

# The Citizen Historian

In 1964, J. H. Plumb, concerned about the crisis in the humanities, wrote of the dilemma of the modern historian:

His profession demands of him an extreme form of specialisation, thus isolating him from his fellow men (including some of his colleagues) — as a result, his research is socially impotent.

Since the days of Ranke, the historian has been taught to act as a scientist; yet he is told by the great philosophers of history that historical objectivity cannot exist. He may be able to write an erudite five hundred-page thesis on the Indian National Congress in 1885 or on the Railroad Strike in Northern Arkansas in 1921; but he fails to find any relationship between the subject of his research and the wider problems of life. His erudite works on history are read by fewer and fewer people. Every publisher knows the rules of the game: the more scholarly you are, the less readership you attract. The 'popular history' is left in the hands of some 'pseudo-scientific' prophets and littérateurs, while the academic historian preoccupies himself discovering new facts from dusty archives or checking some obscure reference in public libraries. Surveying this gloomy situation, Plumb wrote:

So there we have them. The idealists insisting that history is merely a present world, ever changing, never static; the academic positivists burrowing like boll weevils in the thickets of facts, mindless, deliberately, of purpose and meaning outside the orbit of their own activity; the public prophets using pseudo-science to justify a repetitive, cyclical interpretation of history, and the littérateurs with evocation and exercise of the imagination.<sup>1</sup>

The only way out of this crisis, Plumb suggested, was to bring back 'the idea of historical progress'<sup>2</sup> (which so much preoccupied the

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Smith, 'The Historian's Dilemma', in J. H. Plumb (ed.), *Crisis in the Humanities*, London, 1964, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-44. Plumb wanted to disassociate the idea of progress from Marxism. Here one is forced to agree with G.R.Elton that Professor Plumb is at heart a 'Whig'.

philosopher of the Enlightenment and which is today part and parcel of Marxist historiography), as the core of academic historical philosophy.

The 'crisis in history' is still with us. The professional historians are as isolated as they were in 1964, too preoccupied with their research to worry about the future of their discipline. They play a game which is strictly for the professionals and whose rules are increasingly incomprehensible to the layman. We have now evolved a very sophisticated method of research, using statistics, the computer and many other techniques and gadgets to keep up with the Joneses (our colleagues in the natural and social sciences). We can now confidently talk about the Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641, using massive evidence from tables and charts; or estimate the size of households and families in pre-industrial England; or analyse the crowds who were involved in the French Revolution; or make an accurate demographic map of Calcutta in 1806. But our work is read by fewer people than ever, and our history has no purpose other than the purely intellectual pleasure it affords the researcher himself. Professional historians are unwilling to talk about the social function of the past and the role of the historian in the community. It is generally agreed that the historian should not be concerned with problems of the present day world or if he is, then the problems should be left outside his study so that he can continue his 'pure' intellectual pursuits in history. Academic history is written for the academic historian only.

It is not as if the man in the street is not interested in his past — his collective past — that is; in the history of his people. In fact, if the number of books on so called popular history is any indication of the popularity of history, then he is more interested than ever in daily life in ancient Egypt, the bloody battles of the Sepoy Mutiny in India, the rise and fall of the British Empire, Hitler, The Cuban Crisis and other themes, both esoteric and familiar, of history. The bookshops are flooded with such works which are regularly reviewed in the press and discussed on radio stations. The old popularisers like Toynbee are still bought by thousands of people who have never heard of Lewis Namier

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He looks back to Victorian England when the humanities and mathematics were the core of the educational systems which produced politicians, civil servants, imperial administrators and legislators; when engineers went out to India, built bridges in remote areas and filled their dreary memoranda with quotations from Virgil; when fathers read *Dombey and Son* to their families on Sunday afternoons and the idea of progress ruled supreme. Plumb ignores the fact that the great age of progress was brought about at great cost, the dislocation of a large number of people in England and the sufferings of the vast majority of non-white peoples in Asia, Africa and the Americas. For Elton's view of Plumb, see G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, London, 1967, p. 47.

