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Inaugural Address of the Right Hon. Lord Aberdare, F.R.S., President of the Royal Historical Society

Author(s): Lord Aberdare

Source: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 7 (1878), pp. 384-394

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Historical Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3677894>

Accessed: 26-06-2016 09:25 UTC

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF THE RIGHT HON.
LORD ABERDARE, F.R.S.,

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

(Delivered on the 14th November, 1878.)

IT is with unaffected diffidence that I find myself occupying a chair once honoured by so illustrious an historian as Grote, and so recently adorned by a man so memorable in the history of this century as the late Earl Russell. Each of these eminent men had special qualifications for the post of President of the Royal Historical Society such as I cannot pretend to possess. Both were historians, and both had taken an active part in the political events of their times. If in Mr. Grote the historian predominated over the politician, he yet largely contributed to shape and propagate the political ideas which have since inspired the measures of the party to which he belonged. If the reputation of Earl Russell as a statesman obscures that which he acquired as the historian of the British Constitution, his life from first to last was devoted to historical studies, his writings and speeches teemed with illustrations drawn from history, and perhaps more than any statesman of his age he kept in view historical precedents in every measure which he framed, and in every State paper which he wrote ; while he fixed his gaze on history as his guiding star throughout his long voyage over the dark and troubled waters of political strife. The study of history was the passion of his youth, the serious occupation of his manhood, the unfailing consolation of his old age ; and it may interest you to hear that on the occasion of my last visit at Pembroke Lodge, not many months before the death of the

veteran statesman, I found him, feeble and infirm as he was, reading with lively interest a volume of Grote's History of Greece. I know not that he had much meditated the philosophy of history in its most recent and recondite acceptation, nor whether he had constructed for himself a science of history in which "the whole of the events which have befallen the human race, and the states through which it has passed, are regarded as a series of phenomena, produced by causes, and susceptible of explanation."—(J. S. Mill.) He was probably not very familiar with the lucubrations of Herder or of Kant, so admirably set forth in a paper read before this society by one of its ablest members (Dr. Zerffi); and he had formed his habit of historical study and investigation before it had been discovered by Hegel and his followers that history could be treated as a science which might even be constructed *a priori*. These profound speculations on the gradual progress and regular development of the human race, made their way but slowly into the English minds of the beginning of this century, and have not gained a solid footing even at this hour. But still less did Lord Russell study history for the purpose of loading his memory with a barren catalogue of events, or with the pleasanter object of exciting his imagination with the romantic incidents in which it abounds, and by which its first fascination is usually exercised over youthful students. A strong-headed practical friend of mine, while discussing with me the subject of education, once said that he considered "all history as poetry." Not that he shared the scepticism of some persons as to the accuracy of the records on which historical facts had descended to us, but he thought that history, while full of interest and excitement to the imagination, afforded no adequate discipline to the youthful mind, and supplied no effectual assistance in shaping the course either of private or public life. This was not Lord Russell's view of the uses and functions of historical study. He studied history for the lessons it contained. While perfectly aware that history never absolutely repeats itself, and that, as time rolls on, new conditions arise, com-

plicating the problems to be solved with many disturbing elements, the true value of which cannot easily be adjusted ; while conceding their full force to these considerations, he attached the highest importance to thoughtful meditation on past events. He knew that, after making large allowance for the diverse characters of nations as influenced by climate, geographical position, and political institutions, there was still common to all races a fund of human nature, the workings of which could only be studied in history, and which must be studied and taken into account by every one who aspired to be a statesman. He believed none to be worthy of that designation, so often misapplied to the flitting politicians of the hour, who had not, by the insight acquired by reflection upon the past history of man and his nature, learnt to eliminate the accidental and the transitory from the essential abiding characteristics of the human race.

It was probably due in no small degree to this early and thoughtful study of history that Lord Russell was enabled to adopt principles and frame a scheme of political action which sufficed, without change or wavering, to guide his career through that long and stirring period in the events of which he bore so large a part. Nor is this unbroken consistency by any means an ordinary phenomenon, at least among those who have attained the foremost place in political eminence ; on the contrary, the instances are extremely rare in which statesmen have had the merit or good fortune to commence their career on lines which they have been able to follow to the end. Of the six statesmen who have occupied the post of Prime Minister during the last thirty years, Lord Russell alone enjoys this distinction. Three other Liberal leaders entered Parliament as Conservatives, and attained eminence in that party before withdrawing from it ; and both the Conservative Ministers who have held the first place during part of that period began their political career as Liberals. The part of fortune is often however great in such matters ; it was Lord Russell's fortune to be a scion of a great Whig family,—for, had he been born of a Conservative family, there can be

little doubt, judging from the cast of his mind and character, that he would have added one more name to the list of those who have preferred adherence to their own sense of right and justice to the reputation of consistency.

