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Report of the Annual Meeting

## Canadian Historians and Present Tendencies in Historical Writing

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[See table of contents](#)

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## CANADIAN HISTORIANS AND PRESENT TENDENCIES IN HISTORICAL WRITING

By D. C. HARVEY

Without injustice to the valuable work that is being done by non-professional historians from Halifax to Vancouver in preserving historical records and keeping green the memory of our ancestors it is fair to say that the majority of Canadian historians are actually engaged in teaching in our schools, colleges, and universities. Upon their shoulders rests the burden of orientating Canadian history as a whole, of training future historians in historical method, and of formulating historical ideals. It is natural, therefore, that they should take stock of the historical methods and ideals of their day, and respond, however slightly, to the fashion of the hour. It is the purpose of this paper to glance at some of the present tendencies in historical writing and to enquire how far Canadian historians have been and should be affected by these tendencies.

In noting these tendencies, it is necessary to distinguish between the historian engaged in actual research; the critic of the product of historical research; the popular historian who restricts his efforts to the assembling of other men's achievements in various fields; and the writer of text-books in history for school or college. Merely to classify these is to interpret them.

The historian engaged in actual research, apart from contemporary stimuli that may direct his efforts, should not be affected by fashion in regard to standards or methods; but the critic of his researches will be very much subject to public opinion not in regard to the validity of his conclusions but in regard to their utility; while the popularizer of his work will undoubtedly keep his ear to the ground for every murmur of the reading public as that is his standard of judgment. So, too, as public opinion reacts upon educational organisation, the writers of text-books in history will be called upon to revise or rewrite their books in the light of contemporary aims and fashions. If, then, we are to discover present tendencies in historical writing, we must look chiefly to the historical critic, the writer of popular history, and the text-book writer; for all these are hammering away at the historian proper, attempting to direct his research and succeeding, at least, in making his life miserable.

It is impossible in a short paper on a long subject to do more than state a few principles in a general way while asking you to recall the conclusions of those who have written histories of history and have established the theory that there are fashions in history. All agree that each significant age in the period of recorded history has by its interests and by its demands upon historians influenced quite definitely the product; and this has led such a distinguished philosopher-historian as Benedetto Croce to assert that "every true history is contemporary history", by which he means in part that the historian's interest and curiosity in his subject, however remote, has been aroused and stimulated by something in his own life and in the life of his day that has sent him with his problem to the narratives and memorials of the past to seek the origin, tendency, and probable outcome of that problem. Thus a special set of circumstances, the discussion of vital

questions in his own day will set the historian the task of re-investigating and re-writing history in the light of and for light on those circumstances, questions, principles, characters and problems.

It follows that an authoritarian age interested in religious questions will ransack the past for authorities in support of the respective thesis of each historian; an aristocratic society will have its history written in terms of class distinctions to the edification of the lower classes and the glorification of the upper classes; an age interested in political democracy will regard history as the record of political achievement; and an age interested in nationalism will exploit its history to that end. But, while this is true of the historical critic, the popularizer, and the text-book writer, who, as we have said, are especially prone to consistency in following the mode, it is less true of the historian proper, particularly since the rationalistic movement of the eighteenth century and the scientific achievements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These movements have given the historian proper release from any pre-conception as to the destiny of mankind, have secularized his outlook and have given him both tools and method which he is free to use in the investigation of any subject that arouses his own curiosity or the curiosity of his generation. Consequently, we shall leave the trained historian for the moment, conscious of a varied and rich equipment, a full set of tools, repudiating the notion of fashion so far as he is concerned, but very much aware that his conception of knowledge as an end in itself, of truth as an attainable ideal, of history as dowered with dignity, is at present being assailed on all sides by the critic, the popular writer and the text-book writer, all of whom aspire to interpret the views of their day.

According to the most arrogant and dogmatic critics of to-day, it is both the opportunity and the duty of the historian to supplant the gods, assume the role of leadership in human affairs, and to perform the utilitarian, though divine, function of interpreting the past and foretelling the future. Since the ecclesiastical historian has been handicapped by the necessity of justifying the ways of God to man; and the economic historian has interpreted everything from the point of view of economic necessity; and the political historian has restricted his field to kings, parliaments and international relations; and the literary historian has padded his work with irrelevant anecdotes; and since the philosopher has become lost amongst the cobwebs spun by his own metaphysical introspective consciousness, and the scientist has built up a new world aloof and very different from the combined work of the theologian, philosopher and historian of the past, the time has now come, say these critics, for the new historian to integrate all knowledge, to transcend arbitrary divisions of the sciences and the arts, of peoples and of nations, of ancient, mediaeval, modern and contemporary history, to record, interpret, give meaning and purpose to the whole story of mankind from the beginning in remote time to this very hour in far-flung space.