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or Herbert Butterfield. Television producers were quick to realise the market potential of the past. The B.B.C. series on the Empire competed well with such high-rating programs as *Coronation Street*; and currently (1974) the A.B.C. is screening a program on the Gold Rush in Victoria in the nineteenth century, which also looks like being a success. As well, politicians keep the man in the street conscious of his nation's history by invoking the past in times of crisis. It might be Wilson, reminding Britain of 'the great Dunkirk spirit' to inspire a fight against the present economic malaise of the nation, or it might be Mrs. Gandhi calling upon her half-starved peasants to make further sacrifices for the nation, reminding them of the Mahatma and the Nationalist struggle for freedom. Generally speaking, then, people the world over are more history-conscious than ever. While the common man delights in the books he reads, the programs he watches (he might even be an active member of his local History Association), politicians, army generals, business executives and others in public life are busy writing their memoirs or filing their letters and preserving their archives.

The professional historian has no real role in this popular preoccupation with the past. He might condescend to preside over a History Association meeting or to advise on a local history exhibition, but on the whole he feels it beneath the dignity of his profession to indulge in such activities. Historians snigger at popular history, and find many faults with it. It is biased, for instance, and not being the result of painstaking research, is often seen as nothing more than a mere figment of the imagination. There are, however, many exceptions to such descriptions. All professions have their black sheep in the fold, and history is no different. There are some historians who want the best of both worlds: they lecture at the universities as well as appearing on television and writing for the popular press. This kind of activity is relatively more common in England, but even there such historians are often the subject of Senior Common Room jokes and find themselves leading a schizophrenic existence. Hugh Trevor-Roper, the populariser, leaves the gown of Professor H. R. Trevor-Roper in Oxford before he appears on television in London. He is, it seems, somewhat unwilling or perhaps unable to find a relationship between the two. When we leave such mavericks as A. J. P. Taylor and Trevor-Roper aside, we find that most historians are digging out 'facts' of history in the archives (the traditional types) or with the aid of IBM cards (the trendy types), sniggering at the vulgarity of the popularisers, and not caring whether their research has any real social purpose or whether their history

delights and instructs their fellow men. Since the days of Ranke, Clio has undergone a metamorphosis: no longer the muse, she is now a bespectacled researcher poring over index cards and checking references in libraries. Liberal historians of the universities find that this is the only legitimate position to take as a means of defending their academic freedom to pursue their research without outside interference. They recognise that the positivist founding fathers of modern scientific historiography were wrong; history cannot establish positive general laws about human affairs, nor can there be the objectivity known to scientists. Since the days of J. B. Bury, whose suspicions seem to have been confirmed by the devastating world wars, historians have lost faith in the idea of progress. They seek to withdraw from the present and escape in the corridors of history, a journey which leads them nowhere. One London historian has defended this position — he found that the ‘major purpose of history is simply to satisfy the intellectual curiosity’ of the historian and his readers. To him history is a long adventurous journey. The historian can only tell his fellow men that they should travel hopefully. He cannot show them how or where they will arrive.<sup>3</sup>

Alas, most of our colleagues are too smug; they do not recognise the crisis in history nor the threat to their own profession. (The day may soon come when they are no longer needed by society.) Nor do they see that they are all like the Associate Professor of history in Edward Albee’s play, *Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, who talks bewilderedly about his imagined son (the future), about his parents (the past) whom he might have killed. He and his wife (life itself) are doomed ‘to live out in hate, in distrust, in mutual failure’. But history will always be concerned with human affairs — historians cannot escape from life. History today has no meaning (real meaning for men in the street), no power to shape the future of mankind — and there may well be no future for the academic historian. The crisis is with us, and it is to be faced and solved, or there may be no future for our past.

