Miscellanea 30

UNISA

THE HISTORIAN'S NET

Inaugural Lecture

S.B. SPIES

University of South Africa
Pretoria

First impression 1987
Second impression 1992
Third impression 1995

ISBN 0 86981 235 1

Printed and published by the
University of South Africa
Muckleneuk, Pretoria

The Historian's Net

1

The eminent British historian, G.R. Elton, has stated that he does not know what inaugural lectures are for.[1] Some historians on these occasions have lectured on their special areas of interest in the past and have managed thus to express implicitly their approach to their subject. The majority of historians — including Professor Elton — have used their inaugural lectures to issue explicit statements of their personal views regarding the theory or practice or present position of their subject. New professors in other disciplines, it seems, are less inclined than historians to venture into theoretical waters on these occasions. I am not sure whether this means that historians are more introspective or that they are actually assailed by greater doubts about their subject than say psychologists, sociologists or lawyers are about theirs, or whether they have taken Pieter Geyl's definition of history as an unending argument,[2] into the theoretical sphere as well.

The American historian, H.S. Commager, has actually contended that historians argue so much about matters such as: 'What is the nature of history? What is the use of history? What is it that we are about?' that it has become something of a public scandal.[3] I doubt if it really has — but if it has, I propose to add to the scandal.

Like other historians before me, I have decided on this occasion, to talk not about a facet of the past, but about one aspect of the historian's attitude towards the past.

Although Commager, as I have mentioned, has expressed the opinion that historians are somewhat obsessed by the meaning and purpose of their subject, Professor B.J. Liebenberg has maintained that historians have been and are so busy writing history that they do not have the time to ask themselves why they are.[4] Commager and Liebenberg have not necessarily contradicted each other.

Some historians spend so much time telling other historians what sort of history they should write, that they hardly have any time to write any history themselves. But for most historians, their inaugural lectures represent a one-time foray into the stormy and treacherous seas of the theory of their subject. It does appear, therefore, that if inaugural lectures did not exist, historians may have invented something like them to enable them to express their views on the study of history.

2

Another useful function of an inaugural lecture is that it enables the newly appointed professor publicly to acknowledge some of his academic obligations. I am pleased to be able to express my indebtedness to the present principal and vice-chancellor of the University of South Africa, Professor Theo van Wijk, whose guidance when he was in the Department of History meant much to me as a newly appointed lecturer, thirteen years ago. This occasion also provides an opportunity to pay tribute to Professor C.F.J. Muller, the head of this department since its inception. We are indeed privileged to be associated with this gentleman, this enthusiastic and gifted historian, who has made and is making such a great contribution to the writing and study of academic history in this country.

Apart from the University of South Africa, two other institutions helped shape me as a historian, but they should not be held responsible for the end product. As a pupil and master at Pretoria Boys' High School, I worked under three enlightened headmasters, two of whom, D.D. Matheson and D.F. Abernethy, were historians. I benefited by being taught by and teaching with dedicated and stimulating history masters, such as Maurice Geen, K.F. Wynne and Stuart Hendry. I consider myself fortunate indeed to have studied as an undergraduate and a post-graduate at the University of the Witwatersrand under historians of the calibre of J.S. Marais, Arthur Keppel-Jones, J.L. McCracken, Phyllis Lewsen and Noel Garson.

3

Virtually all South African academic historians are general practitioners of history, as well as specialists.[5] Few indeed of the historians at South African universities are in a position where they only teach their special periods or topics. A combination of general practice and specialization, which may seem to be far removed from the ideal, nevertheless has its compensations, provided that the general practice is not so demanding that there is no time for specialization. H.R. Trevor-Roper has remarked on the need to study history both

generally, and in detail on a narrower front. The historian, he maintains, should be

> amphibious: he must live some part of his time below the surface (that is in specializing) in order that on emerging, he can usefully survey it from above. The historian who has specialized all his life may end as an antiquarian. The historian who has never specialized will end as a blower of froth.[6]

Before I make some observations on the nature, reasons for and implications of some types of historical specialization, I will touch briefly on the general subject matter of the historian. When the *English Historical Review* was founded in 1886, its editor stated that it was best to regard history as the record of human action and that the historian should be concerned with thought only in its direct influence upon action.[7] On the other hand, in the 1930s, the British philosopher, historian and archaeologist, R.G. Collingwood maintained that of anything other than thought there could be no history, and that man's actions determined by what he called his animal nature were no concern of the historian.[8] This led Collingwood to declare that when the historian described a famous speech, he did not concern himself with the sensuous element in it, such as the pitch of the statesman's voice. Military history, again, according to Collingwood, 'is not a description of weary marches in heat or cold, or the long agony of wounded men but it is 'a description of plans and counter-plans: of thinking about tactics, and in the last resort of what the men in the ranks thought about the battle.'[9] Clearly these limitations of the historian's field of study are unacceptable. Historians have written, and written convincingly about 'the pitch of a statesman's voice' J.S. Marais, for one, did it effectively in discussing Paul Kruger's oratorical manner in *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*.[10] There are, of course, also countless historical accounts of battles in which pen-pictures are drawn of those features which Collingwood contended were no concern of the historian. For example, the description and analysis of the battle of Spioen Kop by my colleague, Professor Johan Barnard, in his work on General Louis Botha in Natal, deals not only with 'plans and counter-plans', but also with the confusion of battle and he provides vivid depictions of the physical privations endured by the men involved in the clash of arms.[11]

