

THE USES OF HISTORY.

An Address

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ON ITS

EIGHTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY,

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1889,

BY

THE REV. JOHN HALL, D.D.



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PROCEEDINGS.

AT the meeting of the NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, held in its Hall, on Thursday Evening, November 21, 1889, to celebrate the Eighty-fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Society :

The proceedings were opened with prayer by the Rev. THOMAS E. VERMILYE, D.D., Senior Minister of the Reformed (Dutch) Church.

The President made some remarks on the progress of the Society and the value of its collections.

The Anniversary Address was then delivered by the Rev. JOHN HALL, D.D., on "The Uses of History."

On its conclusion, Mr. EDWARD F. DE LANCEY submitted the following resolution, which was adopted unanimously :

Resolved, That the thanks of the Society be presented to the Reverend Doctor HALL for the eloquent and learned address which he has delivered this evening, and that he be requested to furnish a copy for publication.

A benediction was then pronounced by the Rev. WILLIAM R. HUNTINGTON, D.D., Rector of Grace Church.

The Society then adjourned.

Extracts from the Minutes :

ANDREW WARNER,
Recording Secretary.

THE USES OF HISTORY

IT is no small consolation, when one is called to a place for which he is conscious of being unfit, to be able to fall back on the fact that he did not seek it; that he was put into it by the kindness of friends, who may, accordingly, be expected to treat him leniently, and if they have to suffer a little, to say, in forbearing fairness, "Well, we have nobody to blame for it but ourselves." Of the New York Historical Society, of course, I have—in common with my fellow-citizens—heard and read much; but its pleasures and its advantages, absorbing and fixed duties put out of my reach. I am not insensible to the unmerited honor done me in the present opportunity to appear here; and I am assured that the writer of this paper—however it may be with others—will be a gainer from the call to give a little attention to the topic—*The Uses of History*.

When memory was given by the Creative hand as one of the powers of the mind, it was evidently meant that the past should have to do in the mental

experiences of the present. To the Infinite One, past, present, and future make one picture of perfect distinctness. The finite man, whose spirit had the image of the Infinite, falls immeasurably below this capacity; but there is still a lingering vestige of likeness in that we can learn and remember something of what is behind us, and in that we cannot help wondering, inquiring, hoping, regarding the future. The exercise that strengthens this original faculty—which reproduces the past, and places it beside the living present—is good in itself, provided we keep the power, so enlarged, at work on fruitful fields. In the careful analysis of the mental powers by Dr. Noah Porter we have sense-perception, and consciousness, making a first presentation of objects to the mind. Then we have the representative faculty acting (in part without the will), making a second presentation of the objects. But will-power comes in, and is employed in keeping represented to the mind what is desired, and so at once employing and strengthening it. Good history furnishes the material on which this representative power can work, exercising, in part, other faculties, and so far giving vigor, direction, and versatility to that which constitutes the man. For what is history? There is a most valuable—one might say, invaluable—department of literature, in which the make-up, the career, and the influences of individuals are portrayed, and

single lives stand out in their distinctness before a community, so that we seem to live, and toil, and suffer, or conquer, with them. I am ready to own the pleasure and the profit I have drawn from the fruitful field of biography, which is the history of individuals. There are volumes in which—as I linger over their pages—I seem to see, and hear, and feel again the touch of moral kings and conquerors, to live over again a portion of the past, and to get painted fresh and vivid elements in the picture of the illimitable future. But such books, though often valuable contributions to History, do not constitute it. It has to do with men in communities, with forces more or less organized. It is a compliment unconsciously paid to History, when it is taken as a word and applied to discussions upon Mammalia, Amphibia, Articulata, and Crustacea; but History has to deal with men, and in masses, not accidentally, but naturally grouped together. Individuals indeed sometimes, one might say often, stand out prominently, and are formative forces; but you cannot look at them without keeping under your eye the throngs, between whom and them action and reaction are more or less distinctly visible. Constantine the Great cannot be rightly estimated without a careful consideration of the condition, social, political, and religious, of the nations with which he had to do. When Professor Pasquale Villari would depict the man

who moved Italy, from Florence as a centre, in the end of the fifteenth century, he writes "Life and Times of Savonarola." On the other hand, we can not explain the conditions of things, throughout Christendom for centuries, without taking Constantine into account; nor can you get a just view of the sway of the Medicis, and the relations of France and Italy at that time, not to speak of great later movements, without some knowledge of Savonarola. An individual, however interesting personally, becomes "historical" only when he influences, directly or indirectly, the conditions of masses of his fellow-men, and affects their joint movements.

