New Lamps for Old in History[1]

By ALLAN NEVINS

Columbia University

ONE curious thing about history, as Guedalla said, is that it really happened. Another curious fact about history is that while it was happening, nobody really understood its meaning.

John Fiske, pausing one day in his young manhood before the window of Little, Brown in Boston, saw a volume within entitled "Pioneers of France in the New World" and noted that its author was identified as the man who had written "The Conspiracy of Pontiac." He remembered that when that earlier volume appeared, he had wondered whether Pontiac was a barbarous chieftain of medieval Europe. He recalled also that some teacher at Harvard had once expressed the view that the French and Indian War was a dull squabble of no real significance to students of history. Passing on, Fiske wondered why anyone should write about French pioneers in America. He lived to pen an essay on Francis Parkman which not only placed that author at the head of American historians (where he yet stands) but recognized that the epic significance of the struggle of Britain and France for the mastery of North America — a significance which Parkman had first expounded — could hardly be overstated. An interpretation of our continental history which nowadays we assume no child could miss had been beyond the grasp of the brilliant young John Fiske in the 1860's.

This idea that history can ever be so well written that it does not need rewriting can be held only by those foolish people who think that history can ever ascertain exact truth. It cannot. We can go further than the assertion of that truism: we can say, "Fortunate for history that it cannot ascertain exact truth!" If history were a photograph of the past it would be flat and uninspiring. Happily, it is a painting; and like all works of art, it fails of the highest truth unless imagination and ideas are mixed with the paints. A hundred photographs of London Bridge look just alike and convey altogether a very slight percentage of the truth, but Turner's Thames and Whistler's Thames, though utterly different, both convey the river with a deeper truth.

[1] Address at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Dearborn, Michigan, September 14, 1953.

All parts of our history are always being rewritten; no segment of it, from 1492 to 1952, is not now in need of vigorous rewriting. Whenever an expert applies himself to the scrutiny of a special area, he at once sounds a lusty call for more searching exploration of the terrain. Douglas Freeman, carrying Washington through the Revolution, agreed with Bernard Knollenberg, writing a history of that war, that every part of the Revolutionary struggle needs the most searching re-examination and the boldest reinterpretation. Merrill Jensen states in the preface to his study of the Confederation that the entire period 1783-89 demands a study that will embrace every State and every act of Congress. There are men who believe that the historical study of the Civil War period has but just begun — and they are right. Margaret Leech, just completing a study of the McKinley administration, is convinced that a hundred research workers should be set to exploration of the dark nooks and secret crannies of the time.

"In vain the sage, with retrospective eye," writes Pope, "would from the apparent what conclude the why." The three main reasons why history constantly needs reinterpretation include something more than the impossibility of ever learning all the truth about all the motives and actions of the past.

The chief of the three reasons is the need of every generation for a reinterpretation to suit its own preconceptions, ideas, and outlook. Every era has its own climate of opinion. It thinks it knows more than the preceding era; it thinks it takes a wider view of the universe. Every era, too, is affected by cataclysmic events which shift its point of view: the French Revolution, the Metternichian reaction, the movement for national unification in Italy, the United States, and Germany, the apogee of Manchester liberalism, and so on down to the multiple crisis of our atomic age. We see the past through a prism which glows and sparkles as new lights catch its facets. Much of the rewriting of history is a readjustment to this prism. George Bancroft's spectrum was outmoded a few years after his laborious "last revision"; Charles A. Beard's begins to be outworn today, for we possess what Beard would have called a new frame of reference.

As a second reason, new tools of superior penetrative power are from time to time installed in the toolshed of even our rather unprogressive race of historians. Our council for research in the social sciences (it should be studies) justly emphasizes the value of overlapping disciplines. Much could be said for the contention that the best historians nowadays are prepared in some other field than

that of history. Thus Wesley Clair Mitchell, the historian of the greenbacks, of business cycles, and of the ebb and flow of economic activity, whose National Bureau of Economic Research inspired so much fruitful historical writing, was trained as an economist. (He also was trained by John Dewey, who gave courses under all sorts of titles, but "every one of them dealt with the same subject — how we think.") Beard was trained as a political scientist. Parrington was trained as a student of literature. Carl Becker was trained in European history but wrote in the American field. James Henry Breasted was first trained in theology, a fact which stood him in good stead when this pioneer of Egyptology in America began to trace the development of conscience and religion in the ancient East. Not one historian in fifty knows as much as he should of the tool called statistics, or of psychology, or of economic geography, or of ecology. The kinship between Halford J. Mackinder, the geographer, and Frederick J. Turner, the historian, in loosing seminal ideas showed what the geographer could learn from history and the historian from geography.