Was Lord Russell right or wrong in attaching this importance to the study of history as a preparation for statesmanship?

I have no difficulty in pronouncing him to have been right. The influence of this study, pursued in an earnest spirit, is sensibly felt both in the formation of character and in imparting practical wisdom in dealing with men and their concerns.

It seems to me impossible for men of fine natural gifts and strong affections to study the careers of great men without being smitten with a desire to emulate or at least to imitate them. I think it was of Montrose that it was said that the reading of Plutarch's Lives disturbed his very sleep, such was his burning desire to prove himself not inferior to those worthies of antiquity. But perhaps the effect of historical biography is best described by Plutarch himself in the opening sentences of the life of one of the most stainless of his heroes—Timoleon, the Washington of antiquity:—

“It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies, but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking-glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life. Indeed, it can be compared to nothing but daily living and associating together; we receive, as it were, in our inquiry, and entertain each successive guest, view—

‘Their stature and their qualities,’

and select from their actions all that is noblest and worthiest to know.

‘Ah! and what greater pleasure could we have,’

or what more effective means to one's moral improvement?”

Then, after referring with disapprobation to an opinion of Democritus on this subject, he continues:—

"My method, on the contrary, is, by the study of history and by the familiarity acquired in writing, to habituate my memory to receive and retain images of the best and worthiest characters. I thus am enabled to free myself from any ignoble, base, or vicious impressions contracted from the contagion of ill company that I may be unavoidably engaged in, by the remedy of turning my thoughts in a happy and calm temper to view these noble examples."

Nor is it only in the elevation of the character by example that the influence of historical study is sensibly felt. A profound faith in Liberty in developing all the powers of the human race, all the greatness of which it is capable, and in Justice as the virtue without which liberty itself cannot be maintained,—these are perhaps *the* most precious fruits derivable by every generous mind from the study of the past. The earnest student cannot but reflect that, however colossal may be the proportions, however vast the power, of many great states, both in ancient and modern times, they failed, unless based upon public liberty and vivified by its spirit, to produce the ripest and richest fruits of human genius, or to supply any security for the enjoyment of a dignified life. Our first admiration in studying ancient history is not given to the vast empires of Egypt or Assyria, but to the diminutive states of Greece. The proudest monuments of those huge monarchies sink into insignificance when compared with what the petty republics of Greece have left us. We feel that the slenderest shaft of a Greek column, the mutilated limb of a Greek statue, raise their authors to heights immeasurably above the architects of the pyramids of Egypt or the temples of Nineveh. We have the most undoubting conviction that no manuscripts unearthed from the ruins of Assyria or Egypt, however interesting they might be as the records of contemporary thought and manners, could hope to vie in intellectual worth with even the poorest relic of Greek literary genius. And I trust that there is not among us one to whom the life of an Athenian citizen of the age of Pericles, or a Florentine of the time of Gino Capponi, would not be chosen as infinitely more favourable to the dignity and

happiness of man than that of the richest satrap in the realms of Artaxerxes or the most powerful subject of the Czar of Russia.

But the student of history cannot fail to observe that the love of liberty does not always carry with it an equal respect for justice, the other essential requisite of a well-governed state. The passion of liberty is often stained with selfishness, and with an arrogant disregard for the rights of subject or inferior races. Free nations have too often been slow to respect in others the rights they so highly valued for themselves. This fatal defect was not only a dark blot on the brilliant republics of Athens and Florence, but also carried with it its own punishment by exciting the hatred and hostility of those subjects or allies from whom they might otherwise have looked for aid in the hour of need. This is the danger from which even our own free England is not entirely exempt ; and the haughty contempt for the opinions and feelings of weaker nations so often found among ruling races, conscious of their greatness and proud of their freedom, the disposition to impose special rules of right and wrong in their dealings with semi-barbarous people, may yet expose our country to dangers greater than any she has hitherto overcome, and involve her in the fate of those illustrious states in which the love of liberty and the respect for justice did not go hand in hand, or existed in unequal proportions.