Writing about the same time as Collingwood, the philosopher, Maurice Mandelbaum, stated that an action from the past did not become part of the historian's subject matter unless it has 'societal significance', which as another philosopher has explained, means that actions in their purely private aspects (whatever that may mean) should not be netted by the historian.[12]

But there were practising historians of this era who believed that the historian's net should be cast wider. In France, Marc Bloch, stated that the historian should be like the giant in the fairy tale: 'He knows', he maintained, 'that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.'[13] Indeed in recent times historians have been inclined to include all aspects of the human past in the historian's fishing waters. The Cambridge historian, J.H. Plumb, has stated that the aim of the historian is to understand men both as individuals and in their social relationships in time. 'Social' he has explained, 'embraces all of man's activities — economic, religious, political, artistic, legal, military, scientific — everything indeed that affects the life of mankind'.[14] The Dutch historian, G.J. Renier believes that 'Nothing can ... be finally excluded from ... the historian's field. Nothing is too large, neither is anything too small for him'.[15] In similar vein, the American, P.E. Tillinghast, has declared that history has no parameters, that it includes everything that has ever happened to any human being and that the kinds of situations with which historians are incapable of dealing are not clear 'except to the more aggressive specialists in other disciplines'.[16] One of the most recent endorsements of this point of view is the statement made by my friend, Ben Liebenberg, in his inaugural lecture on 28 June 1979: 'Die historikus', he said, 'is geïnteresseerd in alle aktiwiteite van die mens'.[17]

One of the French *Annalistes,* in a recent publication, has called a section dealing with the history of climate as a possible new province of research, 'History without People'. The aim of climatic history, it is asserted, is not to explain human history, but to produce a clear picture of the changing meteorological patterns of past ages. It transpires, however, that the spin-off of this enquiry, is nevertheless expected to have a bearing on the chronology of famines and possibly of epidemics.[18] Professor C.F.J. Muller has remarked on the possibility of research being done regarding the changes which occurred in animal and plant life in the interior of Southern Africa at the time of the *difaqane*. Clearly for him though, the focal point would be to regard those changes as the results of *human action.*[19] 'History without People' is in fact a contradiction in terms. History must be human history. There appears to be no reason, however, why any past human action, or thought, or feeling, should be excluded from the historian's potential field of study.

4

Of course not everything in the multifarious welter of the human past *has* been studied by historians. Nor, it can safely be asserted, will the time ever come

when all aspects of the past will have been studied. Whether it is possible for the historian to study certain facets of the past depends on whether there are traces of these facets left in the present. If an event occurred in the past without leaving any trace in the present then it can not be studied because there will be no evidence. Moreover if the event left no trace whatsoever in the present, we would not, it seems to me, even be aware of the fact that there had been such an event in the past which can not now be studied. There are other events of which we are aware, and which did leave traces, but these do not provide sufficient evidence for the historian to draw any but the most tentative conclusions. I do not intend to discuss this issue of lack of evidence and the historian's choice of a particular field of study, except to remark that historians seem to be becoming increasingly ingenious in unearthing evidence. Nor do I intend to deal with the matter of very recent history where much of the evidence is not immediately available owing to a fifty or a thirty year closed rule affecting archives.

There are events in the past that have left abundant traces, but which have never swum into or been scooped up in the historian's net. It has, with justification, been maintained that we no more want to know everything that happened in the past than we are interested in everything that happens at present.[20]

What determines the historian's decision to study a particular aspect of the past? Are certain topics inherently more 'significant' than others? Are certain segments of the past more 'relevant' at certain times than at others? Selection — selection of topic and selection of material and themes inside that topic (which latter point I will not have time to deal with) are vital matters for the historian. One of the greatest of twentieth-century historians, Sir Lewis Namier, tried to train his first-year students in this respect by setting them an essay on what appears and what should appear in newspapers.[21]

5

There is a widely held belief that successive generations of historians concentrate their studies on different aspects of the past; that the different questions they ask of the past are determined by the circumstances or even the problems of the time in which the historian is living. History has been defined as 'the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another'.[22] 'Each age', it is maintained, 'has its own interest in the past, its own version of the perennial question of Milton's Adam: "How came I thus, how here".[23] 'Every age', it is postulated, 'has its own particular conception of the essence and of the tasks of history'.[24] There are South African historians who have expressed agreement with this interpretation of the behaviour of historians.[25]

Now if it is accepted that it is the climate of *his* time which prompts the historian to ask his particular questions of the past, Collingwood's further conclusion seems logical: 'Since the historian is a son of his time', he has written, 'there is a general likelihood that what interests him will interest his contemporaries'.[26] Certainly the historian is in a sense a son of his time. Marc Bloch was fond of quoting an Arab proverb: 'Man resembles his time more than he does his father'.[27] E.H. Carr has stated that although the metaphor of the course of history as 'a moving procession' may be acceptable, 'this should not tempt the historian to see himself as an eagle surveying the scene from a lonely crag or as a V.I.P. at the saluting base ... The historian is just another dim figure trudging along in another part of the procession'.[28]