But the third great reason why history is rewritten is simply because the constant discovery of new materials necessitates a recasting of our view of the past. We might think that this would one day cease, but it never does. Everyone who has laboriously mapped any historical subject knows how steadily the dust of new facts falls upon that map, blurring some lines and defining new ones. Happy are those who live to rewrite their books, as even Parkman rewrote one of his — "LaSalle and the Great West." One would have said that all the materials for a history of the Revolution had been assembled in print by the innumerable agencies, local, State and national, devoted to that effort, but Freeman assures us that the great depositories like the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, and the main State libraries, bulge with unstudied documents. One would have said that all the material for the history of the Confederate War Office had been studied and restudied; but, behold: the diary of the third officer of that department, Kean, is suddenly deposited in the University of Virginia, and we find a complete reassessment of the Southern military administration possible.

Thus the idea that history is photography is set at naught. It is art; it constantly requires a new mixture of pigments, new points of view, new manipulation of light and shade; and as an art it presents an endless challenge to the writer who perceives that the highest truth of history will always transcend a statement of fact; that in-

deed, historical fact is but a foundation for the truth won by imagination and intellectual power.

The best history is always interpretive, but this does not mean that the best history is consciously or ostentatiously interpretive. The work of the historical masters, from Thucydides to Trevelyan, illustrates the fact that interpretation is most effective when implicit rather than explicit. The true historical attitude is a search for truth about a situation, force, or event — the War of 1812, the abolitionist impulse, Pearl Harbor — which slowly, painfully, accurately, dredges up an unforeseen interpretation. That is, history properly operates by the inductive, not the deductive, method. The merit of an Olympian historian like Parkman is that he says, in effect: "Let us collect and collate all the relevant facts, and find what conclusions emerge from their impartial analysis." The cardinal weakness of a controversial historian like Beard is that he repeatedly gave the impression — perhaps falsely — of having said to himself: "Let us take this provocative theory of the fact, and see how impressive an array of facts we can collect in its support." Ideas in history, that is, should be applied in subordination to the ascertainment of all the facts, and not in control of the ascertainment of one picked body of facts. Hence it is that nothing could be more absurd than to try to predict in advance the interpretations to be applied to our history by future writers — who will certainly go their own way. But we may legitimately make some guesses as to the general drift of some of the new interpretations lying ahead of us.

As American history lengthens and the past falls into longer perspective, we tend not so much to discard major interpretations entirely as to place new ones beside them; not so much to substitute one simple synthesis for another as to embrace old monistic views in a new and complex synthesis. Let us take a sweeping view of the first century of our national history, 1775-1875. In that tremendously variegated and baffling sea of events, forces, personalities, tendencies, and fortuities, let us assume that three great dominant developments lift themselves above all others.

These three — let us assume — are the establishment of American independence, political, economic, and finally cultural, from Europe; the westward movement for the conquest and development of the continent; and the abolition of slavery and a Southern way of life in a civil war which vindicated national unity. Some students, to be sure, would select other elements in our historical fabric, but three special students out of five and nine lay readers out of ten would, I believe, choose these. Now it is evident to a cursory view

that each of the three lent itself at first to a simple monistic interpretation, expounded in the work even of subtle historians, and that within one or two generations this simple view of the past was replaced by a dual or multiple interpretation. What had been a flat telescopic image was given depth and reality by a stereopticon lens.

The Revolution seemed to our primitive historians, down to and including George Bancroft, simply a political upheaval; richly interesting as it was, it was the epic story of the establishment of political liberty in a new nation in a new world, as a guiding torch to all mankind. Before long, however, historians doubled the lens. They showed that the Revolution was a social no less than a political convulsion; that the internal transformation of America was quite as significant as the external; that a broad sequence of changes was set in motion, or rather accelerated, which rolled inexorably on through the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian eras. Some of this truth was visible to that early historian Richard Hildreth, who was as realistic as he was conservative; more of it to Moses Coit Tyler and John Bach McMaster; and all of it to a later school headed by J. Franklin Jameson, Parrington, and others.

