution which took place in historical studies in the nineteenth century with the advent of that scientific historiography which is associated with the name of Leopold von Ranke. It was as if historians, faced with the advances of the natural sciences, came to exhibit a kind of guilt complex about the imprecise nature of their discipline, coming to covet the precision of the laboratory scientist. Doubtless there was a need for a professional reaction against the romantic whiggery of Macaulay's generation. But we may wonder whether the pendulum swing has not been too great, and whether in fact there are not other ways of knowing which supplement the positivist's delight in criticism, detach-

ment, analysis and objectivity. I am in this respect interested to notice that Cardiff's first Professor of Modern History devotes himself to just this theme in an Inaugural Lecture given at the end of last year entitled 'Ideological Commitment and Historical Interpretation', in which he discusses the debate between E. H. Carr and G. R. Elton concerning subjective and positivist ways of comprehending history.¹⁴ In all this it seems to me there is a razor-edge divide between integrity and prejudice – and on the whole I am inclined to think that the historian must embrace both the precision of the positivist and the humanity of the subjectivist. If so, then I would suggest that *commitment* is as much a way of knowing as *detachment* – especially since none of us can escape commitment even if we do not choose to spell out the nature of that to which we are committed. Alan Richardson tellingly illustrates this point by quoting Mr. Trevor Roper's conclusion on the historiography of Archbishop Laud: 'only Gardiner, who treated him *not* as a churchman, but as a protagonist in English history, was able to look upon Land in that secular spirit from which alone an impartial view can come.' Richardson rightly comments: 'We cannot see our own ideological spectacles, and because our eyes are protected by them, we do not notice that as we throw our sand against the wind, the wind blows it back again.'¹⁵

Similarly the historian will need to exercise *sympathy* as well as *objectivity*. Gordon Rupp, for example, shows the folly of attempting to analyse the reformation without a sympathetic understanding of what the words and concepts used meant to the Reformers who penned them: 'One would have thought that whatever the twentieth century thinks about the irrelevance of the Christian religion the men of the sixteenth century could not be made intelligible without it', and that on this basis the great nineteenth-century historians, notwithstanding their own loose orthodoxy, are better guides than more recent secular commentators, because 'they had the sense

¹⁴ A. Hearder, *Ideological Commitment and Historical Interpretation*, Cardiff, 1969, especially p. 4f. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* London, 1961. G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, New York, 1967.

¹⁵ Alan Richardson, *History, Sacred and Profane*, London, 1964, p. 101, citing H. R. Trevor Roper, *Archbishop Laud*, 1940, p. 6.

to see that religion mattered and they took pains to understand theological issues', as against some contemporary 'funking of the chore involved in mastering the intricate code form of an alien ideology.'¹⁶

Over against the crucial role of *criticism* needs to be set the creative part played by *imagination*. Where this quality is lacking the history fails to come alive. I speak with feeling here having come post-haste from marking some 60 final scripts this past week in which all too often imagination is sacrificed to critical analysis. But compare these two comments:

'Hallam's *Middle Ages* (1818) and his subsequent works are based upon honest, painstaking and disinterested research upon original authorities, and they set a high standard of accuracy but he is lacking in that quality of historical imagination which can bring the past to life.'¹⁷

'Having entered imaginatively into the experiences of the nomad, the agriculturalist and the city-dweller, having been marked by the sorrows of the persecuted and uplifted by the steadfastness of just men, having striven with Lenin and known the serenity of St. Benedict, the historian is constantly recapitulating in his own person the history of man'.¹⁸

In like manner *analysis* must be balanced by *intuition*. Indeed it would be dishonest not to admit the large part that intuition plays at the crucial juncture at which the evidence is collected: where should the archaeologist dig his trial trench, where should the historian begin his search, where amongst an unwieldy body of evidence should he begin his dipping audit? Of course, the hunch has to be backed up by solid evidence, but in the psychology of the historian intuition often has the priority. Nor is it confined to where one starts: sometimes the

¹⁶ E. G. Rupp, *Protestant Catholicity*, London, 1960, p. 8f. A second example here which contrasts perhaps with the previous point concerning commitment is to be found in Mr. E. P. Thompson's discussion of Methodist hymnology. 'Christ, the personification of "love" to whom the great bulk of Wesleyan hymns are addressed, is by turns maternal, Oedipal, sexual and sado-masochistic.' *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1963, p. 37of.

¹⁷ Alan Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹⁸ D. Nicholl, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

conclusion comes in the first place by intuition and is only subsequently substantiated.

I am conscious that in this discussion of the techniques required of the historian I may have given the impression that I think detachment, objectivity, criticism and analysis as wholly unimportant. This is not my intention – but simply to suggest that these are not the only virtues, that they need to be supplemented by more personal and humane qualities if we are to use all the resources at our disposal for a complete and realistic understanding of history, a history that is involved with a real past inhabited by real man, flesh of our flesh, mind of our mind, with emotions that are ours; indeed one might say that history must be written from person to person.

