STORY TELLING: NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH ?

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How do you tell a story? How much of any story is its substance, and how much the gloss imposed upon it by the narrator? How will the reader or listener distinguish between fact and opinion? What is a fact? Should an historical narrative be limited to verifiable facts? If not, does history become a misnomer, an art form so personal to the historian that chapter one must be an account of the author's life and beliefs, in order to explain his bias? If, in your ripeness and fame, your story were to be told, how would you want it presented and by what kind of historian? Would the time of the telling - while you live, or a century after your death - make any difference? Are there any reasonable limits to the license of the serious historian to tell a story as he pleases?

I feel remarkably comfortable addressing these questions to this gathering, because you are historians, each and every one of you. Your essays demonstrate your answers, and this evening I will ask for your explicit responses and judgments. Perhaps those of you who have chosen history as your profession will lead the way.

There is no shortage of comment on the telling of history. It can be dull. Macaulay, reviewing a three volume-history of the life of Lord Burleigh by the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, remarked:

> "Compared with the labour of reading through these volumes, all other labour, the labour of thieves on the treadmill, of children in factories, of negroes in sugar plantations, is an agreeable recreation. There was, it is said, a criminal in Italy, who was suffered to make his choice between Guicciardini and the galleys. He chose the history. But the

> war of Pisa was too much for him. He changed his mind, and went to the oar."

Was the defect an excess of fact? Samuel Johnson would have doubted this. On April 18, 1775, he remarked to Boswell, "We must consider how very little authentic history there is. We can depend on as true that certain kings reigned, that certain battles were fought. But all the coloring, all the philosophy of history is conjecture." Boswell replied, "Then, sir, you would reduce all history to no better than an almanack, or mere chronological series of events." Gibbon, who was present, said nothing, but he must have known Plutarch's dictum, "So very difficult a matter it is to trace and find out the truth of anything by history."

Other commentators have been more optimistic. Francis Bacon held that "Histories make men wise; poets, witty; the mathematics, subtle; natural philosophy, deep; . . . logic and rhetoric, able to contend." Viscount Bolingbroke affirmed "the dignity of history" and believed that "history is philosophy teaching by example." Carlyle, complex and metaphysical, agreed, calling history "the essence of innumerable biographies."

A less complimentary view was expressed by Gibbon himself when he praised Antoninus for "furnishing very few materials for history, which is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind." Voltaire, not surprisingly, chimed in with, "History is little else than a picture of human crimes and misfortune." Thomas Hardy gave the consumer's preference: "My argument is that War makes rattling

good history; but Peace is poor reading."

In a remarkable collection of essays, John Clive, recently deceased Professor of History at Harvard, examines the "whole problem of the use of the past." He calls his volume Not By Fact Alone - Essays on the Writing and Reading of History, and he is frank to admit in his introduction that "I happen to believe that the use of the past is a very personal matter; almost . . . like the use of a toothbrush. For the historian, as for everyone else, it is bound to involve one's own past; one's professional pre-occupations; and one' predilections, be they loves or hatreds, . . . opinions or prejudices." He goes on to describe his middle-class German Jewish background, his escape to an English boarding school in 1938 and his decision at Harvard to devote his life to the study of Victorian England. His reputation rests upon his prize-winning study Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian. He has become an historian of historians, fascinated by his subjects and convinced that "the mere fact that someone uses the past for purposes not strictly or exclusively historical, in the professional sense, does not necessarily mean that the result cannot constitute a major contribution to historiography."

We lesser historians understand that there are a number of theories about history. Some hold that it is shaped by aggressive men like Alexander the Great, Caesar, Hitler or Lenin. Others look behind the leaders to economic and demographic forces which could no longer be resisted. Religious thinkers credit man's belief in his deities for enormous influence on history, while even physicians have their partial theory, best expressed in Hans

Zinsser's Rats, Lice and History, demonstrating the unexpected effect of epidemic typhus on some of the world's great battles. The symbols of the major theories, which are not at all mutually exclusive, are Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. Freud suggests the question, "Can psychological normality produce greatness?" Franz Kafka did not think so: "At the end of a man's life we must ask whether he did more harm to his times, or they to him. If the former, he was a great man." Marx fares poorly now. His faith in economic determinism, overlooking Freudian motivations, did not predict the Russia of 1990. Yet we know how right he is. When a man says, "It's not the money, it's the principle of the thing," it's the money.

