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What is History? Edward Hallett Carr

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EDWARD HALLETT CARR, *What Is History?* [The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures, January-March 1961]. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963, 209 pp.

What Is History? by Edward H. Carr, the eminent Cambridge professor of international politics and modern history, is an outstanding addition to the growing body of literature devoted to the examination and interpretation of the nature and meaning of history. Few such studies since Marc Bloch's *The Historian's Craft* in 1953 have revealed such a breadth of vision and perceptiveness of historiographical insight as this careful yet fast-moving historical testimony. It consists of six lectures delivered at Cambridge University in early 1961 under the headings The Historian and His Facts; Society and the Individual; History, Science, and Morality; Causation in History; History as Progress; and The Widening Horizon. So significant were these lectures deemed by the directors of the B.B.C. that they were subsequently broadcast to the entire British Isles. Now they are conveniently available to us in this first American edition.

While recognizing the justifications in some of the Collingwood School's criticism of "scientific history" and the "objectivity of historical facts," Professor Carr is clearly not one of the "relativists" in his interpretation of history. Accepting Pirandello's quip that "a fact is like a sack—it won't stand up till you've put something in it," and Professor Barraclough's observation that "the history we read, though based on facts, is strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments," Carr nevertheless insists that the value of history grows in proportion to the historian's objectivity and precision in discovering truth and perceiving meaningful relationships and interpretations of past events (all events are past).

Carr's opening query, "What is history?" is more subtle and profound than its surface appearance, but his carefully pursued answer is a masterpiece of modest good sense and inspiring challenge, not only to historians, but to all who read and think. First, he observes, history is a process of reciprocal actions between the historian and his facts, "an unending dialogue between the present and the past." By that he means that neither the scientific school's reliance upon the autonomy and objectivity of facts nor the Collingwood emphasis on interpretation and subjectivity is entirely sufficient, although each contains part of the truth. Carr points out that the his-

torian's first selection of material and interpretation must always be provisional; then as he proceeds, both his interpretations and ordering of the facts are altered by their interaction. Neither historian nor facts can stand alone. Opinions without data are mere opinions; facts without interpretation are meaningless. Pertinent questions must be asked of the facts, but "the historian who accepts answers in advance to these questions goes to work with his eyes blindfolded, and renounces his vocation." (p. 108)

So also is the relationship between society and the individual. They are not in conflict, protests the author; they are complimentary, necessary, and even inseparable. Like all persons, the historian is shaped partly by his social environment, and his view of historical phenomena is partially a reflection of his society. Carr does not believe that great men are outside that stream of history, acting upon it only as external forces. Men are at the same time both products and agents of the historical process, creators and created.

Thus Carr's social view of history is closely related to his faith in the future. "The belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere. A society which has lost belief in its capacity to progress in the future will quickly cease to concern itself with its progress in the past Our view of history reflects our view of society." (p. 176) Carr's own view of history, which is the essential lesson of this provocative book, is that the past, the present, and the future are inseparably "linked together in the endless chain of history." And the dual function of the historian is to help us understand past society and its interrelations with the present in order that we may gain mastery over our environment and insure a continuing progress in the future.

The optimism and uplifting candor of Professor Carr's book is a welcome antidote to the flood of despondent and even morbid literature which floods the modern market. Those who are familiar with Carr's many published works will not be surprised to see the clarity and even occasional eloquence of his style, as well as the charming intimacy by which he communicates with the reader. It is this reviewer's hope that *What Is History?* will be read by people of all walks of life. It should certainly be on the shelves of every serious historian.

De Lamar Jensen