This distinction is not, probably, kept in mind by educators. History of the great monarchies and empires, for popular use, are generally divided up by the lives, and times of reigning, of the enthroned magnates. I can very well remember when I entered, at the mature age of ten, on the study of English History, each chapter began with a portrait of the sovereign; and I think most of us ignored the times, and thought mainly of the monarch. We knew when Henry II. was made master of Ireland: we never thought of all the causes or consequences. We could tell of Alfred the Great and his conflicts with the Danes; but the formative forces that he set to work in England, and the intellectual power that he was, personally—even though afflicted with what

some have thought to have been Paul's "thorn in the flesh"—these ideas did not get hold of our minds.

History, then, is the record of facts not as things done and done with, but as things making or marring, telling for good or ill, on organized masses of men, facts—not like pretty and interesting Koenig-Sees and Inter-Sees, but like the sources of the Rhine, or the Danube, which, though men may come and men may go, themselves go on forever, their direction indeed affected by circumstances outside, with which History has also to do.

Take another illustration of this same point—that the historian has to do with lives and facts, as they tell on communities and coming generations—in the case of Mohammed. That poor posthumous child of a heathen man, who claimed direct descent from Ishmael, who was an orphan at six, who kept sheep for a living, and came to think himself, in consequence, in the prophetic succession of Moses and David—that victim of constant headache and convulsions, has personally a wonderfully interesting history. But who can comprehend it who does not know something of the moral and religious condition of the times, and of the lands of the Orient? Why did not the Christian population hold out against the invader? Had it lost the strength of intelligent conviction? Had it ceased to be a divinely-moved

body, and become a compound of superstition and self-indulgence? And here another question comes up: Was there any judicial authority sending punishment in the line of the sin? For no man can, it seems to me, read history, uninspired History, without the suggestion of a power which—to use familiar language—“makes for righteousness,” and in so doing permits ambition, passion, and the concentrated forces of evil to express, and to execute, displeasure upon nations and upon generations that depart from it.

Here it is that Church History, which has all the features of civil history now emphasized—*i.e.*, the connection of men with movements, and the character and influence of organizations—here the ecclesiastical annals come in, and, more directly than in the department of civil history, connect movements and human experiences with a power above force, or law, or any earthly generalization. By its very constitution the human mind cannot stop with these. It must ask, who originated the force? who made the law? The free activity of man furnishes materials for the civil historian, and he may stop there if he will. The Church historian, by the very nature of the case, must rise higher, and go deeper. He has more to do than tell men that such and such things “happened.” He has to trace the moral elements, their influence for good or for evil, and he is forced

to look back to their revelation, and to see and show how the good and the evil are regarded and treated in the government of Him, who is Truth, Righteousness, Holiness in His own uncreated nature, and who makes Himself felt in human life, and seen in human history. Without being a lawyer, one can relish one of the most thoughtful of books—Maine's "Ancient Law," and none the less because of the fitting introduction by our own Professor Dwight. Themis, he shows, became in the later Greek pantheon, the goddess of Justice, but this is "a modern and much developed idea." The Themis of Homer is the assessor of Zeus. Sustained and regularly recurring action men could only explain by a personal agent. Wind blowing, sun rising and setting, earth bearing crops—all such were linked with personal agency. Zeus is not a law-maker, but a judge. But we have a light that Homer had not. We know of One who is the fountain, as He is the vindicator, of law. To Him the Church historian must constantly point in view of causes and effects, of wrong and judgment, and of merciful deliverance: "The Lord is our Judge; the Lord is our Lawgiver; the Lord is our King. He will save us."

Having thus outlined history as it is, we are prepared to raise the question of its uses—not indeed of all of them, but of such as we fittingly look at while

celebrating the eighty-fifth anniversary of this Historical Society.

An agreeable Scottish essayist has given a pleasant picture of what he calls the "parochial mind." It has always known just how things were done in its parish, and it always knew that they were done in the best way. It never knew how they were done in other parishes. Any variation from the methods of its own parish it regarded as obvious mistakes. Wise modification, alteration, or adaptation to new conditions it naturally disliked, and methods pursued elsewhere, if hinted at, were condemned at first sight: they were not the familiar, perfect, venerated methods pursued in its parish. Probably some of us have seen specimens of this parochial mind. It might be modified in time by local changes. Carry it into other places, let it have time to observe, weigh, compare, and allow for circumstances. Not perhaps in one lifetime, but at length, it may come to say: "We used to do thus and so, and I thought the course could not be changed for the better. But after living here a lifetime I admit that some improvements were possible." When, according to a history which does not tax the brain seriously, the Dutchman moved over from the rocks of Manhattan Island, where he could not drive piles for the foundations of his dwelling, as he used to do in Holland, and selected Communipaw, where the pile-driving

was possible, he unconsciously illustrated the solid, conservative, parochial mind.