In asserting that history may convey lessons of practical wisdom profitable to the statesman, and to all who occupy themselves with the public interests of their country, I would avoid falling into the error of exaggerating the advantages to be derived from its study. If, on the one hand, it enlarges knowledge and strengthens natural sagacity, inspires caution, and replaces in some degree personal experience, it does not, on the other, confer the gift of unerring prophecy, nor serve invariably as a guide in determining the expediency of political measures or the choice of policy in national emergencies. To be a good historian is only one of the many

qualifications of a statesman. In a critical situation we should prefer to trust the safety of the state to a shrewd politician little versed in history, rather than to the man possessing the widest knowledge of the past, but inexperienced in the management of men and of affairs, and in the passions and prejudices of contemporary nations. The medical writer who has best described the origin of a disease, its symptoms and remedies, is not necessarily the physician to whom we should apply in the hour of danger. We prefer the man of quick observation and decisive action, who, taking into consideration the peculiar constitution of his patient, the complications caused by previous or concurrent diseases, his strength and his weakness, administers the remedies most suited to his actual condition. The man of action has studied and profited by the treatise of the man of thought; he applies the prescribed remedies, not blindly and slavishly, but with discriminating nicety. Thousands of wise apothegms, full of wisdom, may be drawn from the conduct of men and nations in past times. It needs a wise man to apply them.

Great truths are generally best expressed, and with most pithiness and force, by great poets, and I gladly seize the opportunity of placing in contrast, not perhaps the opinions of Shakespeare and Corneille, but opinions put into the mouths of two of their characters. In the second part of "Henry IV.," act iii., s. i., replying to the king's exclamation,—

"O heaven! that one might read the book of fate,
And see the revolution of the times,
Make mountains level," &c.,

Warwick remarks,—

"There is a history in all men's lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceased;
The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intreaured.
Such things become the brood and hatch of time," &c.

Corneille, for whose political sagacity we know that the first

Napoleon had the highest admiration, puts the contrary view of the lessons derivable from history into the mouth of Augustus when, in discussing the expediency of resigning his absolute power, he refers to the opposite examples of Sylla and Julius Cæsar ; of the cruel, ruthless Sylla, who, after his voluntary resignation of the dictatorship, lived and died peaceful and respected ; of the generous clement Cæsar, who, retaining power, was assassinated.

“Ces exemples recents suffiraient pour m'instruire,
Si par l'exemple seul on se devait conduire ;
L'un m'invite à le suivre, l'autre me fait peur ;
Mais l'exemple souvent est un miroir trompeur ;
Et l'ordre du destin, qui gêne nos pensées,
N'est pas toujours écrit dans les choses passées ;
Quelquefois l'un se brise où l'autre est sauvé,
Et par où l'un périt, un autre est conservé.”

(“Cinna,” act ii. sc. 1.)

Between two such masters of profound thought exercised on political subjects, who shall decide ? Most of us, I think, will be inclined to take refuge with me in the truism that, to a certain extent, both are right ; that Shakespeare's lines express the general truth, and Corneille's the not infrequent exceptions to it.

The observations I have hitherto made have been suggested by reflections on the character of your late illustrious President, who perhaps more than any statesman of his time, Guizot excepted, had inspired himself with the study of history, and who displayed in his application of the lessons of history to practical politics a judgment and discretion which were unhappily wanting in the eminent French Minister and philosophical historian. I have selected among the many possible subjects for my address one which, while illustrating the influence of the study of history on practical life, enabled me also to discharge a pious duty to the memory of a man whose public services were of inestimable value to his country, and whose social qualities won for him the respect and affection of so many private friends, among whom I feel proud to be included:—

“Animam . . .

His saltem accumulem donis, et fungar inani
Munere.”

