DO WE LEARN FROM HISTORY?

BY WILLIAM MACDONALD

DURING the years in which I was engaged in teaching history to college or university classes it fell to my lot to listen, more or less involuntarily and reluctantly, to a good many addresses or discussions about the meaning of history, usually with sidelong glances at the particular usefulness of history as a primary element of the educational programme. Most, if not all, of the persons who talked of the matter seemed to be uneasily influenced by some supposed necessity of justifying the study of history, especially when the subject was required, on ethical grounds, either by demonstrating the great moral purposes which it was assumed were implicit in the varied experience of the human family, or else by showing that experience, if rightly interpreted, was profitable for correction, reproof and instruction in righteousness for the generation that then was and for all the generations that were to come. History, we were assured, was to be studied not only for information and intellectural discipline, but also, and in the case of the young very largely, for the something or other of a moral kind that was to be obtained from the subject-matter and the exercise. Rather curiously, no one of those who propounded such views made any point, as far as I now recall, of religion as a basis of their argument; indeed, I think that I do them no injustice in saying that all of them would have looked with suspicion, if not with aversion, upon any attempt to emphasize the religious motive. The whole tone of the discussions was rather an implication that history as such involved ethical

processes, and that both processes and results carried practical moral lessons as obvious as they were useful.

I should not have thought it particularly worth while to recall such discussions here if they had been confined to the proceedings of teachers' associations. They would in that case seem to belong only to the category of well-meant and on the whole praiseworthy efforts of teachers to justify one of the important subjects of the school or college curriculum or to defend the arduous and expensive work of historical research. One who devotes himself to studying events that have passed or to examining the careers of men who are dead needs some sustenance for his pains, especially if it is a part of his task to communicate his enthusiasm for that kind of inquiry to others; and if the assumption that there is in history a moral purpose from which valuable lessons are actually being learned can afford such sustenance, it would be ungracious to quarrel with opinions or their expression. No minute or extensive examination of the field of historical scholarship of the larger and more learned kind, however, is needed to show that the idea of history as a moulding influence in the education of the race is not at all confined to professional teachers or to the practical routine of pedagogy. Books on the meaning of history, the lessons of the past, ethics and economics, spiritual law in the material world, and the like, are numerous enough to form a considerable literature, and the bulk of that literature would be appreciably increased were there added the innumerable scattered passages in which historians have interrupted for a moment the narrative of events in order to comment upon the ethical significance of the story, pointing the moral to adorn the tale.

It is the soundness of this contention that I should like as a student of history briefly to examine. That the study of history, no matter how small the area studied maybe, adds to the knowledge of what has been done or said or thought in the world, and that such

knowledge is a highly interesting addition to the intellectual equipment of the educated man in any age, are assertions which no one, presumably, will deny. Some of the greatest conquests of science have been won by investigators whose only purpose was to know the facts, and who felt neither material nor moral urging in the search for them; and the historian, though not in all respects a scientist, has the same intellectual right to cut loose from the dogging of purpose and usefulness as he traverses the fields of the past. But does mankind actually learn anything of a guiding nature from his past? Individually, no doubt, we often learn much, and it would appear to be open to any one of us to learn as much or as little as he chooses, or to pick and select at will from the mass of what history offers; but do we learn anything as societies or nations? Do we, in our collective capacity, do or avoid doing today anything whatever merely or chiefly because the same thing, or something very closely resembling it, was or was not done by a former generation or another people with successful or disastrous results? Is the experience of the past which the historian has made known a recognized influence, for either good or bad, in the public policy of any nation at the present time, or has it been, as far as we can see, such an influence at any time? Is it by the steps of a dead past that we climb to higher things, all the while taking note of the mistakes that former generations have made and of the successes that they have won, weaving their experiences into our own for more intelligent combat or more assured reward? If such be the use that we actually make of history, then surely is the historian one of the greatest of moral teachers, and the lessons of history ought to be magnified and broadcast for the guidance of each succeeding age; but if not, it would seem that attempts to draw lessons from the six or seven thousand years of something that may be called history may be somewhat beside the mark. Professor Remsen, the great chemist,

is said to have remarked on one occasion that he felt it to be his proper business in life to investigate the laws of matter, not to invent new baking powders; and the historian may do well to ask himself whether, in dwelling upon the usefulness of history as a guide in the everyday affairs of nations, he has not confused issues that ought to be kept distinct.