What interests the historian will generally interest his contemporaries, Collingwood believed. However, since at least the eighteenth century onwards, historians have been criticized by their contemporaries for writing about the wrong things. Voltaire did not approve of the emphasis historians placed on the 'great men' of the past and their actions in the political and military spheres: 'For the last fourteen hundred years', Voltaire wrote, 'the only Gauls apparently have been kings, ministers and generals'.[29] The novelist, Jane Austen, at the end of the eighteenth century, made one of her characters complain that history

> tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all good for nothing and hardly any women at all ... [30]

I do not wish to discuss the implications of the concluding words of that rather exasperating girl's complaint against written history, namely that 'I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention'.[31]

Nearly a hundred years after *Northanger Abbey* was written, E.A. Freeman, blithely continuing on the road which had displeased Voltaire and Jane Austen's, Catherine Morland, defined history as 'past politics'.[32] But not all historians accepted that view. Macaulay, had tried, so he claimed, to place before his readers 'a true picture of the life of their ancestors' by not confining his historical account to descriptions of battles and sieges and the deeds of great men, but also by writing of the people.[33] John Richard Green's retort to Freeman was that history had become unpopular because it had severed itself from all that could touch the heart of the people.[34] If Green was correct, what happens to the theory that historians generally ask the questions which interest their contemporaries? In more recent times there has been a considerable widening of the historians' range of enquiry. Nevertheless in the

years since the end of the Second World War the criticisms against historians' choice of subject matter have persisted and perhaps intensified.

6

Some historians, it has been suggested, deliberately turn their backs on the things which matter in the present. Is escapism the historian's syndrome? Are there, in fact, historians who deliberately set out to choose a topic for study which has no bearing on their present interests and experience, in order that they may loosen their ties with the world that they live in? Do historians turn to the past to forget what Petrarch called 'our own dreadful time'?[35] One may comment that if the present is so dreadful that it prompts the historian to turn away from it in asking his questions, that would seem to be another — albeit negative — way in which the historian is influenced by the present in his choice of a topic from the past. And one may ask — will the investigation of such a topic necessarily be a sterile antiquarian exercise? I see no reason why a research topic chosen by a historian to escape from the present, should not contribute to our understanding of the past.

I disagree on a number of points with C.V. Wedgwood who asserted about the English Civil War that:

> The final dispassionate, authoritative history ... cannot be written until the problems have ceased to matter; by that time it will not be worth writing.[36]

I do not believe that a 'final history' of anything can ever be written. I do not believe that the historian can only be 'dispassionate' when the problems of the past he is writing about, no longer have any bearing on the present. Thirdly, I do not believe that the only things in the past 'worth writing about' are those which still affect the present. Finally it is worth stressing that historians can never be sure whether the themes from the past they are investigating, have or have not 'ceased to matter' in the present. In the foreword to his *Griff nach der Weltmacht,* published in 1961, Fritz Fischer stated that the theme of the book had been the subject of acute political controversy in the 1920s, but in the completely different political conditions prevailing in the 1960s, it could be the object of 'dispassionate consideration'.[37] Actually this work in which Fischer concluded that the German government had had aggressive expansionist aims before and during the First World War, precipitated what was probably the most heated historical controversy of modern times. Distance in time is no guarantee against violent emotions being engendered.

The confession of an American historian that he knew more about his special subject, the condition of England in the sixteenth century than about his own country in the age in which he was living, has been seized upon as evidence to support the dictum that when one is too curious about the past, one is usually very ignorant about one's own time.[38] I do not believe in this dictum — the best historians are curious not only about the past but also about the present. The historian must indeed be inspired or driven by this 'Great Curiosity'.[39] Namier's biographer informs us that as a child the historian had a basic need and delight in being put on top of a cupboard where he would sit for hours looking down on the people below, observing them.[40] Sir Keith Hancock believes that historical inquiry has its deepest impulse in the lust for life.[41]

7

The choice of a topic for study from the past is an intensely personal matter which involves the preferences, the background, the personality and the special skills of the individual historian. Of course, to some extent that is so for the researcher in every discipline. But it has been suggested that the historian's preference for certain facets of the past is bound up with a variety of feelings, his personal philosophy, his political views, his imagination and temperament; considerations which as Huizinga put it, far exceed 'scholarly aspirations'.[42] Huizinga related the story of a colleague who refused students' requests to provide them with research topics by stating: 'You might as well ask me to pick a wife for you'.[43] But go-betweens and matchmakers do have their successes, particularly if they know both parties well; and professors who are well acquainted with their students' capabilities and bents and with the topic concerned have often introduced a researcher to a segment of the past to which he has then devoted his life's work.

It is self-evident that the historian should select a topic for which he shows a genuine affinity. Ideally there should perhaps be more than mere affinity — his topic should interest and excite him so that he can not resist it. But is there the danger that excessive love for his topic, far from making him see better, will actually blind him, particularly where there is a close connexion between that love and present interest?[44] Perhaps there is such a danger, but whatever topic he becomes involved in, the historian has constantly to ring the changes between attachment and detachment, to guard against various sorts of bias and to be guided by that sense of justice about which J.S. Marais wrote in the preface to his book on the Cape Coloured people.