Clive advises us not to set aside "biased" or "out-of-date" histories as valueless in our times. Quite the contrary. He admits that he would not, in the first instance, recommend Macaulay to a student interested in the "Glorious" Revolution of 1688, or de Tocqueville to someone curious about the old regime in France, but he urges us to read these authors and others - Thucydides, Parkman, Michelet, Burckhardt - in order to encounter literary artistry not inferior to that of the great novelists. Objectivity is not the yardstick. The great historians create their own worlds as they invent and expand the methodology of historical writing.

Macaulay is an example of genius in the writing of history. Of his own writing he said, "I shall cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history." This clearly means that he felt himself his own man. What were the elements of

his genius? Macaulay's great work is The History of England, emphasizing the period of the accession, in 1688, of William of Orange to the English throne. A precocious child (at age four, having suffered a minor burn, he responded to a solicitious woman, "Thank you, madam, the agony is abated."), Macaulay became a successful Whig politician in the 1830s and a man deeply educated in literature and politics. His writing displayed great narrative skill, clarity of style and sense of human drama, while at the same time classifying historical characters too simply as heroes or villains, moralizing rather too much and insisting on an unquestioning belief in progress. His originality, however, lay in his interest in portraying the "public mind," and its enormous influence on events. He searched the available sources of public opinion and public feeling (newspapers did not appear in London until 1695), showed how feelings arose from the circumstances of the groups with which he dealt, and analyzed their rational and irrational bases. Above all he recognized that the public mind, gathering influence as the means for disseminating news proliferated, became a force in times of crisis which political leaders could no longer ignore. He recognized coffee houses as the chief means by which London public opinion found an outlet, and he emphasized the importance of the Licensing Acts ensuring freedom of discussion. His prose was full of introductory phrases such as "Wise men began to perceive that . . .", "It was remarked that . . ." and "The traveler saw that . . ." In his narrative the public mind was heard to speak.

Macaulay, not averse to inserting himself into his history,

congratulated himself on his insight. ". . . surely the events which led to the establishment of the liberty of the press in England . . . may be thought to have as much interest for the present generation as any of those battles and sieges of which the most minute details have been carefully recorded." He was the first to apply the term, "the fourth estate," to the press in general. What was the relationship between his historian's interest in the "public mind" and his own life experience? In 1831 he commented that the House of Commons, instead of "outrunning the public mind, as before the Revolution it frequently did, . . . now follows with slow steps and at a wide distance." In a speech on July 5th of that year, we find him warning, "Woe to the Government which thinks that a great, a steady, a long continued movement of the public mind is to be stopped like a street riot!" He reached this conclusion 100 years before the time of instant public opinion polls and television, and he used it to elucidate English history.

Edward Gibbon, introduced to King George III at a reception following the publication of several volumes of his The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, was greeted by the monarch with, "Still scribbling, eh Gibbon, still scribbling?" Perhaps we too remember Gibbon as too prolific for our tastes. It is our loss. Macaulay believed that Gibbon's work "will retain its place in our literature," despite the fact that Macaulay deplored efforts by historians to deduce general principles from their facts and Gibbon's ideal was to search history for a science of human nature. Where Macaulay called for a new kind of social history,

in which the historian was the poet of an age, balancing reason and imagination, Gibbon saw his own role as a philosopher teaching readers to apply human reason to an understanding of the world. As a philosopher he imposed order on his history, drawing rational lessons from his chroncle of follies and misfortunes. This, on a particularly violent period of Byzantine history:

> "A being of the nature of man, endowed with the same faculties, but with a longer measure of existence, would cast down a smile of pity and contempt on the crimes and follies of human ambition, so eager, in a narrow span, to grasp at a precarious and short-lived enjoyment. It is thus that the experience of history exalts and enlarges the horizon of our intellectual view. . . . our immortal reason survives. . . "