But is there not a weakness corresponding to this, where the boundary line is not one of space but of time? Are we not tempted, now and then, to think our times unique, matchless, unparalleled? Do we not indulge a little self-complacency as a generation? Have we not magnified this nineteenth century at times, because we know it better than any other? We can point to triumphs, in certain lines, of which our forefathers were ignorant. They did not scatter gossip over the world by electricity, nor travel in vestibule-trains. But our forefathers, in comparing themselves with their precursors, felt just as we do, and sometimes talked exactly as we do. Let us look beyond the limits of our land and our century. Let us allow for all that we inherit, in germ, or in fruit, from our predecessors; let us comprehend the difficulties which they swept out of our way, and the facilities thus given to us, and we shall gain in modesty of estimate of our times. The tower of Eiffel is a very remarkable production, but it will be less remembered probably, and less conspicuous, in a thousand years, than is the "Great Pyramid" today. Sir J. W. Dawson, in his recent book, describes it as "a miracle of masonry in the construction of its internal passages and chambers, the accurate levelling and measurement of its sides, the perfection of its

form, and the beautiful fitting of its external casing." Kufu, or Cheops, is not so well known to-day as M. Eiffel, and he only built to the height of four hundred and eighty-two feet; but his monument stands, and is likely to survive modern iron-work.

Do we not make unconscious confessions of the truth that our age is, in essentials, like its predecessors and by no means perfect? Why study Plato? Why find models of eloquence in Demosthenes and Cicero? Or, coming down later, where do we search for models in art, in architecture, even to some extent in dress? Making all allowance for the childish folly that sometimes stamps a thing as necessarily superior because it is old, or because it comes from the ends of the earth, we must, if we study history candidly, deny ourselves, as a generation, the monopoly of genius and triumphant mastery over the forces of nature. On the way to Chicago, the other day, I said to a man on the other side of my dining-table, "We get out more comfortably than did the first settlers in Chicago." "Yes," said he, modestly, "it took me twenty-one days to go to it the first time." I respected him, and I did not mentally compliment myself as a traveller any more. And just so, if this lauded nineteenth century calmly confers with some of its predecessors, it will modify its estimate of itself.

So, in the next place, History helps us to connect

causes and effects. Mere sequence is, too often, the only element taken into account. The cock crew in the early dawn. Soon after the sun rose. Was it the crowing of the cock that brought out the sun? Or was the approach of the sun to the horizon the inspiration of the morning music? The illustration is familiar and suggests the point—the too easy contentment with the relations in time between event and event. Such a man made the times, we sometimes hastily conclude, when it would be more true to the truth of things to say that the times made the man.

The knowledge gained in this way can be, in certain conditions, eminently practical. Here are certain forces at work. They are credited with such and such results in the past; may we expect the same from them in the present? The accurate historian has to determine the exact relationship between the groups of facts. “Republicanism! Why, it was tried by English people under a man as great as Cromwell, and it went down. So it will do again.” So it has been, more or less formally, stated many times in the last century and a quarter. But let the historian tell us: Did its inherent weakness, or did some other cause, produce the downfall? What were the real causes why republics have, again and again, given place to monarchs more or less limited or absolute? Were they elements in-

herent in the free popular government, essential parts of it, or were they adventitious circumstances—parasites, that fastened themselves upon it and sucked out its life? The tree died—was it from failure in its own hold of the soil, or was it from the creeping ivy that stuck to it, climbed by it, at length shut out air and sun, and killed it, and then throve for a while on the dead stem and branches? Here it is that the historian has to aim at exactness and accuracy, and here it is that the reader also has to discriminate between accidents and mere coincidences on the one hand, and inherent and abiding forces on the other.

For, in the next place, History does good service in illustrating the working out of principles. “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.” This comes to us from high authority, and, rightly understood, it is a most suggestive generalization. It does not mean that new facts and new combinations are out of the question. It does mean that, objectively, natural laws and the phenomena that express them are abiding, and that, subjectively, the rational creatures that are working with, and through, them have the same distinctive features. It is suggestive that Seneca in his “*Epistles*,” Tacitus in his “*Annals*,” and “*Marcus Aurelius*,”

make statements quite as strong on the same line. In fact it is difficult to avoid the inference that Seneca had had the Hebrew axiom before his mind, so like to it are his thoughts and words.

