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TRANSACTIONS
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ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

NOTES ON THE STUDY OF HISTORY.

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CICERO'S definition of history as "the lamp of truth" can be accepted only when the events of history are recorded accurately. The writer who travesties historical facts poisons the fountain of knowledge, misrepresents the ancients, misleads his contemporaries, and deceives future generations. Mindful of his responsibility the faithful historian is exact in his narrative, avoiding undue panegyric on the one hand, and on the other rash denunciation. He regards history as a science in which truth is dissociated from falsehood; an art by means of which past events are to be recorded so as to produce a present interest.

Having to deal with facts and dates, the historian is so to arrange the structure of his narrative as to render his work both shapely and cohesive. Before his time many writers had detailed the events of Caledonian history; but it was reserved for Sir Walter Scott to render by the charm of his genius the Scottish nation interesting to the world.

History has been styled the essence of innumerable biographies; but in relating the history of an individual—as, for instance, that of Sir Isaac Newton—something more is required than a sketch of his social manners or the details of his every-

day life. It is essential that his discoveries are presented as they were gradually unfolded to himself, and their influence on the progress of science intelligently depicted. In general history notices of individuals and their work must necessarily be brief ; but the historian should be competent to assign to each character his proportionate place. To his scrutinizing intelligence each period should become as familiar as are the heavens to the astronomer. The writer of history who has knowledge less than this may be a respectable annalist, but he may not claim higher honours. Avoiding all useless trivialities, the true historian portrays as with a painter's brush those who helped to unite the framework of society, and uphold the bulwarks of intellectual or national progress.

What are the best sources of history ? is a question which in relation to the remote past may not easily be solved. At that early period, when historians are few, we must exercise a judicious criticism, applying to every detail the suggestions of experience. Except the writers of Holy Scripture, who were guided by inspiration, the writings of every early historian are blended with fable. Even when the writers fancied themselves careful they were misled by the fabulous relations of the poets, and of a tradition which in early and credulous times was wholly uncertain. The father of secular history, Herodotus, blends fact and fiction with a simplicity which is positively charming. The laborious Thucydides places in the mouths of his heroes speeches which he acknowledges were not spoken. To ruggedness of style Dionysius of Halicarnassus adds a lamentable credulity. Zealous for the dignity of the Roman name, and rejoicing in a graceful diction, Livy is indifferent about his facts. Mean and selfish as a man, Sallust suppresses facts or misrepresents them. Xenophon, Polybius, Cæsar, and Tacitus are more trustworthy. The last has been styled the father of philosophical history.

In perusing the writings of the older historians, it is, in order to estimate their credibility, necessary as a first step to ascertain their sources of information. From their narratives we should eliminate at once all that relates to portents,

auguries, and improbabilities. Speeches, save brief utterances and those of their contemporaries, are also to be rejected. The extent of armies, the numbers described as falling in battle, the populations of states, and the dimensions of cities are all exaggerated.

Not in studying the historians of ancient nations only are we to guard against error. The earlier chroniclers of British affairs are monstrously credulous, and therefore the remote events which they record are to be received with caution. Modern writers even may not be relied on when dealing with facts with which they have not become specially conversant. Not less than their predecessors, modern writers have allowed their judgment to be warped by political bias or sectarian prejudice. Essentially a sceptic, David Hume gives prominence to facts which support his theory, gliding smoothly over those opposed to it. Less prejudiced than Hume, Dr. William Robertson was generally content to obtain his facts from preceding writers. Abundantly inquiring, Lord Macaulay was withal so constituted as to be incapable of rendering strict justice to those of opposite opinions. In resenting the narrow views of others Mr. Carlyle has exhibited prejudices of his own. Chargeable with political bias, Sir Archibald Alison is frequently obscure. A most conscientious inquirer, Patrick Fraser Tytler has produced a history of Scotland which eclipses all its predecessors ; yet he occasionally stumbles. His work is certainly not superseded by the history lately published by Dr. Hill Burton, for this work is an essay on history rather than history itself. Those who enjoy pleasant reading will find it in the historic writings of Mr. Froude ; they should not, however, hastily accept that author's conclusions.