Gibbon was a judge, but one with a sense of humor. "There is some philosophical amusement in tracing the birth of progress and error," he wrote, and indeed, writing the history of Christianity as an agnostic gave Gibbon ample opportunity to smile. In quoting the confessions of a Benedictine abbot, he wrote: "My vow of poverty has given me an hundred thousand crowns a year; my vow of obedience has raised me to the rank of a sovereign prince." Gibbon added, "I forget the consequences of his vow of chastity." In another vein: ". . . during the age of Christ, his apostles, and their first disciples, the lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, demons were expelled, and the laws of Nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the Church." He characterized the observation that Christian intestine[7] dissensions had inflicted far graver severities on believers than they had experienced from infidels as "a melancholy truth which obtrudes itself on the

reluctant mind." Gibbon presented himself to his readers as a skeptic, peering through a mask of credulity and devotion. Few were fooled. His views of human existence were cynical, realistic, and disdainful of hypocrisy. He used verbal humor to communicate them: " . . . the sacred but licentious crowd of priests, of inferior ministers, and of female dancers." "It is easier to deplore the fate, than to describe the actual conditions, of Corsica." "Corruption, the most infallible symptom of constitutional liberty . . ." Finally:

> "The victorious king of the Franks [Clovis] proceeded without delay to the siege of Angouleme. At the sound of the trumpets the walls of the city imitated the example of Jericho, and instantly fell to the ground; a splendid miracle, which may be reduced to the supposition that some clerical engineers had secretly undermined the foundations of the rampart."

Gibbon the humorist was nevertheless making a serious point. We cannot look to priests and poets for our salvation; that will come from slow, steady advances in science and the practical arts. He cites man's rise from naked barbarism as evidence that mastery of the practical arts is the bedrock of civilization. In inviting laughter at the absurdities of misguided figures in history, he intends to teach his realistic view. Although he has been called a master of irony, he had no doubts about ethical standards of behaviour, and allowed within his principle of human nature both love of action and love of pleasure. His hope that history will teach stands in ironic contract to his realistic acknowledgment that the experience of past faults is seldom profitable to successive generations of mankind.

Thomas Carlyle's histories demonstrate another kind of

originality, buried beneath impenetrable prose and intrusive habits which recommend him to few readers. In 1874 Lord Derby advised Disraeli to offer the aged Carlyle a knighthood because, for reasons which Lord Derby did not understand, Carlyle was "very vehement against Gladstone." To be great is to be misunderstood, or is it the other way around?

Carlyle's innovative historical method is important. He pointed out that experience is multi-dimensional, with all sorts of events occurring, and persons interacting, at the same time, influencing each other. He criticized the linear, one-dimensional, narrative method of most historians as a false rendering of actuality. In his masterpiece, Frederick the Great, he attempted a different method. Some called the result chaos, but his perceptive friend Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to him that he was "the true inventor of the stereoscope." The linguistic and literary devices he used were unusual. He shared with the reader his problems with his sources. He invented dialogue for his major characters, for which no source had been found. He changed the first person focus during a single episode, as though his characters were in a play. He made comments directly from himself to Frederick at critical junctures in Frederick's struggles. He inserted his own teachings on morality and politics, to make certain that his readers were learning from the history. At times he came close to becoming an historical novelist, with less than scrupulous regard for what actually happened. Professor Clive will not judge Carlyle's success, but he hails him for his pioneering attempt to recreate the clumsy

process of history as it actually happens.