All men of sense know the value of experience. A plausible project is outlined. A man is found who is trusted, and who can say: "I have gone through that, I have tried it." His opinion is worth much. Now, history gives the experience of ages, of communities, of races. It helps to the estimate of abstract propositions, and to the comprehension of practical principles. In all ages of which we know anything, there have been directors of their fellow-men, more or less disinterested, who claimed that they had their knowledge from the dead. Our English-speaking portion of this century has had more or less of this volunteered instruction—with what influence on our progress history will probably indicate. Now, nearly every intellectual, and even spiritual, fraud is a travesty of something genuine and good. There is a deep true sense in which we are to learn from the dead. The later we come in the progress of the race, the wider is our lesson-book. There is, according to an often quoted saying, a "permitted necromancy of the wise." To many spiritualism is a new thing; but divination by means of the dead is not new. To say nothing of its coarser form,

when omens were sought from the *post-mortem* examination of bodies, and that by the most exalted men of their time, the seeking of light from the recalled spirits of men is frequently alluded to by Justin, Clemens Romanus, and Tertullian. From the sixth century downward, this process of light-seeking had not much repute. We do not expect anything from it, but there is a real way in which we can interrogate the departed, question the centuries, and through the testimony of historians set light on present problems.

Here again, of course, we have to be sure of our History. Few brighter men have figured in this generation than Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, who once made a point about Puritanism, and backed it up by the statement, that by the laws of Connecticut it "was criminal for a mother to kiss her infant on the Sabbath-day." He cited as his authority Peters's "History of Connecticut," 1781, and Captain Marryatt's "Diary, Blue Code," of which the author had kindly given him a copy. He did not investigate the value of Peters's book. And yet it is not wonderful. A well-educated Connecticut lady gravely told me that the laws of that State once made it illegal for a man to kiss his wife on the holy day or on a fast day; and she sincerely believed it. I need not enlarge on the varieties, comic and tragic, of illustrations of this sort that might be compiled.

Anyone desiring to see through the specimen adduced can do it by a perusal of the quite interesting and instructive book on the "True Blue Laws of Connecticut and New Haven," by J. Hammond Trumbull, in which he will find the biography of the clerical historian, Dr. Peters, and abundant proof that Old England was not more enlightened on these nice points of casuistry—on which Connecticut *did* legislate—than her Colonial children. No more interesting and convincing illustration can be found of the principle that the historian has, first of all, to do with *facts*, and that he is to be measured, in a great degree, by his trustworthiness in that line, than these widely spread, and widely believed, caricatures on New England life, furnish. I read a little history in school and college on the other side of the ocean, and I am free to confess that, until I lived on this side, I knew nothing to the contrary of statements and magazine articles in the line of Bishop Wilberforce's declaration. We need to get facts, facts as they were. It is perhaps suggestive, that our painstaking German scholars call history *Geschichte*—the things that happened. We English-speaking people, according even to Macaulay, make it a compound of poetry and philosophy, and count *that* its ideal perfection ("Essay on Hallam's Constitutional History"). Dr. John De Witt, in applying the distinction to Church historians of the two kinds, describes

the English as, primarily, a *belles lettres* product, the product of the art of narrative; and he adduces Dean Milman as an illustration of it; while Neander stands, in his judgment, on the distinctive German line. The point we make is that History helps to a judgment upon the working out of ideas, sentiments, and principles good or bad, right or wrong; but that, in order to a just judgment, we must get the actual facts as they are, and not as they are grouped, twisted, and decorated by a poet, a sentimentalist, or a controversialist.

Hardly a distinct use from the foregoing, but almost another side of it, is the place that History can secure, incidentally, in the support of moral and kindred truth. In that volume which has shaped so largely our civilization, what a large portion is devoted to History! Moses, Joshua, Ezra, and others whose names are not emphasized, give us a multiplicity of details reaching far back and covering a wide area. Why should it be so in a work meant to promote the ethical and spiritual welfare of mankind? The answer that is obvious to all is: that facts are looked at and remembered when abstract statements are passed by or forgotten. The lessons of sacred biography are fitted for individuals, and those of national life for kingdoms and their rulers. But the point now to be touched is quite on another line. The writer of the Pentateuch goes into minute de-