Since striking events, if any, would seem to be the ones most likely to impress the national consciousness and influence national policy, let us take first some illustrations of a striking kind. Political murder, dignified as assassination, and judicial killing as a penalty for political offenses, have been resorted to from the earliest times as devices for ridding the community of undesirable citizens. Both procedures have often been denounced by moralists as heinous at the same time that they have been defended by their promoters as necessary, just or inevitable, but while they have effectually disposed of the victims they have rarely failed to pave the way of the rise to prominence of other persons at least equally undesirable, or of the increased use of physical force in other directions by government, or of the development of plots whose object was revenge; at the same time that the weapon of killing has come to be regarded as legitimate in the case of persons whose influence in general was notably great—witness the assassination of Jaurès, the French Socialist leader, on the eve of the World War—and new growths of hero-worship have arisen to cover with glory both the good and the bad. Historically, assassination and judicial killing have befogged issues rather than cleared them, bringing in their train more trouble than they dissipated. It can hardly be said that the assassination of Russian grand dukes did anything for the cause of freedom in Russia; and the whole history of the American Civil War and Reconstruction is still under the spell of a mythically great Lincoln sanctified by pistol shots in Ford's Theatre. Yet with a long record of complete futility open to be read,

statesmen and commoners were wildly demanding only a few years ago that the Kaiser be hanged, Bolshevist rulers in Russia were executing their opponents by the thousand, and the assassination or attempted assassination of rulers elsewhere has gone on, always, apparently, with an underlying feeling on the part of large numbers of people that while such things were in a way disagreeable and piously to be regretted, involuntary death really solves some problems and the victims probably get what they deserve. I take it that there are probably some millions of men and women in this country who have regretted that the numerous reports of the assassination of Lenin were exaggerated, and who see nothing but propriety in the death penalties adjudged upon Germans by French courts-martial in the Ruhr, and I have yet to see any considerable protest either in this country or in England against the bombing of defenceless native villages in India by British airplanes. The only moral lesson, apparently, that history has to teach in these matters is that those who go in for this kind of thing would do well to have a justifying argument ready for use in order to prevent the acts from being classed as vulgar crimes, and that the real instigators ought to be powerful enough not to be punished if they are known.

Or take the question of revolution, a question in regard to which we in America ought to have clear ideas because our own existence as a nation springs from revolution. Historically, about all that can be said for revolution is that it is justifiable if it succeeds and unjustifiable if it fails; in the language of the street, it is a great and glorious thing if you can get away with it, but a very dismal enterprise if you can not; and this is a pretty poor basis for moralizing. I doubt if there is any revolution that could properly be held up as a model for any oppressed people to follow today, nor do I think that any historian would care to urge any people to resort to revolution on any recorded historical lines as a remedy for their political ills. As a

matter of fact, of course, the law steps in to punish anyone who publicly advocates the overthrow of a government by force or who actively joins in plans to bring such overthrow about, so that even the American Revolution, although open to any kind or degree of glorification as a *fait accompli*, cannot possibly be used as an inspiration of public conduct now or in the future. There cannot be much doubt regarding what would happen to a teacher who should seriously advise his students that if at any time the government of the United States were to become destructive of the ends of government which Jefferson set out in the Declaration of Independence, and should "evince a design to reduce them under absolute despotism," it would be their right and their duty "to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security."

Moreover, the enlightened principles in whose behalf revolutions are often set on foot do not always carry over into the post-revolutionary period. The American Revolution is a striking illustration in point. The Declaration of Independence, the foundation of the American state, embodies not only the idea of a justifiable revolt against what was somewhat heatedly called absolute despotism, but also the more important constructive ideas of the equality of men, of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as the great ends of government, and of government itself as grounded in the consent of the governed. Yet when a revised Constitution for this revolutionary state came to be framed, one of the most rigid systems of government that the modern world has known, a system especially designed by the influential propertied classes to curb the activities of what John Locke more than a century before had felicitously described as "a numerous democracy," beyond the possibility of change in its legislative and executive departments as a whole at any one time no matter what might be the state of public opinion, susceptible of change only in part at

fixed chronological intervals, and without the requirement of a popular vote on any proposition of amendment, was fastened upon the country, to be made more secure and comprehensive year by year as Congress encroached upon powers clearly intended to be reserved to the States, as the executive encroached upon Congress, and as the Supreme Court upheld the actions of both. Today, in the United States, government by the consent of the governed exists only at a second, third or fourth remove from the people themselves; nineteen amendments have been added to the Constitution without any opportunity of a popular expression regarding any of them, and life, liberty and happiness are no better safeguarded than in many other countries nor so well safeguarded as in some. Evidently, if one is to draw from the history of our national establishment lessons that shall hang together, one must choose between the Declaration and the Constitution as we now have it in practice, since what appears to be taught by the one is more or less directly contradicted by the other.