How many of you have read Lytton Strachey's Eminent Victorians? More than once? A more delightful book of history has not been written, nor one more relevant to this evening's discussion. In one volume, Strachey debunked four of the most admired personages of the 19th century - Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold of Rugby, and General Gordon who died at Khartoum at the hands of the Mahdi. Using printed sources, Strachey composed highly personal interpretations of these great figures, exposing their psychological recesses as well as their idealism with irresistible wit and irony. Strachey owes something to Gibbon in his tone of amused detachment and his disingenuous persona as a reasonable man scarcely able to believe that folly and self-deception had played such a large role in the respectable lives of such distinguished leaders.
As Professor Clive puts it, Strachey indicated "in no uncertain manner that some of the great Victorian idols had possessed feet and, on occasion, heads of clay." Strachey himself referred gently to those "certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy and lay to my hand." "It has been my purpose," he wrote in his introduction to Eminent Victorians, "to illustrate rather than to explain. It would have been futile to hope to tell even a precis of the truth about the Victorian age. . . . I hope, however, that the following pages may prove to be of interest from the strictly biographical no less than from the historical point of view. Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past." Then he entered with relish upon sketches

which must be the beginning of psychobiography, as we would now call it. Strachey seldom indulges in the verbal humor, at the expense of his subjects, which characterizes Gibbon. Instead, he uses the rhetorical question, asking such questions as an active intelligence, seeking to rationalize an un-Christian action, might employ to justify going ahead. He also enters directly into the heads of his subjects and reports what they perceive in a factual manner. Other facts are reported without qualification, with no apology for being only "fragments of the truth." His narrative is full of innuendos, his tone irreverent and his concern for historical accuracy insufficient. His wit and brilliance indicate a flippant view of the world, and too great a willingness to poke fun at the complexity and contradictions which exist in all of us.

So say his critics. On the other hand, his portraits are now known to be essentially correct, and his genuine concern with the interrelationships of character and circumstance, morality and action, the influence of the spirit of the age and the power of unconscious motivation is timeless. Perhaps to criticize it as history would be equivalent to denying the merit of Don Quixote because the novel is absurd. We know more about these four unfortunates who caught Lytton Strachey's attention, enough to sympathize with them rather than to attack them for psychological complexity. But we must give Strachey credit for refusing to write standard biography, for not depicting his subjects as pillars of virtue, incapable of error, and for giving us readable, lively, memorable art. He never said he was an historian.

Enough of Victorian historians, and those who wrote about Victorian times and personalities. Let me tell you a story.

In 1933 a physician named Sidney Garfield went to the desert East of Los Angeles to provide medical care for workers building the aqueduct from the Colorado River to that growing metropolis. He quickly faced bankruptcy, because industrial injuries were sent past him back to the city, and the workers had no money for non-industrial illness. Acting from necessity, he and the management of the project negotiated a prepayment of 5 cents per worker per day for non-industrial illness and another set amount for the care of industrial injury. The plan was brilliantly successful. The physicians realized that healthy patients were assets, and illness prevention became a priority. The project ended in 1938. Dr. Garfield went back to Los Angeles.

The same year Henry J. Kaiser bid successfully for the construction of the Grand Coulee dam in Eastern Washington state. He cajoled Dr. Garfield into providing medical care, on a prepaid basis, at the work site. This time wives and children were included in the plan, at the insistence of the union. A multispecialty group of physicians, isolated from civilization, toiled around the clock, enjoying themselves and providing excellent care. They dreamed of continuing their program, but, when the dam was completed in 1941, they dispersed to traditional practices.

World War II followed. Henry J. Kaiser summoned Dr. Garfield to take care of his shipyard workers in Richmond, California. Dr. Garfield had a commission in an Army unit destined for India. Mr. Kaiser contacted President Roosevelt and had Dr. Garfield

discharged for civilian duty, without bothering to tell Dr. Garfield. But the medical program worked, covering by the war's end not only 90,000 workers in the San Francisco Bay Area but thousands of others in Portland, Oregon, Vancouver, Washington, and Fontana, in Southern California. Dr. Garfield ran the medical program, under a contract with the Kaiser shipyards.

When the war ended, the medical care program continued, reduced to a tenth of its wartime size, and desperate to sell its concept of prepaid group practice to the public. The few physicians willing to bet their careers on this doubtful future were farsighted indeed. Against odds - the lack of capital, the difficulty recruiting physicians for a program called "socialistic" or worse by organized medicine, and the entrenched hostility of the AMA, CMA and county medical societies - the program grew. Unexpectedly, the greatest problem for the program proved its need for Henry J. Kaiser's guarantees of the loans it required to build or buy new facilities. Mr. Kaiser was willing to guarantee the loans, but in return he expected a major voice in the management of Dr. Garfield's medical group. He said, "Anything I am part of, I run. You physicians tend to the patients. My people will manage the business side." This meant everything but clinical care.