tails of the march of the Israelites from Egypt, over a region, for obvious reasons, little traversed by tourists, and in which names, and even surface physical features have naturally changed in the many generations since Moses' time. But the British Ordnance Survey has brought the material appliances in its hand to bear on the questions raised, "by subjecting the rugged heights of the peninsula to the unreasoning, though logical, tests of the theodolite and land-chain, of altitude and azimuth compasses, of the photographic camera, and the unerring evidence of the pole star and the sun." What has been the result? Here is Sir J. W. Dawson's summary of it: (1) "The correspondence of the recorded route of the Israelites with the topography and geology of the country; (2) the site of the battle of Rephidim, and the mutiny of Moses and Jethro; (3) the Mountain of the Law, and the plain before it." What human mind will not be apt to reason in this way: Thirty centuries after Moses wrote his account of this long and complicated journey, with its many places with hard names and hard conditions, a body of ordnance surveyors went over the ground, with the history, and the many discussions it raised, in one hand, and their instruments in the other; and they verify Moses through and through. He told the truth, the literal truth in his history, geography, and physics. I cannot but be-

lieve that he tells the truth all through ; and I am prepared to trust him in all else that he has left on record." And then comes the appeal from the lips of a greater than Moses, made to descendants of the desert-wanderers, and applying to us all, " If ye believe Moses ye will also believe in me, for he wrote of me."

It would be easy to carry you over other parallel lines, and to bring out and illustrate other high purposes that History can serve, in holding up the unity of the race, the fixedness of great dominant principles, the continuity of great moral laws, and so teaching men—in communities and in races, by the record of experiments made on the largest scale, and in the most varied conditions—what they should aim at and love, and what they should turn from and abhor. The origin of communities great in numbers, like the Roman Empire, or great in influence, like Athens, with only its 400,000 people ; the wars of nations, the treaties of nations, the shifting boundaries of nations, the internal machinery of nations—all these, and many other classes of facts, gathered, described truly, and put in their right relations to one another, and leading up to the philosophy of history, and preparing the mind to explain in part the rise, the decline, and the fall of empires—these are the matters with which History deals, and in treating them holds up object-lessons

—the grandest and the most impressive—to the human race. There is something recorded of Washington—not so widely known as the incident of his hatchet, but quite as instructive. When the organization of the United States was being discussed, he drew up a list of all the most notable confederacies of states known to the world, that, by the study of the constitution and records of each, he might get light as to the best constitution for his own land, when it was passing from the thirteen Colonies into the United States. It was the practical assertion of the fact that the ages that are gone give us precedents, warnings, and positive instructions on the matters affecting common life and national welfare.

“Ah! but,” says someone, “I am not a leader of men, not a formative force; I am not making history; I am not even a politician. Of what practical use is all this to me?” This is the last point to be touched, and it can be treated concisely. The human mind is not a box of tools, like that which the carpenter carries about, each separate from the rest, and with its own distinct work. The human mind is a unit—a living organism, with various powers, now remembering, now judging, now feeling, now admiring, now making new combinations. It has memory, imagination, judgment, emotions, variously described by the students of metaphysics. You cannot keep one power at work without stimulating and, in some

degree, exercising the rest. Recall to me a heroic deed: my admiration is roused. Paint a horrid crime: indignation is called out. Describe a delicate critical situation, where wisdom is needed: the judgment is exercised. And all this is good for the mind, promotive of its health and its activity, and a check on any tendency to indolence or torpor. Does it not follow that History may be very useful to you, even though you have no ambition to administer Brazil, or even to be governor of your own State? Fiction is artificial biography, or history. How many realize its charms! Truth—historic truth—is, if not stranger, purer and better, than fiction, and makes good, nutritious, and, to a healthy mind, not insipid, but savory, pabulum.

Or, to put it in another form, if Bacon's division of knowledge or learning be correct—namely, History dealing with the memory, philosophy with the understanding, and poetry exercising the imagination, you have a province for History in the ordinary development of your mind. It supplies the facts to which philosophy has to turn, and on which the understanding works. It presents the sides of men and of things with which fancy occupies itself. Homer dealt with the Trojan war; Virgil depicted the career of Æneas; Shakespeare's historical plays are not the least attractive of his works. So, if you look no higher than mental

health and culture, history has a place for you, and will aid in the several forms of intellectual activity. But one would safely, I think, go farther than Bacon. There is a field in which another mental power—call it “conscience,” call it “moral sense”—has to work, and History is constantly bringing to it what will exercise and employ it. The tenderness of pity, the unselfishness of benevolence, the vigor of just sentiment, the admiration of goodness, the reverence of the divine as it pervades all like an atmosphere—these inner movements are called out by the revelations given in the annals of the past. They lead to the healthy exercise of these constituents of our being, and in responding aright we become wiser, deeper, better, and—I speak it reverently—we come into closer sympathy with Him who notes the fall of a sparrow, and who is from Everlasting to Everlasting.