The character and achievements of the founding fathers have come in for so much manhandling of late that one may hesitate to add anything to the burden that historians have laid upon their memory, but I nevertheless venture to draw an illustration of which the fathers are a part. Recent eviscerations of early New England, and particularly of Massachusetts, have only confirmed what was, I think, a fairly general impression that Puritan intolerance and highhandedness, however explicable by the conditions from which Puritanism sprang or the new-world situations with which it sought to deal, bore its natural fruit in a certain glorification of force, in intellectual formalism and sterility, in provincial satisfaction with a little Americanism, and eventually in popular resentment and revolt. The Puritan character was doubtless rock-ribbed, but it was also hide-bound. If history teaches lessons that later generations learn, it would

seem that, with a fairly accurate conception of the nature of Puritanism spread broadcast in the schools and in literature for some forty years at least, the essential spirit of Puritan policy would not now be revived. Anyone who thinks so may find food for reflection in the recent book by Professor Mecklin of Dartmouth College on the Ku Klux Klan. The numerical strength of the Klan, Professor Mecklin points out, is in the small town and country district parts of the United States, the overwhelming majority of whose population prides itself on an American descent unmixed with recent foreign blood; and it is in those areas that some 42 per cent of the total population is to be found. Here, in regions remote from large cities or industrial centres, largely untouched by the intellectual or social interests which to most of us seem best worth attention, the Klan has built up a powerful autocracy of class control, dominating business, politics and social life, ruthlessly repressing dissent, and gathering strength from an intellectual atmosphere which embalms antique theologies in the wrappings of fundamentalism and drives from their chairs professors in State universities who believe in or teach evolution. Substitute for the leaders of the Klan the clerical hierarchy of colonial Massachusetts or Connecticut, replace the fiery cross or the hooded parade with the heresy trial or the public rebuke of political or sectarian objectors, and exchange the anti-evolutionary discourses of Mr.Bryan and his devoted following of Baptist and Methodist preachers for the Calvinist sermons of a colonial sabbath or a mid-week lecture day, and we have reproduced, to the satisfaction and spiritual delight of a region which holds some two-fifths of the population of the United States, the essential elements of a Puritan spirit which to most of us, I fancy, seem least desirable to imitate. If the time shall ever come when a popular novelist shall draw a picture of the social life of Puritan New England with the same skill and power with which the intellectual

and social life of the parts of the United States in which the Klan thrives has been drawn in "Main Street," the populace which takes its history only from the pages of the best sellers will find the historical parallel tolerably complete.

The period since 1914 abounds in illustrations of the way in which peoples and rulers disregard what, to the historian, must often seem to be the obvious lessons of experience. President Wilson's plea for a peace without victory, the phrase torn from its context and distorted into a plea for tenderness with the enemy Powers, was a historical generalization whose soundness has for more than five years been in process of demonstration, and the end is not yet. There will be, I take it, no denial that the systematic cultivation of hate, the magnification of acts of harshness or cruelty, the violation of the rights of non-combatants whether individuals or neutrals, the wanton devastation of territory or waste of private property, the imposition of excessive punitive damages, the establishment of oppressive systems of alien control, the disregard of minority rights or aspirations, or the attempt to check the natural economic development of nations large or small, have been abundantly shown historically, wherever they have appeared, to be the sure promoters of revenge, evasion, fraud or war; yet the clear historical record has not prevented one or another of the Powers that were involved in the World War from doing or attempting, singly or in various combinations, all of these things on a large and drastic scale, and with some, at least, of the results that were to be foreseen. Perhaps there has never been so large and perverse an exhibition of contempt for the experience of the race as was exhibited for four or five years by the Allied and Associated Powers on the one hand and the Central Powers on the other.

And what shall be said of the period which, almost in irony it would seem, is commonly referred to as "the peace"? What can we say about the teachings of

history in the face of the deliberate bankruptcy of Germany, the all-but bankruptcy of France and Poland, the serious talk about inflating the currency in Great Britain, the erection of economic barriers along four thousand miles of new frontiers in Europe when the revival of trade was urgent, or the scheming and recrimination which the questions of reparations and war debts have produced? Why, after all that we have seen of the horror and costliness of war, are most of the great Powers, including the United States, and some of the small ones pressing hard for greater armaments, encouraging scientists to perfect still more deadly instruments of destruction, meantime talking unctuously about disarmament and peace? In France, more than one influential newspaper has pointed out that the use of force in the effort to extort reparation payments from Germany is a direct encouragement to Germany to use force to resist, yet it does not appear that the French Government and its supporters are disposed to abandon a policy which is widely regarded both within and without France as wrong in principle.