IV. The Nature of Historical Conclusions

(a) *General and Particular*: ‘The eliciting of general truths or of propositions claiming universal validity is the one kind of consummation which it is beyond the competence of history to achieve’.¹⁹ This needs constantly to be emphasized: my colleague Donald Nicholl resists the temptation to think otherwise by questioning: ‘What could be more unhistorical than those veils of pseudo-science in which we try to cloak our subject for the sake of decency? We are lost from the beginning unless we candidly recognize that the process of historical knowledge runs completely counter to that of knowledge achieved in the natural sciences. In the latter one proceeds from numerous instances to the establishment of general laws by using deduction, induction, analogy and inspired guess-work; but whatever the means the work attains perfection in the formulation of a general law, the more general the better. The historian, on the contrary, using similar methods, as well as the yet more bizarre instrument of his own personality, brings his work to perfection in understanding a particular event, person or institution; but whatever the means, his work is achieved when he has a profound and comprehensive understanding of these

¹⁹ H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, p. 65.

particulars, the more intimate and all-embracing the better'.²⁰

In science then an experiment only achieves notoriety outside the laboratory if, supported by many other experiments, it can be made to project a general law. But the historian, since he is concerned with individual events, persons and institutions, is interested in just those particulars which might well spell failure for his scientific colleague, failure that is in the pursuit of a given general law. The chance experiment may indeed lead to new discoveries but on its own, unsupported by other experiments it can mean nothing to the physical scientist.

(b) *Exactitude and Ignorance*: The historian here finds himself poised between two stools. On the one hand, there are many things that he can affirm with confidence: thus Professor Hearder wrote last year: 'that Queen Anne is not only dead, but that she died two hundred and fifty-four years ago, is not only a fact which it would be unreasonable to doubt: it is a statistical statement of a much more reliable kind than most statistical statements issuing from boards of directors or government offices. The legal phrase, that a case can be proved "beyond reasonable doubt" seems to me particularly useful for the historian. The surface facts which we establish from our evidence can usually be proved "beyond reasonable doubt". It is only when casual factors, or more general explanations are considered, that more than one interpretation becomes possible. What caused the French Revolution, or whether the French Revolution succeeded are matters of interpretation, that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo is a matter of fact, and of a *fact that has been proved beyond reasonable doubt.*'²¹

But over against that we must never forget that much of the past has been lost beyond recovery. If, for example, we were to think of our meeting here today – certain records will be produced, the Secretary's letters, the advertisement, the Minutes of the Annual General Meeting, and, eventually in the Journal, the Symposium Papers, even lists of those who attended – but what will not be recorded is the clothes you wear, the lunch-time conversations, the fact that in my mind there

²⁰ D. Nicholl, *op. cit.*, p. 275f.

²¹ H. Hearder, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

was a recollection of a paper that Dr. Markillie gave to us at Keele on 'Sin and Psychology' or my apprehensions at appearing on so august a platform. Apart from my now falsifying this prophecy, these would be realities lost for ever beyond the power of recall of even the most expert historian. And with this fact of necessary ignorance the historian must remain content though clearly not all do so – only on Saturday at the Anglo-American Historians Conference Mr. Denis Watt of the LSE made a spirited attack upon the seduction of historians by the use of mathematical techniques into a bogus search for certainty.

(c) *History and Eschatology*: The continuing necessity for ignorance is a phenomenon which many secular historians find it hard to live with for it seems to suggest a certain incompetence upon their part, and so the need for them to exercise a certain sovereignty in their historiography until they become like gods manipulating the past with their rival theories and hypotheses. But for a Christian to behave in this manner would be a denial of his faith, because he both knows more, and also knows less.

He knows more in the sense that his theological awareness provides him with an understanding of the true 'thickness' of events, what, I believe, theologians have called their 'ontological density', that is, their richer meaningfulness when seen in terms of other related happenings. In this respect the historian's distant vision may be compared with the lean and thin perception of the journalist, no more than twenty-four hours deep: the importance, once again, of chronology. But history set in a context of a theology of beginnings and ends means that the Christian historian can see the true 'thickness' of events – to see them not only in their contemporary setting, not only in the context of human history, but in relation to 'In the beginning God' and 'I will come again'.

But the Christian historian also knows less, for one theological way of describing history would be to say that it is the time of God's secret work. Honesty demands that when we look at the history text-book, we say that it is often difficult to discern there the finger of God: some events patently reveal the divine, but for the most part the story reads in soiled and earthy terms. It is easy to see the divine influence at work in the life of

St. Augustine or St. Francis, or in the revival of religion in the eighteenth century: it is much more difficult to see it in the Black Death, the dropping of the H-bomb on Hiroshima or the advent of apartheid in South Africa. But there is a sense in which it is irreverent to want to know, for this is the time of God's secret work. Only at the *parousia* will Christ disclose what His secret work has been in that moment when He redeems not only the Church but history itself. Thus although the Christian believes that God is the Lord of history in all its totality, he does not now pretend to know the plan of God, and therefore he cannot construct a pattern of history upon that basis. Such patterns must remain eschatological for only then will the sacred be fully seen in the profane.