> Justice (he stated) which has rightly been represented as blindfold, does not allow the use of two measures, one for ourselves and our own people, and another for those who differ from us in nationality, or race, or the colour of their skins.[45]

8

Historians do not always inform their readers why they decided to write on a particular topic. Without the author's personal confession of the circumstances which led him to that particular segment of the past, attempts to resolve this question must be treated with caution. There have been at least three different explanations of Namier's decision to investigate British politics at the accession of George III. E.H. Carr maintains that it was his conservatism which led him to concentrate on the last period in English history 'in which the ruling class had been able to engage in the rational pursuit of position and power in an orderly and mainly static society'.[46] But, Herbert Butterfield, after reading Julia Namiers' biography of her husband, wrote that it could now be vividly seen that it was the problem of Britain's overseas empire that had first awakened Namier's special interest in the reign of George III.[47] Julia Namier, herself, however, told an interviewer that her husband had become interested in parliamentary history, because 'he had never learned how to consort with people' and that he tried to discover more about this matter by studying the history of an institution 'where people best consorted with each other'.[48]

Some historians *do* tell their readers what led them to write about a certain topic. One of the most famous explanations of this sort is surely that of Edward Gibbon, who related how his great theme came to him, as it were, by accident:

> It was at Rome ..., as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capital ... that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city, first started to my mind.[49]

It was also the trace left in the present which seems to have provided the initial impetus for J.H. Plumb to write his biography of Walpole. He has stated that his interest in Walpole was first aroused because that statesman's portrait hung over the high table at his Cambridge college. It was also, however, he admitted, his later realisation of the inadequacy of the existing works on Walpole, which induced him to start doing research on the topic.[50] Sir Keith Hancock, on the other hand tells us that his decision to do research on the Italian Risorgimento came from his absorption in Italian affairs of his day — the 1920s; he went to the nineteenth century with questions that were prompted by Mussolini's march on Rome.[51]

To turn to historians who have written on South Africa. C.W. de Kiewiet, in the preface to his *Imperial Factor in South Africa*, informs his readers that he chose to write on the 'seventies and 'eighties of the preceding century, because 'in no other period can the racial, social and economic issues be so clearly and conveniently studied'. In his introduction he reveals that it was really his interest in South Africa of *his* present, the nineteen thirties that led him to the topic:

> Most of these pages speak of South Africa ... of the last century; and yet they are also about today. The problems here are curiously of our own time, unsolved some of them ...[52]

W.M. MacMillan's decision to write *The Cape Coloured Question* and *Bantu, Boer and Briton* was obviously linked to the Dr Philip papers becoming available to him, but the shape of his researches was also influenced by his interest in the race problems of South Africa of his day. In the preface to the former book, he states that

> a better understanding of the oldest phase of this question is an indispensable preliminary to any hopeful approach to the complex problems that remain.[53]

J.S. Marais's, *Cape Coloured People* was stimulated by MacMillan's work, but it is also apparent from what he states, in his preface that he had hoped to contribute to an understanding of South African society.[54] Marais's *Maynier and the First Boer Republic* was primarily an attempt to reveal the shortcomings of G.M. Theal as a writer of history.[55] C.F.J. Muller informs his readers that his topic of *Die Britse Owerheid en die Groot Trek* was suggested to him by his promoter, Professor H.B. Thom (a striking example of how successfully a professor can select the right topic to recommend to his student).[56] Ben Liebenberg has stated that he started doing intensive research on Andries Pretorius when while writing an article for the *Dictionary of South African Biography* he became aware of the shortcomings of Gustav Preller's life of that Voortrekker leader.[57]

9

Historians apparently select their special fields of study for a variety of reasons which are not always related to their interest in present-day problems or to the cultural climate of their age. Moreover in the cases where these factors do play a role, there is still this question: if the historian is subjected to all 'the modes of thought, feeling and practice ... in his time',[58] why does he react to only some of them?

To return to the 'son of his time' concept? If the historian is 'a son of his time', does he have to be utterly devoted to his time? Furthermore do all people, particularly historians, actually have to 'belong' to their period? Trevor-Roper considers that Burckhardt was a misfit in his own time, but that he is now one of the historians 'this age finds worthy of note in another'[59] Is it not possible to regard the historian's mind as being free to initiate new situations and new systems of relations? And what of the 'spirit' or the climate of the time? Is the influence of the historian's contemporary world not so complex that it defies all but the crudest analysis? Does a typical period have 'not so much a unified spirit of its own as a precarious conglomerate of tendencies, aspirations and activities which more often than not manifest themselves independently of one another'.[60]

If there is some validity in these ideas, is it possible to go further than A.O. Lovejoy's statement that 'histories are written to answer questions concerning the past which are of interest to somebody in the present'?[61] The questions asked by historians are necessarily linked to the historian who is living in the present but they are not always related to the problems or the 'spirit' of the present.