In *The New History and the Social Sciences* Mr. Harry Elmer Barnes asserts: "But the latest, most inclusive, and most important of all types of historical interpretation, and the one which, perhaps, most perfectly represents the newer history, is the synthetic or 'collective psychological.' According to this type of historical interpretation no single category of 'causes' is sufficient to explain all phases and periods of historical development. Nothing less than the collective psychology of any period can be deemed adequate to determine the historical development of that age; and it is the task of the historian to discover, evaluate, and set forth the chief factors which create and shape the collective view of life and determine the nature of the group struggle for existence and improvement."

In his introduction to the Borzoi Historical Series Mr. Barnes makes his usual criticism of the old history as being "extremely narrow in its scope and interests" and pictures the new history as follows:—

"The new history is as wide in its interests as the entire range of human activities and achievements in the past. It deals not only with politics, dynasties and treaties but likewise with art, material culture, philosophy, education, medicine, literature, and manners and customs. Cultural achievements have replaced racy anecdotes, and institutional evolution has supplanted striking episodes." But even Mr. Barnes admits that "Thus far the new history has been limited for the most part, to the monographic, methodological, and polemic works of the leaders of the various groups interested in this movement. There has been little organized effort to rewrite the totality of human history from the standpoint of the newer interests and assumptions. Hitherto world histories have tended to be either ephemeral literary projects executed by authors possessed of stylistic capacity but with little historical knowledge, or they have been equally unreliable anthologies of the works of the contemporary historians of past ages, few of whom have had any comprehension of the standards of historical accuracy which have been worked out in the last hundred years."

In other words Mr. Barnes has responded to the appeal for a new history but admits in many words that this appeal is already fifty years old and still an aspiration. He himself proves that it is easier to find a dozen with the wit to tell how things should be done than one with the patience and tenacious industry to perform the gigantic task. But, while noting his disrespect for the majority of older historians and his exaggerated estimate of the contributions of the newer historians, we may classify him as one of the most aggressive, stimulating, and responsive of the historical critics of to-day who are laying down tasks of great magnitude for the historian.

From a list of his fellow countrymen whom he quotes with approval James Harvey Robinson may be selected as a pioneer in the field of the newer history, since he not only defines the subject but attempts to write in accordance with his definition. His view of the matter may be gathered from the following extract:—

"The 'New History' is escaping from the limitations formerly imposed upon a study of the past. It will come in time consciously to meet our daily needs; it will avail itself of all these discoveries that are being made about mankind by anthropologists, and sociologists—discoveries which during the last fifty years have served to revolutionize our ideas of the origin, progress and prospects of our race. History must not be regarded as a stationary subject which can only progress by refining its methods and accumulating, criticizing, and assimilating new material, but it is bound to alter its ideals and aims with the general progress of society and the social sciences and will ultimately play an infinitely more important role in our intellectual life than it has hitherto done."

This was the view of Mr. Robinson twenty-five years before Mr. Barnes became so dogmatic. This is still his view which he describes as the genetic or developmental view in which the function of history becomes distinctly utilitarian, the duty of the historian being to tell the world how it got that way in order that it may, having mastered the living past, direct the nascent future.

Mr. Barnes's optimism in regard to a possible historical interpretation of the universe and Mr. Robinson's desire to take the common man into his confidence are reflected in *Whither Mankind*, edited by Mr.

Charles A. Beard. It is not unnatural, if one accepts the idea that the historian can and should give meaning and purpose to life, to attempt to forecast the future. Hence Mr. Beard's attempt to provide, through co-operative effort, a panorama of modern civilization, a sort of stock-taking of the universe preparatory to laying in new supplies for the future demand. Curiously enough, although this co-operative effort has not penetrated far into the unseen, Mr. Beard retains the optimism with which he set out. "For the reasons thus adduced it may be inferred," he says, "that modern civilization founded on science and the machine will not decline after the fashion of older agricultural civilizations; that analogies drawn from ages previous to technology are inapplicable; that according to signs on every hand technology promises to extend its area and intensify its characteristics; that it will afford the substance with which all who expect to lead and teach in the future must reckon."