The westward movement and the taming of the continent were first treated in terms of the transforming impact of man on nature; the expulsion of the Indian and wild beast, the hewing out of pioneer farms, the building of roads, and the ultimate planting of school and factory where the fur trader had trod. Then arose the eminent historian who perceived an equally rich meaning in the impact of nature, the wilderness, upon man; who explained how the frontier converted the European into an American, how it transformed men of caste-ridden minds into belligerently democratic individualists, how it manufactured nationalists out of separatists, and how, in short, it altered the whole pattern of thought, emotion, and conduct. This binocular view of the westward march was infinitely more interesting and arresting than the old monocular view. Parkman, Justin Winsor, Reuben Gold Thwaites, Edward Eggleston, Theodore Roosevelt, H. H. Bancroft, had been roughly accurate in their delineation of the westward thrust, but their interpretation had lacked depth and distinctness. When Turner substituted his perceptive and penetrating image of the frontier for this flat photograph, it flashed into life, color, and meaning; and behind Turner came a new body of writers who saw with his eyes.

To Hermann Von Holst the abolition of slavery seemed to mark the climax of 70 years of national life. America, to this German of Lithuanian birth, this hater of Russian and Prussian tyrannies, was

the home of freedom and democracy; and the development and exemplification of these two inestimable gifts had been its principal mission in the world. But Liberty in America had suffered from a cancerous social institution — slavery, — which sadly impaired her usefulness in the sisterhood of nations and threatened her very life. This interpretation possessed more validity than some recent writers have been willing to allow; indeed, within limits it was entirely valid. But it was too obvious, and it left too many historical phenomena of the period unexplained. The antagonism of North and South by 1860 transcended slavery, even though the conflict over slavery was certainly its central element. The simple monistic view of our great upheaval in the middle of the nineteenth century had to be amplified.

Hence arose the interpretation of that upheaval as one which included conflicts of economic interest, of philosophies of life, and of ingrained prejudice; a conflict between the eighteenth-century and the nineteenth-century mind; a conflict between the nascent industrialism of the North and the entrenched agrarianism of the South. Such an interpretation had been adumbrated by Southern politicians and publicists like Yancey during the war; it was stated with emphasis by a Southern historian, Percy A. Greg, soon after Appomattox. It had the merit of both widening and deepening the canvas. It demonstrated the links which joined Thaddeus Stevens, the anti-slavery covenanter, with Thad Stevens, the ironmaster, and Thad Stevens, the high-tariff legislator. If used as a constructive interpretation and not as a cloak for our political shortcomings and errors or as a means of glozing over the hideous blot of slavery, it had immeasurable value.

So much for three great developments in American history: the severance from Europe, the conquest and settling of the continent, and the elimination of slavery and the State rights doctrine as retarding agencies in our national growth. The character of a fourth great development, accomplished and sealed in the last 50 years of our national life, can hardly be missed. On that new phase of our history, too, general agreement will perhaps be found. We have become first a great world power, and then the great world power. We have moved first into the open arena of world affairs, and then into the very center of that arena. We now view our national past from the vantage point of this new turn and with the changed perspective which it gives us.

Just as John Fiske saw our history from 1607 to 1789 as an evolutionary preparation for the gift to the world of practical de-

mocracy and the Anglo-American principle of self-government in the shape of our Constitution and Federal system, just as Von Holst saw the whole period from 1776 to 1861 as a preparation for the vindication of human liberty and national unity, so now we have historians who view our whole national life as an unconscious preparation for the time when we should become Protector of the Faith for all democratic peoples; when, having turned away from Western European affairs until we gained first place among the nations, we returned to them as the pivot and support of Western European civilization. These writers regard American history not in terms of the Western continent but in terms of an Atlantic community. We find, indeed, that we never left that community; that the Seven Years War was our first world war, the Revolution our second; that we have but awakened to our consciousness of a global role. And when these historians write of our national future, they speak not of short-term objects, but of what Lincoln called "man's vast future."