Errors in history may be traced to one of two causes : an assertion is made concerning some well-known character, which accords with his ordinary procedure, and it is therefore accepted and put on record ; or the fact related bears the aspect of probability, but is too unimportant to invite special investigation. An illustration of the former species of error

will be found in the nearly universal assertion by historians that Edward I. assassinated the minstrels of Wales. Edward, having unjustly executed David, brother of the Prince of Wales, also Sir William Wallace, the Scottish patriot, was readily credited with the wholesale massacre of the Cambrian bards. But he is so charged unjustly. The statement, first made by Sir John Wynne in his work on the Gwedir family, was copied by Carte in his history of England, and thereafter passed as true. Now it has been shown by Mr. Stephens, in his "Literature of the Kymry," that Wynne's statement is unauthorized, and that the only edict issued by Edward which might be construed as hostile to the Welsh minstrels is one which provided for the suppression of idlers and vagabonds, who, assuming the calling of bards, practised imposition.

False statements have retained a place in history, owing to their character being too insignificant to invite special inquiry. Thus, among the favourites of James III. of Scotland, who by the jealous and irate nobility were hanged at Lauder Bridge in 1482, has been included the name of James Homyll, the king's tailor. The best Scottish historians make this assertion, including Tytler and Hill Burton. Their only authority is Boece, who is notorious for his credulity ; —but the fact that Homyll was certainly a favourite of the king was held as confirmatory. Homyll having found no biographer, either among his craftsmen or in his family, this statement about his being hanged was unquestioned till the recent publication of the "Rolls of Exchequer." It there appears that a pension of £20 which Homyll had conferred on him in January, 1472-3, was paid him several years subsequent to the date of the Lauder massacre.*

The inquiries prosecuted under the direction of the Royal Historical Commissioners have cast new though strange light on another point of Scottish history. After being the chief instrument in effecting the destruction of her obnoxious husband Lord Darnley, in February, 1566-7, the Earl of Bothwell was accepted by Queen Mary as her future consort.

* Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, vol. i., Preface, p. lxiii.

It was, however, essential that prior to the solemnization of the nuptials he should get rid of his existing wife, the Lady Margaret Gordon. By Archbishop Hamilton, of St. Andrews, sentence was pronounced that Bothwell's marriage with Lady Margaret "was radically null, in respect that the parties were related to each other within the forbidden degrees of consanguinity, and consequently were debarred from lawful marriage without a previous dispensation having been obtained." Now though the precise character of the relationship subsisting between the earl and his countess is unknown, and was certainly remote, it was not doubted that they were considered within the degrees which the Romish Church prohibited, and that the procuring of a dispensation prior to the marriage had certainly been overlooked. A few years ago the late Dr. John Stuart, of Edinburgh, examining on behalf of the Historical Commissioners documents in the charter-room at Dunrobin, fell upon the actual dispensation. This instrument, dated 17th February, 1566, was issued by Archbishop Hamilton, as legate of the Holy See, while he solemnly averred the year afterwards that the document did not exist.* Had Mary's son James VI. died childless, and Mary had a son by the Earl of Bothwell, with surviving progeny, might not the incidental discovery at Dunrobin have illegitimatized a dynasty?

In the Transactions of our Society several historical inaccuracies are pointed out and corrected. In vol. i. Colonel Chester has corrected an official inaccuracy in relation to the Princess Margaret, the short-lived daughter of James I., and which uncorrected most seriously compromised both the king and queen. On her tombstone in Westminster Abbey the Princess Margaret is described as having died on the 16th December, 1607, the burial register recording that she was interred on that day. Thus the tombstone and register, though slightly differing, coincide in naming December as the period of the Princess's death.

* In "A Lost Chapter in the History of Mary Queen of Scots Recovered," By Dr. John Stuart.

Then it appears, from other contemporary evidence, that at the Christmas holidays of 1607 the court indulged in excessive gaiety, which would be difficult to account for in view of the fact that the king and queen had so lately been bereaved. But Colonel Chester has succeeded in proving that both the register (which is a transcript of the lost original) and the tombstone inscription are inaccurate, and that the actual date of the princess's death was the 16th of September.

One of the meekest pioneers of the Scottish Reformation was George Wishart, testimony to his pure life and amiable manners being emphatically borne by his contemporaries. But in the State Paper Office Mr. Tytler found a document showing that in April, 1544, "a Scottish man called Wishart" had borne a letter to the English court from certain persons in Scotland who had banded together to effect the death of Cardinal Beaton. With this State paper in his hand, and finding a statement put forth in Buchanan's history to the effect that Wishart had while suffering martyrdom foretold the cardinal's death, Tytler rushed to the conclusion that the reformed preacher was bearer of the conspirators' letter to Henry VIII., and was thus a conspirator himself. In our Transactions, vol. iv., we have demolished this hypothesis, first by showing that at the stake George Wishart did not predict the cardinal's death, and further that there is conclusive evidence that the messenger to the English court was John Wishart of Pitarrow who was in point of character quite suited to do the work of a conspirator. Cardinal Beaton, it is shown, while he knew of the conspiracy, did not charge the reformed preacher with being concerned in it.