The doctors told Henry J. Kaiser that he was wrong and that his insistence on control was unacceptable. Ten years of struggle followed, resulting in new, contractual divisions of labor and responsibility, under which the program has experienced incredible expansion and prosperity. Knowing that the alternative was

dissolution of the Kaiser-Permanente Medical Care Program, cooler heads, in particular Mr. Eugene Trefethen and the Kaiser attorneys, had prevailed over the contentious Mr. Kaiser and the equally stubborn Drs. Garfield, Cutting and Collen.

Thirty years later a retired leader of The Permanente Medical Group undertook to write its history. The group's executive office blessed this undertaking. The initial draft was typical of what Carlyle called the Dryasdust school; the author was only a physician, not an historian. But the subject matter was most promising. A distinguished historian was retained to do more research and to rework the text. One of his conditions in undertaking this assignment was that the executive office would allow him his professional prerogatives in presenting the history in an honest and informative manner. This was granted, verbally.

The distinguished historian was not surprised to discover that the overpowering figure in this history, from 1945 on, was Henry J. Kaiser. Mr. Kaiser was a high-school dropout who invented roles for himself in American industry and somehow managed to grow into them. When he sponsored a health care program, he was fond of telling how his mother died in his arms for lack of medical attention. This, unfortunately, was not true. He carried a black bag, filled with medications and medical supplies, and looked for opportunites to inflict doses of medicine on his frightened associates. He became rather too fond of certain pills. He bullied his colleagues by telephone and in person. Rather like Florence Nightingale, he felt that because he was willing to work 20 hours a day, others should be too. He

could not tolerate being told he was wrong. And he accomplished miracles of industrial engineering. His force and talents in road-building, dam-construction, steel, cement and other industries were astonishing - except in medical care. When he went to Hawaii to begin a medical care program, under his exclusive control, to show Dr. Garfield and others how wrong they had been to oppose him, he fell flat on his face, and had to ask the physicians to bail him out. Yet, an irony worthy of Gibbon, he knew before he died that the Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program would be his monument, outlasting his industrial accomplishments! The distinguished historian loved him for ~~his~~ his ebullient personality, his forcefulness, his successes, his failures, and his weaknesses, and he wrote of him accordingly. The result was a colorful character study.

The executive office was not pleased with the historian's draft. The office argued that difficult relations between the medical group and the Kaiser side of the organization had never really improved, and that, suddenly, the appearance of a book recounting the struggles with Henry J. Kaiser during the 1950s would compromise the chances of cooperation. Moreover, there might be persons, descended from Henry J. Kaiser and his lieutenants, whose feelings would be hurt by a factual account of the great man, warts and all. This degree of psychobiography was not acceptable. The distinguished historian's draft was shelved.

Again, cooler heads prevailed, but at a price. The history is now in the hands of McGraw-Hill, being prepared for publication in 1991. The distinguished historian's text has been sanit-

ized, to remove from it anecdotes and interpretations which might indicate that Henry J. Kaiser was a complex man, full of contradictions, capable of brutality and generosity, errors of judgment and inspiration, leadership and deceit. Over-all, he was a genius, a gifted visionary who could make his dreams come true.

How would this executive office have regarded major historians had it played the role of editor and publisher to them? The executive office might have accepted Macaulay, whose belief in progress would have appealed. It would have found Carlyle disorganized and unclear, and it would have rejected Gibbon for his impious sense of humor, and Strachey for his interest in the dark places of the human psyche. Professor Clive, were he alive, would grieve that a subject as interesting as Henry J. Kaiser and the struggle for control of Dr. Garfield's innovation in medical care has been relegated to an "official" history. Is not this censorship? Is this an appropriate use of the past?

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