Thus we set out with the new historians to explain the past, reduce it to maxims for the common man to use in moulding the future; and then, as our doctors disagree on the diagnosis of the present, we find that historical analogies break down on the threshold of the future; but, with the spiritualists, we discover with certainty that "all are happy over there." We may well say not only Whither Mankind oh historian but Whither Historian oh Logic!

While Mr. Robinson and others on this side of the Atlantic have led a natural revolt against the narrow nationalism of historical interest and writing and have tried to introduce their generation to the world outside of and including America, a similar revolt has been going on in England. Let us begin with Mr. F. S. Marvin's *The Living Past* published in 1913. Like Mr. Robinson, Mr. Marvin is concerned with the common man and like Mr. Barnes he seeks a canon of historical interpretation. Like both, he seeks a remote beginning and would not terminate his narrative and interpretation until the moment at which he is writing. Like both, he holds that the present is the past alive in us. All this, together with the idea of utility, is hinted at in his preface which is in part as follows:—

"Public interest in history is clearly on the increase. There is, however, one obstacle to its effective study which is growing likewise, and has in recent years become serious and even threatening. Not only is mankind, by thought and action, constantly accumulating the material for fresh history, but our knowledge of the past is, by the exploration of the world, by the discovery of fresh documents, above all by the widening of our notion of history itself, becoming immeasurably fuller and more complex. The growing interest seems to run some risk of being smothered by the abundance of its food.

The study needs a clue. . . . "You have then one strong clear clue which, with the necessary qualifications, seems to offer in the field of history something of the guidance and system which Newtonian gravitation gave to celestial mechanics in the 17th Century. The growth of a common humanity; this is the primary object to keep in view. But it will prove vague and inconclusive, unless we add to it a content in the growth of organized knowledge, applied to social ends."

Marvin himself was not content to be the critic but attempted in *The Living Past* and *The Century of Hope* to apply his theories; and at the same time, as editor of a series of books on the unity of civilization, he sought the aid of other scholars in realizing his ideal. But it remained for Mr. H. G. Wells, the great popularizer of history in our day, to attempt single-handed to "tell truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the

whole story of life and mankind" and at one stroke to meet the needs of the student and the common man. His thesis is that "universal history is at once something more and something less than the aggregate of the national histories to which we are accustomed, that it must be approached in a different spirit and dealt with in a different manner," ignoring many details that are ordinarily stressed but presenting in bold relief many subjects of primary interest to mankind. Unlike Marvin he does not stress signs of unity in the past, but in his own way he is much concerned with the possibility of unity through education, arguing as he does insistently that "there can be no common peace and prosperity without common historical ideas" and that "A sense of history as the common adventure of all mankind is as necessary for peace within as it is for peace between the nations." Here again, in both Marvin and Wells, we find contemporary insistence upon the utilitarian aspects of history and of general history in particular, the *raison d'être* being organized knowledge applied both to social ends and to international relations. Mr. Wells not only starts at the beginning and continues to the present but also devotes a chapter to the future, thus sweeping aside the notion widely held not long since that history could not concern itself with contemporary events. His influence has been very great not only on the general public but upon school and college and particularly upon High School text-books in general history throughout the English-speaking world.

But if Mr. Marvin and Mr. Wells have made the remote past a reality to school, college and general reader, it is Mr. R. H. Gretton who has become the able champion of contemporary history as the pivot upon which the historian must turn both backward and forward. In his essay on history he says "The vivifying imagination, which is necessary for all good historical work, comes at this moment, not from any temporary and external provocation of interest in national existence, nor from the direction of literary impulse, but from an influence that must in all probability be permanent—a widely spread acquaintance with events and a widely spread intelligence about social conditions." . . . "To begin with there is all the difference in the world between a pivoting of history upon one point in the past, and a weaving of it upon the warp of contemporary conditions. There is, in the latter case, no limit to what may be history, and no moral prejudicing of any issue. But, more importantly, to recognize that there is a vast field of interest in history which has been opened by concern for contemporary conditions and fertilized by the imagination provoked by the life of our own time, is not to say that contemporary history must be the centre of the historians outlook, or attention to it his main duty. It is only to plead that the last of the artificial limitations from which history has suffered should be removed."

