

Of History

If you can control people's ideas of the past, you control their ideas of the present and hence the future.

"The Way of the Church," *CWHN* 4:217

HISTORICAL APPROACHES

Taking one's own, contemporary civilization as the very latest civilization (which it is) and therefore the best (which it is not), it is the easiest thing in the world to classify all other civilizations on a scale of proximity to your own in time and spirit.

"Before Adam," *CWHN* 1:80

The greatest handicap an ancient writer has in trying to tell his story against entrenched opinions of the scholars is that he cannot be present to defend himself. The master himself is dead, the public in ignorance, and the field is left clear to the servants of the household to make themselves magnificent at the expense of their lord.

"The Way of the Church," *CWHN* 4:240

There is an orthodoxy and a heresy in history as well as religion. History is as much what a man believes as his religion is. History vindicates the proposition that God loves the Jews. With equal force, if you want it that way, it vindicates the proposition that he hates them. History has long been taken as a superbly convincing illustration of the working out of the principle of evolution in human affairs; today some scholars see in it a smashing refutation of any such idea.

"Do Religion and History Conflict?" *CWHN* 12:436

We look for easier and quicker solutions, as did the sophists of old. And like them we find those solutions in the endless discussions and expensive eyewash of the university. Consider what goes on in the history business.

1. The academic mind wants neatness, tidiness, simplicity, order. . . .
2. The modern college teaches us, if nothing else, to accept history on authority. . . .

3. The insights of men . . . are not to be despised. Do not for a moment think that the only reliable evidence comes from brass instruments. But insight offers no escape from evidence. . . . The learner must come to grips with the real thing at first hand. . . .

4. The most popular attempt to grasp history at a gulp is the Cook's Tour. . . . At best our college humanities are a sentimental journey, a scenic-postcard world of the obvious and theatrical: the Great Books, the Hundred Best Poems, the Greatest Works of the Greatest Minds, etc. . . . It is a cozy and reassuring thing for student and teacher alike to have our neat authoritarian College Outline Series, Syllabi of Western Civilization, Surveys of Great Minds, and what not to fall back on. But please don't point to these pedestrian exercises in skimming and sampling and try to tell me that *they* are a valid refutation of the prophets!

5. To handle problems requiring data beyond the capacity of students and educators impatient to shine, the ancient sophists devised certain very effective discussion techniques. In these, the most important skill was that of presenting evidence by implication or inference only. . . . A limited use of jargon is indispensable in any field: having solved for "x," we do not have to derive "x" every time it is mentioned, but simply to indicate it by a symbol, such as those useful keywords commonly used to power historical discussions: the Medieval Mind, *Sturm und Drang* [Storm and Stress, a movement in German literature], the Frontier, Hellenism, the Enlightenment, Puritanism, the Primitive, Relativity, etc., each of which is supposed to set a whole chorus of bells chiming in our heads—the echoes of deep and thorough reading. . . . My own self-confidence in sounding off on historical matters need not reflect any solid knowledge at all, but may well be the product of a careful grooming, a calculated window-dressing. Today the typical academic historian does most of his training before a mirror. The modern world, like the ancient, is a world peopled largely by zombies. Occasions like this one tonight are not meant to teach but to impress. If it was knowledge we were after, we would all at this time be pursuing the evidence, not listening to me. . . .

6. What about those great historical systems which the giants have erected from time to time. Do not such give a faithful picture of the world? Alas, system is the death of history! . . . When you choose to build one structure rather than another you are not merely rearranging materials in new combinations, you are emphasizing some things at the expense of others. . . .

The *via scholastica* [the way of scholarship] is well marked. First one takes a sampling, merely a sampling, of the evidence. Then as soon as possible one forms a theory (the less the evidence the more brilliant the theory). From then on the scholar spends his days defending his theory and mechanically fitting all subsequent evidence into the bed of Procrustes.

"Do Religion and History Conflict?" CWHN 12:439-45

We have been conditioned to look for a growth and development in everything and this has crippled the study of the humanities . . . in many fields. Music is not better today than it was in the time of Bach. It may be different, but it is not better.

This is true with . . . written documents, too. The greatest comes first. The experts are forced to admit that it is always the same gospel. . . . There is no development among the prophets from a ritual type of religion to a prophetic type to a poetic type, or the other way around. What Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob preached in the beginning is just what the prophets were preaching later on. It is just what you find in the New Testament. In other words, the same gospel and the same theology and the same morality are characteristic of these three periods.

THE ANCIENT WORLD

Unique events in history can never be reconstructed with certainty; but characteristic related events—manners, customs, rituals, etc., things that happen not just once but again and again in familiar patterns—may be the object of almost absolute certainty. Hence they, and not particular events, are the hardest things to fake. In testing forgeries and identifying documents it is the general pattern that is all-important.

“Lehi the Winner,” *CWHN* 5:114

Whether the ancient scenario was spontaneous or whether it was carefully worked out in one place before it spread throughout the world, the phenomenon is equally astounding—tribes and nations around the globe going through the same elaborate rites in the same settings and at the same portentous times—a vast and grandiose spectacle. . . . That primal unity is the one-ness between heaven and earth which we have called atonement.

“One Eternal Round,” *CWHN* 12:381

The two most important contributions to Ancient history in our time [are] the discovery of changing weather conditions in antiquity and their close correlation with migration, revolution, and war, and the recent comparison and interpretation of ritual texts, calling as they do for a complete reevaluation of ancient thought and letters. We must assume that there is a usable residue of valid knowledge in the half-real, dimly discerned, vaguely-tangible stuff that comes to us from antiquity.

Review of Joseph Ward Swain’s *The Ancient World*, 80-81

People are prone to expect any civilization described in the records as great and mighty to leave behind majestic ruins. The mighty piles of Egypt and Babylon have fooled us into thinking that the greatness or even the existence of a civilization is to be judged by its physical remains. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The greatness of a civilization consists in its institutions. . . . This has led even the experts to overlook the importance and sometimes the existence of heroic or epic worlds.

“Our Own People,” *CWHN* 5:413-14

By neglecting to consult the writings of the ancients, we miss the fact that in their trials and triumphs, individually and collectively, they had to undergo exactly the same trials that we do: the props of the plays, the technology and the fashions, wear out and are constantly being replaced, but the issues and the plot always remain the same.

“But What Kind of Work?” *CWHN* 9:275