The Englishman on the whole has a healthy distrust of philosophical speculation about the ends of history. Hence it is not surprising that England has produced only one philosopher of history, R. G. Collingwood. (Collingwood died before he could complete his masterpiece which, from the Englishman’s point of view, was a blessing.) For generations students of history at universities have been discouraged to speculate about the role of history in society. Most will

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<sup>3</sup> A. L. Basham, *The Indian Sub-Continent in Historical Perspective*, London, 1958, p. 23.

find it hard to answer the fundamental questions related to history, 'What is history?' and 'What is the use of history?'

In the early 'sixties, however, it looked as though English historians had decided to shed their usual reserve about the philosophy of history. There was a series of (often acrimonious) epistolary exchanges between historians in the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Listener* and *The Times* often preceded by a review article or a talk on a B.B.C. 3 program. The first shots in this controversy were fired from Trinity College, Cambridge by E. H. Carr. In 1961, Carr, rather provocatively, called his series of George Macauley Trevelyan Lectures, 'What is History?'. The lectures were broadcast by the B.B.C., reproduced in *The Listener* and finally came out as a book, *What is History? In his book, Carr assailed, in a very reasonable but nonetheless effective fashion, many 'sacred' ideas deeply embedded in the European liberal tradition of scientific historiography. These ideas were concerned with the purpose of history, the role of the individual in history, the idea of progress, and other related topics. It provoked Sir Isaiah Berlin to come out of his comfortable Oxford college to chide the Cambridge historian for being naughty in moving into the difficult, treacherous and unfamiliar field of philosophy of history. Trevor-Roper brought his *Encounter* chopping block to present the world with yet another condemned historian's head. (This was a favourite hobby of the Regius Professor of History.) Carr's work showed, according to Trevor-Roper, that 'no historian since the crudest ages of clerical bigotry has treated evidence with such dogmatic ruthlessness as this. No historian, even in those ages, has exalted such dogmatism into an historiographical theory.'*<sup>4</sup>

No doubt the fury has now died, but the dust is yet to settle.<sup>5</sup> Whatever might have been the merit of *What is History?* as a contribution to the philosophy of history, no-one can deny that Carr took a bold excursion into a region which is central to the world of history. He compelled most historians to re-examine their arguments and reconsider the validity of their subject. Most, however, refused to challenge the fundamental postulates of Western historiography as it developed under the impact of Ranke, Monod and Acton. Many like Elton and Trevor-Roper thought that the way to save history from the present crisis was to hold on to the 'old' history with its obsession with

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<sup>4</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper's review of E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, as quoted in Ved Mehta, *Fly and the Fly Bottle*, London, 1965, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> K. Thomas, 'Total History', *New Statesman*, 20 April 1973.

events. Elton, for instance, is unimpressed by the 'new' methods of history; to him, 'The study of history is an intellectual pursuit, an activity of the reasoning mind, and, as one should expect, its main service lies in its essence. Like all sciences, history, to be worthy to itself and beyond itself, must concentrate on one thing: "the search for truth".'<sup>6</sup> Trevor-Roper, while disagreeing with Elton on the 'usefulness' of history, defends the autonomy of history ('the independence of the past') against the sociologists' invasion of his territory. He refuses to 'dress up the Muse of history in more fashionable and more highly coloured clothes'.<sup>7</sup>

There were others who agreed with Plumb that there was a crisis in history, that something had gone wrong for the academic historian since the days of Acton. Questions were asked about the purpose of history and many suggestions were offered to meet the crisis. Plumb, as we have already noticed, thought that we should regain our faith in the idea of progress. Barraclough thought that history had 'taken a wrong turning down the wrong road. It has done so under the influence of German philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Heinrich Ricket and Wilhelm Dilthey'.<sup>8</sup> Barraclough thought that the way out of this malaise was for the historian to be concerned with results and not with motives and causes. 'The causes belong entirely to the past, their study serves only the purpose of saving national honour; but the consequences are with us still.' It seems that Barraclough, like J. H. Robinson in 1912, thought that the starting point of all historical studies should be the present.<sup>9</sup>