Thus pleads Mr. Gretton for perspective in history on the basis of a present comprising the living past and throwing up problems that have their roots in the facts and experiences of humanity a knowledge of which will help us in the upward struggle.

Without specific reference to any other critics or writers and keenly conscious of the limitations of this analysis, one may summarize present tendencies in historical writing thus:—

The modern historian is being pressed from all sides to help in the solution of contemporary social, political, intellectual and international problems by the application of doses of history. Inasmuch as the Industrial Revolution has made these problems world problems, the emphasis is upon world history or general history. The pressure comes from both the

common man, who wants to be given a digest of human experience as a starting-point for his efforts at the amelioration of his lot; and from the champions of public opinion in international affairs, who claim that before the different peoples of the world can co-operate adequately to usher in an era of international peace they must be re-educated by the historian till they achieve in Mr. Well's phrase, "a sense of history as the common adventure of all mankind."

As a result of this double pressure there has been a two-fold revolt against the narrowness of history. History has been attacked as narrow in that it has placed more emphasis upon political than upon social and economic problems, and secondly in that it has restricted itself to national rather than to world history. Hence the cry for general history for the reading public and for general history as the chief educational agency in our schools and colleges. Now curiously enough Canadian historians as a whole have been strangely unaffected by the appeal to general history so far at least as their writing has been concerned. With very few exceptions they have confined themselves to Canadian history; and, even in this limited field, have dealt with sectional or local aspects of this history. The teacher who would organize a course of history other than Canadian must search in vain for books written by Canadians. This is absolutely true of general or world history and almost absolutely so even in regard to British and American history. It therefore becomes a pertinent question for the Canadian historian to ask, what, if any justification, is there for restricting his efforts to local history, what is the place of local history in general history, what service can the local historian perform for his community and the world in general?

In order to approach the problem with some degree of discernment, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the present insistence upon world history is an aspiration only; and that, in so far as it is a practicable proposal, it depends upon the adequacy of the work that has been done by a vast army of historians battling in the restricted areas of national and local history. In other words the basis for the new experiment is the assumption that historical method has been perfected during the past 50 years, when science has been in the ascendant, and the archives of different peoples have been collected, made more accessible to historians, examined, edited, published, interpreted, and integrated within national areas; and that the time has now come for an integration of national histories into some sort of an international or world history. The form of this new history is still matter of experiment and controversy; but, whatever the ultimate outcome, the past is being ransacked again in the hope of arriving at the formulation of world-tendencies as distinct from national or local tendencies.

But, while this is true and the labour will engage the attention of many historians in many lands for many years to come, and while it is hoped that some Canadian historians will make a worthy contribution to this work, three things must be noted. Firstly, such a task requires special gifts and therefore will attract the legitimate efforts of only a small percentage of historians at any time; secondly, these general historians must base their generalizations upon the material already assembled by the whole group of specialist historians, which means that these specialists must continue to supply the original research; and lastly, the general historians must deal primarily with the past, leaving to others the continuing stream of history that flows on in greater volume than ever. Hence it follows that merely as a hewer of wood and a drawer of water for the

master historians of the world there is adequate justification for the local historian.

But there are other and more important reasons why the local historian must continue to perform his functions, reasons which assume a new dignity because of the present aspiration to trace the growth of a common humanity and to discover the underlying and impelling world-spirit. These reasons lie in the nature of man and the interplay of his ideal strivings and his local environment.

If a nation is the workshop of the world, the community is the workshop of the nation as the family is of the community. Thus we must have the history of our nations, our communities and our families. In all our families continuity depends upon certain members who catch the tradition and continue it, serve their community and nation, and thus contribute to world history, so that we must have our biographies as types of our contribution to the efforts of mankind. Each community has its local problems, fundamental to organized life and co-operative activity, which problems are but a microcosm of the problems of mankind. Each nation but concentrates the efforts of its many communities and tries to deal with major problems common to all; and any international organization can only strive to reconcile conflicting interests and to effect the same compromise between national rivalries and emulations that the family effects between individual members, the community between families, and the nation between communities. Thus, the biography of an individual in mirroring his struggle for food, clothing, shelter, for harmony with his environment, for an interpretation of his being intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically, is analogous to the story of a community, a nation, the world.

