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# THE EXPERIENCE OF WRITING HISTORY

By GEORGE F. KENNAN

I JUST want to make a few very informal observations about the nature of history as a subject and about the condition of the historian. My excuse for doing so is simply that I came to this work unusually late in life, after a quarter of a century, in fact, in a wholly different sort of occupation. The impressions I have gained of these matters have something of the quality of the naïve. And since the naïve is occasionally amusing, whether or not it is instructive, I thought you might just possibly like to hear what these impressions are.

One of the first things that dismayed me, as I tried to put pen to paper with a view to relating historical events, was to discover the hopeless open-endedness of the subject of history itself: its multi-dimensional quality, its lack of tidy beginnings and endings, its stubborn refusal to be packaged in any neat and satisfying manner. I was soon brought to realize that every beginning and ending of every historical work is always in some degree artificial and contrived. No matter what you told, there was always something that had gone before, or came afterward, which you didn't have time to tell about, or which you didn't know about, and which was nevertheless essential to the completeness of the tale.

This open-endedness of the historical subject applied, I was brought to realize, not just to the longitudinal dimension of chronology, but also to the latitudinal dimension of related subjects and related happenings. No matter what field of human activity you selected for treatment, there were always a dozen other fields that had something to do with it, which you couldn't treat. And wherever you tried to draw the boun-

dary between what you could write about and what you couldn't, it was always an artificial boundary, doing violence in some degree to the integrity of the presentation itself.

The perfect historical work, in other words, could not be written. If you were a great enough historian, if you were sufficiently learned in the environment of your subject as well as in its central core, then you might be able to do a good job of concealing from all but the most perceptive of your readers the untidiness of the outer limits of your presentation. But the untidiness would be there, nevertheless. There would always be a border, however well concealed, beyond which the firmness of your knowledge trailed off into the obscurity of your ignorance, or where the obvious limits on the patience of publishers and readers made it impossible for you to tell all you knew.

In addition to this diffuse quality of the subject, I was startled to discover how rigorous, when you stopped to think of it, were the limitations of perspective. History, it seemed, besides being open-ended, partook also of the nature of a sphere. You couldn't see it from all directions at once. You could see it only from some tiny, fixed point in its ample stratosphere. This point was always arbitrary in relation to the subject. An infinite number of other points could conceivably have been selected. Each would have revealed something which you, from the perspective of your particular point, were unable to reveal. Every point was, therefore, severely limited in its possibilities. Not only that, but there was a real question as to what latitude you really had in selecting the point you were going to use—whether, in fact, it was not already substantially selected for you.

This brought up, as you will readily see, the whole perplexing question of subjectivity. I had naïvely supposed, before I tackled this work, that there was a body of unrevealed or unappraised historical fact lying scattered around, like so many archeological fragments, in the archival and bibliographical sediment of the ages, and that the historian's task

was only to unearth these fragments, to order them, to catalogue them, and to arrange them in a manner that would permit them to tell their own tale. I was soon to learn that it was not this simple. These fragments were there, all right; but they had, it seemed, no single, definitive tale to tell. They could be arranged in an infinite number of ways, and each had its specific implications. Much was left to the powers of insight of the arranger. He had to do this arranging on the strength of his own good conscience, and to take personal responsibility for the product. This was the task of analysis and interpretation. And this meant that the fixed point from which one viewed history was actually none other than one's own self—one's self in the most intimate personal sense.

The describing of historical events, in other words, was partly an act of the creative imagination of the writer. You might know the bare skeleton of circumstance: that such and such occurred on such and such a day. The fact remains: you weren't there; you didn't see it. To arrive at its true significance—to understand its atmosphere, its meaning for those who experienced it, its relation to other events—you had to put yourself in the place of the people who were there; you had to apply to the historical record something which, however you tried to make it informed and dispassionate, was still an act of the imagination.

But then the question arose: was your imagination not the product of what you yourself had known in life? Of the things you had seen and experienced, as the inhabitant of a specific historical age? And if so, could you really visualize the happenings of another age? Could you conceive of things outside the range of your own experience? If not, then were you not really imposing a distorting lens upon the stuff of history by the very act of attempting to describe it? Was it not history which was serving as a framework for the product of your own imagination, rather than your imagination which was serving to illumine the facts of history?

I recall once seeing a performance of Gogol's *Revisor*

(The Inspector) in one of the leading theatres in Stockholm. It was Gogol's old classic, all right. The words were correctly translated. The script was faithfully followed. Yet what was represented was not Russia but Sweden. Gogol's profound and despairing caricature of bureaucratic life in a Russian provincial administrative center of the early nineteenth century, with all its sad and despairing humor, had been somehow transformed into a jolly, colorful, little Swedish fairy tale, with characters who were like painted dolls—a very creditable performance, a very enjoyable and creative one, in its way; but it was Sweden, not Russia.