10

The historian having selected his topic will usually justify his choice by stating that it is 'significant'. There is truth in De Kiewiet's suggestions that 'it is the special temptation of the historian ... to make his little fishes talk like whales'.[62] Indeed, I would say, that it is essential that the historian should at the outset feel that his theme is significant; he may, of course, subsequently change his mind. If one examines specialized historical studies one will find that historians frequently justify their choice of topic on the grounds that it is significant. Eric Walker tells us that the Great Trek is the central event in South African history.[63] Leonard Thompson sees the unification of South Africa as 'a striking example of the operation of political forces in a multi-racial society', as well as providing 'a salutary reminder of the limitations of human foresight'.[64] Ronald Hyam tries to make doubly sure of winning over his readers, by telling them that his study of Elgin and Churchill at the colonial office 'is both historically *interesting* in providing a fantastic clash of personalities and *important* in determining the evolution of the commonwealth'.[65]

The criteria historians use to assess the significance of their topics seem to be two-fold: firstly causal fertility, that is, the consequences of the events they are dealing with and secondly that their theme has wide implications and connotations. What about using as a yardstick the opinions of those people who were living at the time? One difficulty is that such people would not have

been in a position to know the consequences of those events. Furthermore as Geoffrey Barraclough has pointed out: 'if we followed the indication of those who troubled to write down what they thought was important in Ninth Century Gaul or in Thirteenth Century England (we would have) '... a dreary recital of miracles, tempests, comets, pestilences, calamities and other wonderful things'.[66] Yet, what the people of any age consider to be important, may tell the historian a great deal about them and about their society. Also there is much to be said for the conclusion reached by Macaulay that 'in the apparent trivia of history the historian could discover the essential nature of a society; that which distinguished it in place and time from all others'.[67]

Can it be left to the judgment of an individual historian to decide what is significant in history? Are there other criteria which need to be taken into account when topics are selected for investigation?

11

The objections raised within the last decade against the topics historians select to study, seem to me to be able to be grouped under three main headings. Firstly that historians are not committed enough to the issues that really matter; that they are not doing enough to ensure that there will be a better future for mankind. Secondly, that many historians are writing about topics which are irrelevant to people today. Thirdly, that by still concentrating too much on those areas on which they have traditionally focused, historians are presenting an incomplete picture of the past. In the final section of my lecture, I propose to examine these strictures.

The most extreme attacks against the historian of today accuse him of concentrating on those topics which serve the interests of the establishment and of the ruling structure.[68] 'The earth', says Howard Zinn, 'has for so long been so sharply tilted on behalf of the rich, the white-skinned, the male, the powerful, that it will take enormous effort to set it right'.[69] It is argued that a revolutionary cult of the past, history written from the working-man's point of view or the black man's point of view, or the woman's point of view is needed to replace the reactionary cult of the past, written by and for the upper and the middle classes or by and for the white man and stressing male dominance.[70] But according to some exponents this view, the historian must not only present a new view of the past, he must also become an activist; he must thrust himself and his writing into history on behalf of the goals in which he believes; he must learn to use the past to change the world. The first step is to choose a topic that will enable him to write 'value-motivated, action-inducing

history'.[71] Historians of this type are seeking a 'usable past'; their aim is to link together past, present and future.[72]

I admit that the desire to induce change may lead historians to topics which have not previously been investigated. It does seem, however, that the historian's already difficult task of freeing himself from bias and of being just to all sides, may become an insurmountable one, if he goes to the past with not only the present, but also the future weighing heavily on his mind. Can intellectual honesty be achieved by the historian who writes about the past with the aim of creating a better future.[73] Does future-minded history writing not carry with it the possibility that 'the investigator's aggressiveness tends to frighten the past back into the past; instead of conversing with the dead, he himself does most of the talking'.[74] The main trouble with committed history is that what should be the historian's chief aim — the discovery of truth about the past — becomes subordinated to the aim of improving the present and creating a brighter future (which latter aim seems anyhow to be far beyond the powers of the historian as historian).

Less revolutionary than the demands that the historian should manipulate his reader (and the past?) so that there will be a better future, is the plea that the historian should write about such aspects of the past which are 'meaningful'. The historian, should, it is argued have 'a sense' of what is central, and serious and relevant.[75] Most historians, Professor T.R.H. Davenport has stated, 'think they have a duty to be relevant'.[76] Connell-Smith sees a correlation between relevance and significance to the changing circumstances of human society.[77] Gerhard Ritter defined relevant history as those inquiries about the past which 'in some way contribute to the direct understanding of the present'.[78] In principle, the doctrine of relevance can not easily be faulted; in practice different criteria of what is relevant will be applied by different people. Excessive insistence on what is relevant may lead to dogmatism and intolerance, or to an exclusive and absurd preoccupation with those threads of the past which still figure prominently in the present. What is one to make of the declaration of a British historian in 1961, that whereas the predominance of English constitutional history was justified when Britain was a great power, the time had come when constitutional history should be replaced 'by a study of what alone now gives Englishmen influence, namely culture and ideas'?[79] The demands for relevancy seem now to be not quite as strident as they were a few years ago. Perhaps the term itself is no longer relevant. Elton considers that relevance is a vogue word which had already disappeared from the revisionist vocabulary in the early nineteen-seventies.[80] The criterion of relevance can not, however, so easily be dismissed. What is the alternative to