This is the darker side, the side of failure not from ignorance but from disregard. There is another side, less conclusive than one might wish, but at least more agreeable, and less in need of elaboration because its features are on the whole well enough known. The world has practically abandoned slavery, rightly judging it after long experience to have been inhuman and unprofitable, and the few vestiges of the system that remain seem destined soon to disappear. The attempt to conduct government upon any other basis than that of practically universal male suffrage has for the most part been given up where the white race alone is concerned, and the extension of the suffrage to women has made substantial progress. The right of the whole people, irrespective of race or color, to education of various grades is very generally conceded, notwithstanding wide differences of thoroughness in the application and much covert denial of the right in

particular localities. The right of private property is no longer to be asserted in all cases against society, and private right in certain kinds of property is increasingly denied where it has not disappeared altogether. The attempt to prevent wage-earners from organizing in behalf of their rights or for the improvement of their condition has been generally abandoned, notwithstanding the continuance of attempts to belittle such organizations or impede their activities. If war has not yet ceased to be a thing in which any people can rather easily be induced to engage, opposition to war among all classes is certainly more widespread than formerly and denunciation of its evils is more readily tolerated, at the same time that the arbitration of international disputes susceptible of dissociation from national honor seems on the whole to be making its way. It would be superfluous to cite the numerous scientific matters which represent improvement upon the past, the conscious search for business methods more efficient than those which former generations employed, or the substantial acceptance of the lessons of experience in health and disease.

Neither of these two groups of illustrations, nor yet a comparison of one with the other, leads to entirely precise conclusions. Taking the facts or tendencies last mentioned, it would appear that social progress is not a meaningless phrase, and that progress follows in part from a more or less conscious effort to apply the lessons of historical experience. The direct connection between progress and history, however, is clouded by the considerable volume of speculation that is constantly being put forth about ideal states of society, the still very imperfect application of any of the newer practices whose principles have been elaborated, and the readiness with which institutions apparently upon the point of establishment are thrown to the winds under the pressure of bigotry or frenzy or temporary enthusiasm. The World War, it will be remembered, burst upon the nations at a moment when

disarmament, international arbitration and the development of administrative or consultative organizations of international scope had for twenty years been actively discussed and hopefully tried.

From the many instances of apparent disregard for history the inference is more definite. What we commonly think of as the teachings of history are at best of a large and general kind, easily accepted in their sweep but as easily disregarded in concrete circumstances. The world has witnessed many revolutions, some of which have succeeded and some of which have failed, but we have not learned from their history how to make a revolution or whether, indeed, a revolution is the only remedy to adopt. There is abundant experience to show that inflation of the currency entails economic trouble and may bring bankruptcy, but no nation appears to have been deterred from inflating its currency if it cared to take the chances which inflation involved. There is hardly a nation in the world that has not on occasion taken a gambler's chance, hoping to win where others have failed or at least to keep its losses at a minimum.

For this there are, I think, two primary reasons. The first is the fact that no two sets of historical circumstances are ever exactly alike. Just as a court, confronted with an imposing list of judicial precedents which counsel insist are exactly applicable to the case, nevertheless often finds that the precise circumstances of the case have never arisen before and that the precedents are not wholly binding, so nations, notwithstanding a long record of experience with what on the surface appear to be similar matters, have little difficulty in perceiving in the circumstances, colored as they are likely to be by ambition or fear, something unique which may be dealt with at discretion. The second reason is that peoples do not, save perhaps in rare instances, generalize their experiences. Their attitude towards history is much like that of a child regarding the landscape which unfolds from a car window: its

untrained and immature eyes do not connect with the beauty or sweep of plain or mountain or wood, at the same time that they fasten unerringly upon an isolated cow or automobile. The fault is not with the historian, but with the immaturity of the community and the irrational forces that form its moral judgments. We might learn from history if we would, but we do not. The wise course for the historian is to go on with his researches, verifying and ordering the truth of what has been and spreading abroad the results of his study for the information and enlightenment of whomsoever will attend; but he will court disappointment and waste his time if he thinks that knowledge of the road which has been travelled will exercise much control over public councils, restrain popular impulse, or prevent the wisest nation in the world from choosing the worse rather than the better part. If the acceptance of this necessity should help to lift history out of the hazy domain of ethics and give it more the character of science, it would, I think, better the position of history everywhere.

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