One was obliged to wonder whether this was not substantially what one did to any historical subject one touched, no matter how objective one tried to be. I wrote two volumes about certain phases of international life in 1917 and 1918. I did my best to describe things as I thought they looked to the actors in that drama. Sometimes I thought I had succeeded in tolerable degree. But I also had panicky moments of wonder as to whether I had done anything closer to reality than a sort of historical novel. In any case, I was forced to realize, when I looked at the volumes in retrospect, that however revealing they were as a record of the time to which they pertained, they were probably more revealing as a record of our own time—of the outlook and manner of thought of a citizen of the 1950's. I realized then why someone was once caused to remark that all history was contemporary history.

On the other hand, I did see that it was possible to do better or worse in this respect. It was possible to enhance one's capacity for visualizing history by means of the very effort of studying it. One thing supported another. The more you steeped yourself in the environment of your subject—the more, let us say, you supported a study of political events with a parallel study of the art, the religious beliefs, the folklore, the economics, and the manners of the times—the more your imagination could rise to the task. You could, in other words, lift yourself, to a degree, by your own intellectual

bootstraps. But this meant that if you really wanted to get near to your subject, it was yourself you had to change. The mere amassing of more data would not do it. To understand a past episode, you had to make yourself to some extent a citizen of the epoch in question. You had to make its spirit, its outlook, its discipline of thought, a part of your own nature.

But this was something which you did only at a certain personal price; and the nature of this price was again one of the things that struck me very strongly about the writing of history. It was something which I can only describe—and I hope the term will not sound too bizarre to you—as its loneliness.

I do not mean to use this term in any self-pitying way. I have enjoyed no less than anyone else the company of my colleagues in the academic life—their company, that is, in the sense of the association one has with them in the odd moments of relaxation: over luncheon tables, and that sort of thing. I even discovered that scholars, so long as they have not constituted themselves a committee to deal with academic-administrative affairs (in which case something very strange indeed happens to them), are the most amusing and companionable of men. I should also like to stress that what I am about to say applies only to the studying and writing of history, not to the teaching of it. But it does appear to me that the studying and writing of history is a relatively lonely occupation.

The historian is lonely, first of all, vis-à-vis the historical personages who are the objects of his study. He lives for long periods among these people. They absorb his attention, his thoughts, sometimes even his sympathies and antipathies. Yet generally speaking, they are not really his companions. They surround him, silently and inscrutably, like figures in a wax museum. He can see them to one extent or another, in the literal sense, depending upon the stage of pictorial or photographic representation in the period when they lived. But they are inanimate. He sees them only frozen in poses---

in a series of *tableaux morts*. Sometimes, to be sure, words are to be seen issuing from their mouths, hovering above their heads, so to speak, like the bubbles of utterance that emerge from characters in a comic strip. But one does not actually hear the voices; and one is often not sure whether the words were really theirs or those of the author of the comic strip. In any case, the human context of the utterance: the elusive nuances of circumstances, of feeling, of environment, of intuition and telepathy—the things that made that particular moment unlike any other moment that ever was or will be—all this is seldom to be recaptured. Only, perhaps, in cases of the most profound and selfless and erudite identification of the historian with the period of his study does there occur that intimacy of acquaintance which permits historical personages really to become alive again in their own right—not as products of the arbitrary imagination of the writer, but in reasonable resemblance to what they really were.

But even where such people become real for the historian, he, let us remember, does not become real for them. Their mutual relationship is a one-way street. *He* takes an interest in *them*. He supports them. He becomes their posthumous conscience. He tries to see that justice is done them. He follows their trials and experiences, in many instances, with greater sympathy and detachment than any of their egocentric and jealous contemporaries ever did.

But do *they* support *him*? Not in the least. They couldn't care less. Most of them would snort with contempt if they were to be made aware of the identity of those who would later undertake the effort to interpret their lives and strivings to future generations. Statesmen often conceive themselves to be working for posterity in the abstract, but they have little real respect for individual members of it, in a world where youth is never what age was and where the good old times will never be recaptured. Historical characters would have little solicitude for the brash member of a future generation who takes upon himself so presumptuously the burden of interpreting *their* doings and *their* difficulties.

The historian assists then, like a disembodied spirit, at the activities of his characters. To them, he has a duty, a responsibility, of understanding and of sympathy. But he himself remains unseen, unknown, unaided. This, for my money, is loneliness.

And it is not only vis-à-vis the inhabitants of the past that the historian is lonely. The study of history is something that cuts one off from the age in which one lives. It represents—let us face it—a certain turning of one's back on the interests and preoccupations of one's own age, in favor of those of another. This association with the past cannot occur, if only for reasons of time, otherwise than at the expense of the association with the present.