However, there were others who suggested that the only way out of the crisis was to widen the horizons of history. History, it was thought, should no longer be just continuous methodical recording of 'past' events (as it is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary), but should concern itself with the problems of society, its structure and function. Many advocated that history, if it were to survive as a viable science, should borrow from the social sciences, particularly from sociology and social anthropology. In 1966, *The Times Literary Supplement* devoted

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<sup>6</sup> *Op cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'The Past and the Present: History and Sociology', in *Past and Present*, No. 42, February 1969, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> G. Barraclough, *History and the Common Man*, Presidential address to The Historical Association, London, 1966, pp. 9-12.

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Robinson, *The New History*, New York, 1912. For an interesting study of Robinson, see David Gross, 'The New History: a note of Reappraisal', *History and Theory*, Vol. X111, No. 1, 1974, pp. 53-8.

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two issues to what it called the 'New Ways in History'.<sup>10</sup> This was an auspicious occasion, the sixtieth anniversary of the birth of The Historical Association. The editor took the opportunity to review the development of historical research in England since 1956 (the fiftieth anniversary of the Association). He felt it was time to congratulate the English historian for he was beginning to shed his parochialism both intellectually and geographically. Historians in England had begun to take greater interest in Asia, Africa and Latin America. They were also no longer cut off from 'related disciplines particularly from the social sciences'.

A serious attempt was made to see 'history as a whole' or as Keith Thomas called it, 'total history'. The emphasis was on discovering the interconnectedness of things and making historians aware of the questions that preoccupied the ordinary people. In England, this 'new' historiography can be traced back to 1952, when a group of Marxist historians started to widen the horizons of history in the pages of a journal called *Past and Present*. By the turn of the decade the journal had shed some of its orthodox Marxist preoccupation with economic determinism (it even changed its subtitle from 'Journal of Scientific History' to 'Journal of Historical Studies'). It attracted historians of different political persuasions (even Trevor-Roper wrote for it). The 'new' history was even more successful in France where under the leadership of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch it became central to French intellectual life. Their journal *Annales de Histoire, Economique et Sociale*, started in 1929, was widely regarded as the most stimulating history journal in the world. (Incidentally it has also changed its name, to *Annales Econotrues, Sociétés, Civilisations*.) In the United States, historians have a long tradition of looking at the past with sociological and demographic tools.<sup>11</sup>

We all owe an immense debt to these new prophets of history — but though they have gone some distance to meet the crisis they have not gone far enough to solve it. They have made us aware of the problems that concern the man in the street about food prices, famines, crop failures, the structure of families, riots, and the oppression of women, racism and so on. History is no longer 'past politics' (and even when it is a study of past politics it is a study of political structures in relation to society); it is now concerned with historical societies and their

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<sup>10</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April and 28 July 1966.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Shils, 'Seeing it Whole', *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 July 1966, pp. 647-8.

problems. The 'new' historiography has brought with it 'new' tools of history, and these tools have helped the historian understand the past better and find some answers for present day problems. But the charts, tables, statistical models and the sophisticated sociological language has turned history almost into a drawing room parlance for the historian alone; our professionalism has forced us to write history for the historian. We must recognise that historians are made for history and the reverse cannot be true. We should not only concern ourselves with the problems which the man in the street faced in the past, but make them entertaining and instructive for the man in the street today. Let him enjoy his B.B.C. version of Henry VIII, but let us tell him more about life in Tudor England.