relevance? Is it what has been called 'the study of the past for its own sake?'; antiquarianism; a concept of the past, as Michael Oakeshott put it, loved by the historian 'as a mistress of whom he never tires and whom he never expects to talk sense'.[81] Elton claims that the idea of studying the past for its own sake has been misunderstood. It does not, he has declared, mean that the present should be forgotten altogether, but it implies the desire 'to understand the past aright before investigating its relation with the present'.[82] Important themes for historical investigation have emerged as a result of interest in present problems and there is no reason why such research projects should be devalued. Nor, however, does there seem to be any reason why such projects should be considered more worthy than the investigation of themes from the past not directly inspired by present problems. Moreover, insistence that historical research should be prompted exclusively by present interest will eventually lead to distortion of the past by emphasizing those elements of the past which have chains of continuity connecting them with the present and ignoring the equally valuable elements of contrast and discontinuity in the past. If a view of the past is to play a role in helping us to understand ourselves and to understand the present, that view must not be a distorted view but as true a view as the historian of that age is capable of achieving. Another consideration of which philosophers of history may not be aware, but of which most practising historians are only too conscious, is that certain elements of continuity, relevance if you like, between past and present may well be lost to the historian if he concentrates only on those topics which appear on the surface to have a bearing on the present. The historian can never, after deciding on his topic, be sure what his researches will unearth or where his evidence will lead him.

The final current criticism of the historian's choice of topic, I intend discussing, is a matter which has already been noted earlier in the lecture, namely the historian's excessive concentration on matters which have traditionally been studied and his neglect of other areas. The chief target is political history in all its forms. Regarded once as the backbone of history, it has become in the eyes of some, 'the parson's nose of history'.[83] Military history has for long been sneered at as 'drum and trumpet history' and diplomatic history has been disparagingly written off as 'the record of what one clerk said to another clerk'. Some historians nowadays seem apologetic about writing political history.

It has been postulated that part of this distate for political history may well lie in the disillusionment of the present generation with politics in general and with political history's central theme — the struggle for power and success. To many people today, success has become a vulgar concept. It has been

suggested, too, that politics are 'dirty' and 'sordid', and that in a world which has come to terms with sex and money, politics has obtained a monopoly of those epithets.[84] It is true, as has been admitted by some of its practitioners, that much of the political history that has been written has been too narrow and that large segments of the population have been left out of account; political history has usually been 'history from above' and often too it has been superficial, concentrating only on 'the public faces of men and events'.[85] But none of these are inherent weaknesses of political history, and nobody surely would advocate that political history should be neglected altogether. No one of what are usually regarded as the categories of political, social, economic and cultural history should be practised in isolation. It is difficult too, to justify any hierarchy of value, of precedence, or of significance that would apply to these different categories of history.

In his inaugural lecture delivered in 1945, Professor J.S. Marais, of the University of the Witwatersrand, stated that South African history writing had only recently emerged from what might be described as the stage of 'extensive farming' of big and necessarily superficial sweeps across a vast field. The stage of intensive cultivation, he maintained, had been reached.[86] Since 1945 a considerable amount of South African history has been written and much of it conforms to the highest standards of historical scholarship.

Yet it is not surprising considering the comparatively limited number of historians who have written on South Africa's past, that there are many pages of the history of this country which still have to be written. Political history, particularly as seen from the angle of the white ruling class, has predominated. Economic, social and cultural history has been neglected. Women have not received the attention they deserve. More research has been focused on the nineteenth century than on any other period. Historians have concentrated on the large public issues rather than on Macaulay's 'apparent trivia'. South African historians have until recently shown little interest in the sort of topic which was discussed at the fiftieth Anglo-American Conference of Historians held at the University of London in July 1979. The theme of the conference was 'The Pursuit of Happiness' and papers were read on topics such as 'The Pursuit of Happiness at the Seaside', 'Sexual Freedom and Social Constraint in later Medieval England' and 'Drink and Welcome: The Alehouse as a Social Centre, 1600–1730'; 'Why is it', a commentator recently asked, 'that so much South African history is a kind of denatured history? A history lacking in colour and flavour and shorn of living persons, which fails to mirror the richness and complexity of the South Africa we discover around us?' ... 'Why', it has been asked, 'is there no South African history which deals seriously with the variety

and evolution of the South African landscape; which tells us about shebeens and dagga, rugby and soccer ...'[87] It should be noted, however, that there are historians who have started investigating some of these hitherto neglected areas of South Africa's past.[88]

The unprecedented world interest in South Africa — even during the Anglo-Boer war there were not as many eyes and minds concentrated on South Africa as is the case now — has brought with it an unprecedented interest in South African history. The different approaches of these historians, the new topics that are being investigated and the controversy which has been introduced to the South African historical scene are surely welcomed by all historians except those traditionalists who are convinced with myopic certainty that *their* view of the past is the only valid one.

There are, as I say, new trends discernible in the study of South Africa's past and these can only enrich the historiography of this country. But it should also be recognized that important as it is to explore new themes, much that has been written, needs to be revised. It is not necessary to choose a novel topic to present original ideas about the past. There is no topic in South African history, that has been so thoroughly 'done' that there is nothing new to say about it. There does sometimes seem to be an idea that new perspectives of the past must necessarily invalidate all our previous conceptions.[89] It is important that all historians, including and particularly, those intrigued by new trends, should read carefully what their predecessors have written. In some cases it may be found that their own approaches are not entirely novel. It is essential that historians also pay attention to what other historians of their own age are writing and that with open but critical minds they carefully consider different views of the past.