This is something which one's contemporaries, polite as they may be, rarely really understand or forgive. Every age is egocentric—and fiercely so. Every age thinks itself to be the most important age that ever occurred. Is not the present generation, after all, the occupant of that incomparably most important place in human history—the area between the past and the future? The very idea that one of the members of this generation should turn away from its absorbing and unprecedented concerns to give his attention, professionally and at length, to the affairs of people who suffer from the obvious inferiority of not being alive at all: this, to any normal and full-blooded contemporary, is little short of insulting. It implies that there were people long ago whose lives were so much more important and interesting than our own that the mere contemplation of them from a distance is held preferable to a direct participation in the affairs of our own age, despite all its obvious glories and mysteries. What body of the living, intoxicated by the illusion of progress and the belief in the uniqueness of its own experience, would ever forgive *that*?

The historian too often finds himself, I fear, in the position of the man who has left the noisy and convivial party, to wander alone on cold and lonely paths. The other guests, whom he has left behind, murmur discontentedly among



themselves: "Why should he have left? Who does he think he is? Obviously, he doesn't like our company. He thinks us, plainly, a band of frivolous fools. But we are many; he is one of very few. We therefore are clearly right, and he is wrong. The devil take him. Let him sulk." So they say. And so he does.

So much for the historian's loneliness. Let me just mention one more thing that has grown upon me in the course of this work. It is the realization of how deeply one has to dig to find the justification for what one is doing. There are, after all, so many discouragements.

A librarian friend of mine told me the other day that it was most doubtful, in view of the inferior quality of present-day American paper, that anything I, or any of my colleagues, had recently written would still be legible fifty years hence. Since one of the few real consolations of writing history is the faint hope that perhaps one has accomplished something for the ages, this was a shattering thought.

Then, too, there is the atom, with all its grisly implications. I find it hard to forget that we live in an age when all sorts of people who haven't got the faintest concern for history—who don't even know, in fact, what it is—have it already in their power to put an end not only to great portions of the historical record (this, various military characters have done very successfully at frequent intervals in the past), but to both the writers and the readers. It is an uncomfortable reflection that this entire work of the study of the past—its subject, its rationale, its practitioners, its customers, its meaning—that all this is vulnerable, or soon will be, to the whims of brother Khrushchev or brother Mao or even certain of our American brethren that I could name, not to mention others who may, with time, come into the power of disposition over these apocalyptic weapons.

Even if men manage to avoid, by some unaccountable good fortune, the plunge over this particular abyss, one sees that humanity is now living, anyway, in the midst of some sort of

a biological and technological explosion, by which the terms of life are being altered at an ever-increasing pace. A part of this explosive process is the multiplication of the historical record, particularly the recent one. Even the major events of the present century—events which appeared to people at the moment to be of major, headline significance—have accumulated in such volume as to place them quite beyond the apprehension of the layman. It is the rarest of persons who today has any comprehension of the series of events which, just in his own time and that of his father, has brought him where he is today. Even the historian feels increasingly inadequate to this task. He can only wander around, like a man with a tiny flashlight amid vast dark caverns, shining his little beam here and there for a moment on a tiny portion of the whole, but with the darkness always closing up behind him as it recedes ahead. More history is probably written today than at any time in the past; and with respect to distant ages, once largely lost to historical knowledge, we are no doubt making progress. But with respect to the doings of our fathers and grandfathers, or even our elder brothers, we are, I fear, fighting a losing battle. The dizzy pace of change is carrying us into the future faster than we can pay out the delicate thread of historical scholarship that is our only link to the past.

What, then, is the use? Has this pursuit of history become no more than a superfluous habit—something that people assume their children ought to study in school simply because this has always been done within their memory? Are the conditions of our lives being altered with such rapidity that the record of the past would have little to tell us even if we could keep up with the explosive expansion of its volume?

Each of us, I suppose, has to answer these questions for himself. I am personally convinced that they must be answered in the negative. It may be true that it is becoming increasingly difficult to reconstruct an adequate record of the past. It may be true that there never was a time when history

was less susceptible of apprehension, in its entirety, by the layman. It may be true that we are condemned to explore only tiny and seemingly unrelated bits of a pattern already too vast for any of us to encompass, and rapidly becoming more so. All these things, to my mind, merely make the effort of historical scholarship not less urgent but more so.

It is clear that the spectacular mechanical and scientific creations of modern man tend to conceal from him the nature of his own humanity and to encourage him in all sorts of Promethean ambitions and illusions. It is precisely this person who, as he gets carried along on the dizzy pace of technological change, needs most to be reminded of the nature of the species he belongs to, of the limitations that rest on him, of the essential elements, both tragic and helpful, of his own condition. It is these reminders that history, and history alone, can give; for only history can expose the nature of man as revealed in simpler and more natural conditions, where that which was elemental was less concealed by artificialities. And to the supplying of these reminders, which is the historian's task, it is not necessary that one should know or understand the whole unconscionable and spreading panorama of history. A little bit, looked at hard and honestly, will do. In this little bit will be found, in the measure of the devotion applied to it, the compensation for all the essential imperfection of the historical art, for all the struggle with subjectivity, for all the loneliness, for all the questioning as to whether anyone will ever read what you wrote or whether it would do them any good if they did.