Let me conclude with some remarks suggested by the examination of the volumes published by our Society, which, although they do not supply the only evidence of its usefulness and vitality, yet perhaps afford the best illustration of the services it has rendered and continues to render to the progress of historical investigation. These volumes are full of thoughtful essays bearing on the philosophical study of history ; they abound with excellent treatises on questions of historical interest, which, often neglected by earlier writers are now recognised as necessary to the thorough comprehension of the past ; they give us biographies and extracts from the writings of British worthies, often unjustly appreciated or wholly forgotten. For it must be admitted that Fame is often capricious in the distribution of her favours, and allows many a worthy name to sink into oblivion, and many a worthless one to keep its head above the waves. And above all, they are a repertory of curious and important facts, carefully sifted and assigned to their right places. And let us not judge lightly of the labour of those who collect and arrange facts for future use. The “raw compilers, who see no more in facts than facts” (Gibbon), may possibly be held in just contempt. The careful sifters of events, the exposers of falsehoods even apparently trivial, the unearthers of the forgotten sayings and doings of past generations, are by no means obnoxious to ridicule, nay often deserve our respectful gratitude. It was significant of the eighteenth century, with its overweening confidence in itself and its contemptuous depreciation of past ages, that it should have proposed, by the mouth of one of its most respectable representatives, the philosophic D’Alembert, that at the end of every century all facts should be collected together, a few chosen out of them, and the rest committed to the flames. Gibbon, preluding on history, his own great work still undreamt of, took a different estimate of the importance of facts.

"It is easily seen (he says, in his *Essay on Literature*) how difficult a task it is to choose the facts which are to be the bases of reasonings. A historian's negligence or want of taste may deprive us for ever of some peculiar trait in order to stun us with the din of a battle. * * * Let us imitate the botanists ; all plants are not useful in medicine, yet they are continually discovering fresh ones ; they hope that genius and successful labours will find in them properties at present unknown."

This Society seems to me, therefore, to act wisely in publishing such records of facts recovered by the diligence of their members as may serve the future historian. In matters of history it is hardly possible to have too catholic a taste. We may at one time, after reading the pages of Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, or Gibbon, be tempted to exclaim with the younger Pliny, "*Quanta potestas, quanta dignitas, quanta majestas, quantum denique numen sit historiæ.*" But we should be wrong, we should deprive ourselves of inestimable pleasures, if we limited our historical readings to these grave, eloquent, and weighty writers. Who that lived thirty years ago can forget the eagerness, the wonder, the delighted sense of novelty, with which the *Chronicle of the first English Boswell*, Jocelyn of Brakelond, was received ? We seemed, as we read his artless gossip, for the first time thoroughly to understand how men thought and felt in the days of Richard Cœur de Lion and John Lackland ; the Middle Ages emerged in a new light, and with a new meaning for us ; and soon a great writer, still happily among us, seizing on the newly discovered treasure, succeeded by a copious use of its pages, in making Abbot Sampson of Bury St. Edmunds, almost as lifelike and as popular as had the chronicler of Dr. Johnson his great idol. (Carlyle's "*Past and Present.*")

In fact, no generalisations of minds, however vigorous and penetrating, can succeed in bringing bygone ages before us with the same vivid truth as can contemporary writers, even though they be not historians, like Xenophon, De Thou, or Clarendon, but ignorant monks like Jocelyn, or rough soldiers like Montluc.

Which of us would not agree with Montaigne, when he says that he would rather have heard the conversations which Brutus held with his friends in his tent the night before a battle, than the speech which he made next morning to his army?

Such speeches have not seldom been recorded, and such conversations almost invariably neglected, to the grievous disappointment of posterity, by historians full of a mistaken sense of the dignity of history. The speeches serve to show the skill and eloquence of the historian; the familiar utterance caught from the living lips of the speaker would have given us a glimpse into the hero's own mind. We could often dispense with the first, we can never have enough of the last. And how many of us, in our secret souls, would not join with Montaigne in his preference for those simple historians who, as he says (Book II., c. x.), "have nothing of their own to mix with their recitals, and who only bring the care and diligence to collect everything which comes under their notice, and to register in good faith everything without choice and without sifting, leaving our judgment free for the knowledge of the truth?"

Such, so wide, so various, so comprehensive, are the results aimed at and largely attained by the Historical Society. May their labours be continued in the same tolerant and catholic spirit; slaves of no system, organs of no party; loving Truth for herself, seeking for her by many a sequestered path, in many a secluded hiding-place, revealing her in the white light of unbiassed honesty, and thus contributing by the knowledge of the past to the improvement of the future, and supplying one of the purest pleasures of which cultivated man is susceptible.