In our memoir of Sir Robert Aytoun (vol. i. of Transactions) we have exposed a strange error concerning him, committed by the historiographer royal of Scotland. Finding that one William Aytoun was connected with the erection of Heriot's Hospital at Edinburgh, Mr. Hill Burton, in the first edition of his history, proceeds to describe the poet as an architect and the builder of an hospital. Next, finding an illuminated copy of the Scottish Confession of Faith in the

Advocates Library, also executed by a member of the sept, probably by William Aytoun, Mr. Burton gives the poet the further credit of excelling in the caligraphic art ! Neither architect nor artist, Sir Robert was private secretary to the queens of James VI. and Charles I., and resided constantly in London.

Having fallen into two errors, the historiographer royal perpetrates a third by describing the late Professor Edmonstone Aytoun, of Edinburgh, as one of his descendants. He was not so ; Sir Robert Aytoun died a bachelor.*

In vols. i. and ii., an Irish judge, claiming credit for his beneficence and religious zeal, has been described in his true character. In his will, dated 23rd March, 1670, Sir Jerome Alexander expresses, among other pious sentiments, his devout thankfulness that he had been helpful to persons in distress, and especially that he "could never be drawn to serve particular interests against the public." Of these qualities he offers proof by granting an endowment to secure a discourse being preached at Dublin each Christmas on the doctrine of salvation through grace, by bequeathing his library to Trinity College, and by providing a fund for a weekly donation to the Protestant poor. Having looked into his history, we found that Sir Jerome, at the commencement of his career as a barrister in London, had been guilty of serious malversation. For falsifying a document in a cause in which he was plaintiff, he had been deprived of his status, fined, and subjected to imprisonment. This narrative of his early history as a barrister Mr. Prendergast followed up by sketching his character as a judge. In his judicial capacity he shows that Sir Jerome was harsh, merciless, and grasping ; his sentences in administering the criminal law were so terrible that the expression *to be Alexandered* came to signify to be hanged. Implacable in resentment, he cherished many feuds, and by force of law wrested large estates from the rightful owners. A Jew by birth, he subscribed the Covenant when in 1644 Presbytery obtained temporary ascendancy. At the Restoration, when Episcopacy became the recognised form of worship, he ex-

* See the inscription on his tombstone in Westminster Abbey.

pressed his adherence to it, and thereafter became the terror of Nonconformists. And this man, consequent on his will, had for 150 years been regarded as a saint !

To the student of history are strikingly laid open the inconsistencies of mankind. Sacred history represents Adam as a sage and a poltroon ; Noah as a preacher and a drunkard ; Abraham as illustrious in faith, yet guilty of dissimulation ; Jacob as a deceiver, yet worthy to give name to chosen Israel ; Samson as a hero among men, but the slave of a woman ; David as pious, yet criminal and licentious ; Solomon as wise through life and foolish at its close ; Job as abounding in patience, yet cursing the day of his birth ; and, stranger than all, the faithful, loving Peter is found denying with oaths that Master to whom he had an hour before vowed a deep and unalterable attachment.

The inconsistency of mankind has been illustrated in every age. In the history of our own country there are many striking examples. Generous to his followers, and individually brave, William the Conqueror was the terror of his household. Magnanimous and heroic, Richard Cœur de Lion was withal cruel and mean. Regal dignity and administrative vigour were in Henry VIII. combined with excessive tyranny. In his daughter Mary bigotry and benignity embraced ; she burnt Protestant bishops, and cherished her handmaidens. Mary Queen of Scots was generous to her servants, though utterly regardless of her promises, and no doubt privy to the murder of her husband. The vainest and most foolish of her sex, Queen Elizabeth chose wise counselors, and firmly retained them. James I. of England read theology, translated a portion of the Psalms, and promoted the translation of the Scriptures ; yet persecuted the Scottish clergy, and was an unstable friend and an implacable enemy. Affectionate to his family and a lover of devotion, Charles I. clung to falsehood as eagerly as most men respect truth. An unsated voluptuary, Charles II. cherished the arts and sciences. A judicious admiral, James II., in attempting to steer the vessel of the State, wrecked his dynasty.