The historian's primary aim in selecting a topic should not be to entertain, nor to solve present-day problems (although there can surely be no objection if he does entertain or if he studies a topic in order to understand the present). Least of all should a historian choose a topic so that he can be in fashion, so that he can be a 'swinging, trendy' historian. The historian should realize that his selection of a topic is, in effect a statement that he considers that particular aspect of the past to be significant. There are different types of significant things in the past and all of them are worth studying. The historian's task is to explain — without distorting the past — why his theme is significant — or in cases where the evidence leads him to that conclusion, to indicate why what was hitherto considered to be significant, is in fact insignificant. The historian should try to make sense of that segment of the complex past he has chosen

to study. 'The historian', as one of us has said, 'is not a smart man who knows all the answers, but a persistent one who has come to grips with a few very difficult questions'.[90]

Notes

1. G.R. Elton, *The Future of the Past,* Cambridge, 1968, p. 3.
2. P. Geyl, *Napoleon. For and Against,* London, 1968, p. 16.
3. H.S. Commager, *The Study of History,* Columbus, Ohio, 1966, p. vii.
4. 8.J. Liebenberg, *Waarom Bestudeer Ons die Verlede?,* Inaugural Lecture, University of South Africa, 28 June 1979.
5. Cf G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History,* London, 1967, *passim* and G. Connell-Smith and H.A. Lloyd, *The Relevance of History,* London, 1972, p. 35.
6. H.R. Trevor-Roper, 'The Past and the Present. History and Sociology', *Past and Present,* 42, 1969, p. 16.
7. *The English Historical Review,* Vol. 1, No. 1, 1886, quoted in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present,* Papermac, 2nd Edition, London, 1970, p. 175.
8. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History,* Oxford (Paperback), 1963, pp. 216, 304.
9. R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography,* Oxford, 1964, p. 110.
10. J.S. Marais, *The Fall of Kruger's Republic,* Oxford, 1961, pp. 8–10.
11. C.J. Barnard, *Generaal Louis Botha op die Natalse Front, 1899–1900,* Cape Town, 1970, pp. 74–106.
12. Quotation and comment in William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History,* Englewood Cliffs, N.J., pp. 4, 28.
13. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft,* Manchester, 1967, p. 26.
14. J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past,* London, 1969, p. 105.
15. G.J. Renier, *History. Its Purpose and Method,* Boston, 1950, p. 73.
16. P.E. Tillinghast, *The Specious Past,* Reading, Mass., 1972, p. 42.
17. Liebenberg.
18. E. Le Roy Ladurie, *The Territory of the Historian,* translated from the French by 8. and S. Reynolds, Hassocks, Sussex, 1979, p. 295.
19. C.F.J. Muller, *Die Oorsprong van die Groot Trek,* Cape Town, 1974, p. 20, N. 51.
20. Connell-Smith and Lloyd, p. 44.
21. J. Namier, *Lewis Namier. A Biography,* London, 1971, p. 224.
22. J. Burckhardt, *Judgments on History and Historians,* London, 1959, p. 11.
23. H.J. Perkin, 'Social History', H.P.R. Finberg, *Approaches to History. A Simposium,* London, 1962, p. 81.
24. Wilhelm Bauer quoted in Renier, p. 26.
25. See M.C. van Zyl, *Oor Vertolkingsverskille in die Geskiedskrywing,* Pretoria, 1971, p. 5; F.A. van Jaarsveld, 'Die Geskiedenis en Relevansie', *Historia,* May 1979.
26. Collingwood, *Idea of History,* p. 305.
27. Quoted in Jean Chesneaux, *Pasts and Future or What is History For,* London, 1978, p. 37.
28. E.H. Carr, *What is History?,* Harmondsworth (Pelican), 1964, pp. 35–6.
29. Quoted in J. le Goff, 'Is Politics still the Backbone of History', *Daedalus,* X, 1, Winter 1971, p. 1.
30. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey,* first published in 1818, but written in 1798, Chapter 13.
31. *Ibid.*