Historians must recognise the fact that history can and should be a revolutionary force. It is widely acknowledged that the past can be a revolutionary tool inspiring men and women to revolutionary action. In England the idea of the 'Norman yoke' has for long inspired radicals;<sup>12</sup> in India the 'golden age' of ancient India attracted many to the Nationalist cause. The academic historian would tell us that such historical ideas as the 'Norman yoke' are part of popular myths about the past and not true history. I think they are right (though they are nevertheless interesting phenomena to study). But even professional history can be a revolutionary force. If we are not mere chroniclers of past events, if our interest is not in the dead past (in the way the antique collector is interested in Chippendale chairs), then we study the past from the present, recognising the fact that both history and historians are part of a process of development of human awareness about ourselves and our environment. If we are not Collingwood's 'scissors and paste' historians,<sup>13</sup> searching for facts from the old authorities, and if we were to use his logic of 'questions and answers', then the questions we ask about our past must be related to our present day problems. I often think of history as a fabric handed down to us from the past — some of it missing, some of it we cannot understand; we should single out every thread and then recreate a new pattern which we in our generation can understand and enjoy.

For its survival history must become central to intellectual life and a focus of *les sciences humaines* — as Collingwood has conceived it. For long, at least since 1600, man has been able to control almost any

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<sup>12</sup> C. Hill, 'Norman Yoke', in J. Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, London, 1954, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 257-61.



situation in which the elements are physical bodies and the forces physical forces, but he is unable to control situations in which the elements are human beings and the forces mental ones. As early as 1763, Adam Ferguson regretted that while human knowledge of the material system of the world 'consists of a collection of facts or at most in general tenets derived from particular observation and experiments',<sup>14</sup> human knowledge of man himself was still based on 'hypothesis'. Throughout the nineteenth century historians and social scientists (since Comte) have marched into archives or villages to collect facts about 'man himself' in the same fashion as the natural scientists have collected facts about nature. History, since 1800, might have passed through its 'Copernican' revolution, but it has remained subsumed under the natural and physical sciences and an impotent social force. To become a true *science humaine*, history must establish the interconnectedness between past and present, between the individual and society and between ideas and action. This kind of history would help man to understand, if not control, situations where the elements are human beings.

If history should be the focus of *les sciences humaines*, then the historian has a very significant role to play. When an historian is conscious of his role in society he becomes a citizen historian. And he is a citizen of a special kind because of his knowledge of history and his ability to use the tools of the most important science of human affairs. And the citizen historian is a better historian than the academic historian who leaves his present-day problems outside his study; the citizen historian can find a connection between his studies and life, and thus enrich both.

The historian can function at three levels. At one level he should help to liberate his fellow human beings and this can cover activities of all kinds, including marching against bombings in Vietnam and involvement in campus politics to help democratise the universities. At another level he can use his pen (any historian worth his name must have some gift with his pen) to help to enhance the cause of liberation. (He may appear to be a member of Mao's cultural army fighting with his pen.)<sup>15</sup> Yet at another level he should continue to work on his research topics, improving research techniques and asking meaningful questions from history. All these functions are not separated but

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<sup>14</sup> S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Mao Tse Tung, *Selected Readings*, Peking, 1967, p. 224.

interconnected, and our research will then have significance for us and our fellow men, while our activities will be based on a better knowledge of ourselves and our past. Historians who snigger at popular history and who feel that they cannot lower their standards, must recognise that there is no necessary connection between popularisation and the maintaining of standards. Good and popular history would help to raise the standard of general views of our past and a close touch with ordinary people would help the historian better to understand human situations. The historian who has never moved out of his library will be a poor historian.

We cannot afford to be uninterested in the nuclear age, for our indifference only helps established ideologies and institutions. Lest I am accused of preaching seditious Marxism to my academic friends let me end with a quotation from the most important of the philosophers of history in the English speaking world — R. G. Collingwood, who could hardly be accused of being a subversive Marxist. Writing in 1938, when the 'National' government of his country had betrayed three nations, Abyssinia, Spain and Czechoslovakia, Collingwood wrote: 'I know now that the minute philosophers of my youth, for all their profession of a purely scientific *détachement* from practical affairs, were the propagandists of coming Fascism. I know that Fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism. I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford, 1939, p. 167.