In Scottish annals inconsistency rules supreme. Pious and brave, the Marquis of Montrose derived his military renown in contending with the Covenanters, whose cause he had sworn to defend. A hard-working parish minister, James Sharp was selected by his brethren to plead at the English court the cause of Presbytery; he returned home a bigoted Episcopalian, a persecutor, and an archbishop. In youth John Graham of Claverhouse was gentle in inflicting punishment as a magistrate; he afterwards mercilessly shot down in presence of their wives those who preferred to hear the gospel preached under a Geneva gown rather than a surplice. The learned founder of the Advocates Library, Edinburgh, Sir George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh, published a work in which as a lawyer he sanctioned the immolation of women on charges of sorcery; and as king's advocate hounded to death those who asserted liberty of conscience. Among many illustrious Scotsmen of later times, whose inconsistencies were prominent, may be named Sir Walter Scott and Edward Irving. Scott dwarfed his aspirations by seeking ephemeral honours as a Scottish laird. Irving denounced Romish superstition, yet accepted as spiritual manifestations the frenzied utterances of a Dumbartonshire factory girl.

On the apostolic saying, "No man liveth to himself," history affords a powerful comment. To Margaret, Queen of Malcolm Canmore, what has Scotland owed! In teaching the people to spin she evoked that spirit of industry which has become the national characteristic. She prayed fervently, and through her devotion the tribes she ruled abjured savagery and embraced religion. Another representative of northern civilization is Sir William Wallace. Welsh by extraction, he inherited physical strength and patriotic ardour from his Cymric ancestors; and so inspired his countrymen with that military zeal which led them to contend for freedom, and to maintain it. Awaking from a night of superstition, Scotland in the sixteenth century experienced a revival under the enlightened teaching of Knox.

Though bores in society, men of one idea have proved most

useful to mankind. Howard, by his amiable persistency, led to the improved condition of our convict prisons. The mild treatment of the insane, and the general reform of lunatic asylums, are mainly due to an American lady. Through the efforts of a few strong-minded women the class-rooms of our universities have been opened to female students.

By concentrating the force of their powerful minds on a single object, Mahomet spread abroad his false religion ; William conquered England ; David I. covered Scotland with religious houses, and Luther snapped the fetters of the Papacy.

History directs us to subsidiary causes which have led to national reforms. With the drainage of fens and the construction of better ventilated dwellings have disappeared intermittent fevers and pestilences. The fire of London, which burnt down the city, burnt out the plague. Pestilence and famine, which drove people into the towns, gave them culture ; commercial stagnation, which led them to emigrate, has planted our colonial empire. Religious persecution drove forth the Pilgrim Fathers to lay in the Western world the foundation of a great commonwealth. Republicanism in the new world has checked despotism in the old. The collapse of the Darien and South Sea schemes tended to foster enterprise at home.

In tracing the influence of individual action or of human passion on the destiny of nations the historian fulfils an important mission. Under his teaching the ends of Providence appear to be subserved even by human perversity. War and disease are shown to have their purposes—the former by stimulating courage and crushing tyranny, the latter by conducting to sanitary reform. The historian shows how disaster has awakened energy ; how one act of national progress has promoted another ; how as nations approach in civilization their wants become similar, and commerce extends. As a help to commerce the historian shows that the arts are cultivated, and that science and letters attend the development of national prosperity.

In contrasting the old civilization with the new, the historian shows how Rome, ignoring science, sank at the end of a thousand years into effeminacy, and became a prey to the northern nations. He shows, on the other hand, that those races which now form the British people first engaged in agriculture, then in commerce, then in establishing colonies, then in cherishing the sciences, till they attained both commercial and intellectual pre-eminence.

To return to the inquiry as to the best sources of ancient history, we would point to inscriptions on rocks and on ancient monuments. By means of coins and medals Vaillant determined the chronology of Syria and Egypt. The domestic and social condition of a people may be gathered from their inscriptions, and their religious and funereal rites. The investigator of modern history walks secure when for his materials he has recourse to statutes, state trials, treaties with foreign powers, and instructions to diplomatic agents. The English historian has his materials in Domesday Book, the Patent and Exchequer Rolls, the Will Registers, Rymer's *Foedera*, the proceedings of Parliament and of the Privy Council, and State Paper collections. Particular periods are illustrated by songs and ballads. Diaries and journals are important when the writers relate events which occurred under their own eyes, or with which they were familiar.

To make sure of his facts by a careful and searching scrutiny, the historian should confine his inquiries to one epoch, perhaps to one or two reigns. Next to accuracy, he should cultivate an epigrammatic idiom, avoiding vague generalities and cumbrous amplification. His page should be graceful through the succinctness of his details. Suiting his narrative to the capacity of a schoolboy, it should be rendered attractive to the scholar. Of Saxon England the history should be written in the Saxon tongue. Artificial forms are to be eschewed. His province being to delight and gratify as well as to convey sound and correct information, the historian should remember the Horatian maxim, "*Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci.*"