32. Quoted in A. Marwick, *The Nature of History,* London, 1971, p. 47.
33. T.B. Macaulay, *History of England,* Vol. 1, London, N.d., p. 2.
34. Quoted by Alice S. Green in Introduction to J.R. Green, *A Short History of the English People,* London, 1895, p. xi.
35. M. Postan, *Fact and Relevance. Essays on Historical Method,* Cambridge, 1971, p. 56; Renier, p. 30; Connell-Smith and Lloyd, p. 76.
36. C.V. Wedgwood, *The King's Peace 1637–1641,* London, 1960, p. 14.
37. F. Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War,* London, 1967, Author's foreword to first German edition, p. ix.
38. J.H. Hexter, *Reappraisals in History,* London, 1967, pp. 8–9; Connell-Smith and Lloyd, pp. 16, 45–6.
39. Catherine Drinker Bowen, 'Biography, History and the Writing of Books', A. Nevins and C.D. Bowen, *The Art of History Two Lectures,* Washington, 1967, p. 23.
40. Namier, p. 14.
41. W.K. Hancock, *Country and Calling,* London, 1954, p. 213.
42. See Stern, 'Introduction' and J. Huizinga, 'Historical Conceptualization', Stern, pp. 26, 300.
43. Stern, 'Introduction', Stern, p. 13.
44. See Siegfreid Kracauer, *History. The Last Things Before the Last,* New York, 1969, p. 72.
45. J.S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People; 1652–1937,* Johannesburg, 1957, p. x.
46. Carr, pp. 38–9.
47. H. Butterfield's review of J. Namier, *Lewis Namier, History* Vol. 58, 1973, p. 411; see also Namier, p. 192.
48. Ved Mehta, *Fly and Fly-Bottle, Encounters with British Intellectuals,* London, 1963, p. 211.
49. Edward Gibbon, *Autobiography,* Everyman edition, London, 1948, p. 124.
50. J.H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole. The Making of a Statesman,* London, 1956, p. x.
51. Hancock, p. 215.
52. C.W. de Kiewiet, *The Imperial Factor in South Africa. A Study in Politics and Economics,* Cambridge, 1937, pp. ix, 1.
53. W.M. MacMillan, *The Cape Coloured Question. A Historical Survey,* London, 1927, p. vii.
54. J.S. Marais, *Cape Coloured People* pp. vii–x.
55. J.S. Marais, *Maynier and the First Boer Republic,* Cape Town, 1944, pp. v–vii.
56. C.F.J. Muller, *Die Britse Owerheid en die Groot Trek,* Cape Town, etc; 1948, p. v.
57. B.J. Liebenberg, *Andries Pretorius in Natal,* Pretoria, etc., 1977, p. 7.
58. A.O. Lovejoy, 'Present Standpoints and Past History', H. Meyerhoff (ed.), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time,* p. 175.
59. Introduction by H.R. Trevor-Roper to J. Burckhardt, *Judgements on History and Historians,* p. 11.
60. Kracauer, pp. 66–9.
61. Lovejoy in Meyerhoff, p. 176.
62. De Kiewiet, p. 1.
63. E.A. Walker, *The Great Trek,* London, 1948, p. ix.
64. L.M. Thompson, *The Unification of South Africa 1902–1910,* Oxford, 1960, p. v.
65. Ronald Hyam, *Elgin and Churchill at the Colonial Office, 1905–1908,* London, etc., 1968, p. xi.
66. G. Barraclough, *History in a Changing World,* Oxford, 1956, p. 22.
67. M.A. Crowther, 'British Social History', *The Historical Journal,* 20, 4 (1977), p. 991.
68. See Chesneaux, p. 105.
69. Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History,* Boston, 1970, p. 27.
70. See G. Barraclough's foreword in Chesneaux, p. ix.
71. See Zinn, *passim* and pp. 2, 27, 54.

72. See David Hackett Fischer, 'The Uses of History', A.N. Gilbert (ed.), *In Search of a Meaningful Past,* Boston, 1972, p. 107; Tillinghast, pp. 131–2.
73. See Tillinghast, p. 130.
74. Kracauer, p. 69.
75. Anonymous leading article, 'New Ways in History', *Times Literary Supplement,* 7 April 1966, p. 295.
76. T.R.H. Davenport, 'The Tiger in the Grass', *South African Historical Journal,* 9, November 1977, p. 3.
77. Connell-Smith and Lloyd, p. 44.
78. G. Ritter, 'Scientific History, Contemporary History, Political Science,' *History and Theory,* 1, 1961, p. 262.
79. See G.R. Elton, *Practice of History,* p. 148.
80. G.R. Elton's review of G. Connell-Smith and H.A. Lloyd, 'The Relevance of History' in *History,* 58, 1973, p. 410.
81. Quoted in W.H. Walsh, 'The Practical and the Historical Past', P. King and B.C. Parekh, *Politics and Experience. Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of His Retirement,* Cambridge, 1968, p. 16.
82. G.R. Elton, *History,* 58, 1973, p. 410.
83. Le Goff, *Daedalus,* X, 1, Winter 1971, p. 4.
84. Tillinghast, p. 109; Elton, *Political History,* p. 64.
85. Elton, *Political History,* p. 60.
86. J.S. Marais, *The Study of History,* Johannesburg, 1945, p. 15.
87. K.R. Hughes, 'Preview Symposium. Challenges from the Past: Reflections on Liberalism and Radicalism in the Writing of Southern African History', *Social Dynamics,* 3(1), 1977, p. 62.
88. See especially the work of, Charles van Onselen, for example, *Randlords and Rotgut, 1886–1903; an essay on the role of alcohol in the development of European imperialism and southern African Capitalism with special reference to black mineworkers in the Transvaal Republic,* Johannesburg. 1976; "The Regiment of the Hills": South Africa's Lumpenproletarian Army 1890–1920, *Past and Present,* No. 78, 80, August 1978.
89. See C.V. Wedgwood, 'The Present in the Past', *The Listener,* 10 February 1955, p. 236.
90. Hancock, p. 113.