If a stone is cast into a pool the energy thus communicated finds expression in a series of widening circles each shallower and less intensive than the preceding one. Thus it is with social organization. The place where our energies are concentrated is the community in which we live, move and have our being; the locality, the local life. Our sphere of activity is here. The traditions which influence us are here: some of them have grown up here, others have been blown in from other communities equally engaged in a similar struggle, and, perhaps with a greater body of tradition and experience. It is true that ideas know no bounds; but it is also true that the uses we make of ideas from without are conditioned by our own nature and needs. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So it is with ideas. But the wind itself affects each locality intimately and closely. Its effects can and must be recorded.

One of the tempting snares of world history is inherent in the dictum, happy is a country that has no history. By taking in this sense the world-view we might say happy is mankind when it has no history. The meaning is clear. History in that sense is a record of conflict, catastrophe, war and rumours of war rather than the less dramatic account of a peaceful and workman-like solution of day by day problems. Nations rise and fall, civilizations wax and wane, but families and communities go on forever just as if these larger organizations were comparatively incidental. Thus it may be that the true interpretation of man's purpose and destiny may be found by studying the individual and the community rather than in the hasty and inadequate generalizations of world-historians. One can see clearly why a family is wiped out or a community driven to insolvency; but we have yet to learn why the glory that was Greece is not still Greece and why the grandeur that was Rome no longer exists. That which attracts and repels immigrants, physical features, natural resources, and



climate, meteorological observations, the fall of rain, the vagaries of snow, statistical accounts of gold, lumber, wheat, the use we make of our energies and our resources, our habits of work and play, our laws and government are as important in teaching mankind as the international rivalries, political intrigue, and vanities of statesmen can ever be.

But much depends upon the spirit in which local history is written; and here we hit upon a paradox: local history cannot be written in a local spirit; the true local historian is he who has an interest in world history. A genealogist, a maiden aunt, is often perfectly reliable as to the vital statistics of her family and immediate community, a census taker may record the exact number of hens and sheep on a farm, a party heeler may know to a nicety the number of voters in the community; and yet none of these could write a biography, an essay on population, or the significance of democratic self-government. Even an annalist may compile year by year all the materials of a local history and yet may not be able to use them as history. All these types of compilers have their uses, are indispensable to the historian; but the historian must see meaning in these collections of dissimilar facts, and must be able to interpret them to his own locality and relate them to similar or allied activities in other localities. That is to say that the local historian has the benefit of an intensive study of a limited field, of accurate knowledge of a limited set of conditions and group of people and therefore is in a position to see causes and results in a way that is not open to the general historian; but he must have the general historian's equipment for generalization, an eye for larger relationships, if he is going to see all that is in local history and thereby make its work and his significant.

It would be possible to illustrate this at length if I had time but I must conclude by an attempt to explain why I inflicted this paper upon you. I have been reading a good deal of historical literature recently in an effort to discover what ideals historians have set for themselves at present, and I was struck by the fact that all this progressive discontent is voiced by others than Canadians. I thought of my colleagues in Canadian universities who, themselves Canadians though trained in European and American universities, were restricting their efforts to the Imperial, Canadian, or provincial fields. I wondered whether this was from choice, habit or necessity, whether we were all contented with this outlook, whether we were all convinced that this was the duty of our generation or that it was also our duty to give a wider ambition to our students. In other words I hoped that this paper would evoke some discussion.

To this end I shall formulate some hypotheses and leave them with you.

In the first place Canadian historians have not made any proportionate contribution to the field of general history. In the second place they have not written an adequate national history, every attempt that has yet been made being limited by sectional outlook or an intimate knowledge of parts of Canada only. In the third place Canadian historians have only vaguely recognized that they are in a position to interpret the Old Colonial system more accurately than a writer in London or Paris. In the fourth place no adequate Canadian history can be written until fuller and more intimate provincial histories have been written by competent historians of general training who can see general principles emerging from the local detail. Lastly, no adequate Canadian history can be written that does not place Canada in its proper perspective in general history, firstly as a pawn in the game of European imperialism and secondly as seeking its own national character and lastly as emerging into world-politics.