This tremendous change of the past 40 or 50 years — this emergence of America to the leadership of the Western World — will undoubtedly affect our children's children, and the long generations to come, in the most sweeping way. It will loom up, in time to come, as tremendously as the great changes which preceded it — as the Revolution, internal and external, the American conquest of the frontier and the frontier's conquest of the American, the death of slavery, and the birth of machine industry. But the full significance of this development will not become evident until it, too, is given the dual or multiple interpretation that historians gave these older developments. We shall not understand its essential character until all the accompanying phenomena, social, economic, and intellectual, have been analyzed, and some mind as electric as Parrington's and as penetrating as Turner's has pierced nearer its heart. What then will be its significance? That is a question we cannot answer; it is for the oncoming generation of historians.

My own guess is that this great development by which America has been projected into world leadership, with all the exhilarations and perils, the opportunities and costs of that position, will in some fashion be connected, by future interpreters, with the advent of an age of mass action, mass production, and mass psychology in American life. From being one of the most unorganized, the most invertebrate of nations, in 1860, we have grown into the most powerfully and efficiently organized people on the globe. Our population of 155,000,000 disposes of its resources through such mass combina-

tions, political, social, and economic, as mankind never saw before. Our thinking in 1865 was still individual thinking; today it is largely mass thinking, shaped and colored by mass media of unparalleled and sometimes dismaying potency — press, radio, television, cinema. No one can go to what were recently primitive frontier communities in America — say Texas and California — without being struck, and a little appalled, by the complexity and efficiency with which they have organized their life. It was our mass production which won the two last world wars; it is our genius for making big organizations work which has built the means for saving Western democracy since the latest world war. Our national outlook, once that of the individualistic pioneer, has become a social outlook. Without this pervasive internal change, our new position in the world would have been impossible.

The striking shift in our character and our world position in the last half century of course has some direct results, already visible, in our interpretation of history. We are evincing a greater militancy in asserting the virtues of our political and social system. The apologetic attitude of the years of the Great Depression is gone. We can henceforth be more confident and more energetic in asserting that our way of life, called decadent by our enemies, has proved itself historically to be freer, more flexible, and more humane than any other in history. We can be as emphatic and frank as ever in describing our past weaknesses, from slavery to slums, but we shall insist more rigorously on the fundamental healthiness of our system and on its proved ability to mend its defects and give us a constantly self-regenerating society.

We shall also evince, I think, a tendency to insist more emphatically on the fundamental unity of the United States with Western Europe and the various other nations sprung from Western Europe. All kinds of Western institutions and virtues now find their principal stronghold in the United States. The literature written in the English tongue increasingly has its main center of vitality in America, a fact well recognized by the London *Times* Literary Supplement. The Roman Catholic Church, like the Protestant churches, finds its chief springs of wealth and power in the United States. The Atlantic Community, as many publicists term it, has taken the place of the former division between Europe and the Americas. Oldtime quarrels between America and Western Europe have lost a great part of the significance which was once attached to them. What does the War of 1812 count for, compared with the maintenance and growth of the political, social, and cultural ties that

have made the English-speaking nations so nearly a unity? The nationalistic view of our history will increasingly be replaced by the international view, treating America as part of a great historic civilization with the Atlantic its center, as the Mediterranean was the center of the ancient world; with the tides of population, power, and influence first moving from Europe to America, and then beginning to flow in the opposite direction.

We may look forward also to a more appreciative attitude toward our material strength and to a more scientific treatment of the factors which have created this material power. In the past our historians were apologetic about our love of the dollar, our race to wealth, our interest in material objects; they deprecated our worship of size and deplored our boastfulness about steel tonnage, grain production, and output of machinery. Clio, with her tradition of devotion to moral values, was scornful of any others. Our writers in general — for the historians but followed the poets, the novelists, and the dramatists — intimated that America had grown too fast, too coarsely, too muscularly; they exalted the rural virtues as against industrial might, the rarefied air of the study as against the smoky atmosphere of the mill.

Without denying that many accompaniments of our swift industrialization were unhappy, we can now assert that this historical attitude was erroneous. The nation grew none too fast. We can see today that all its wealth, all its strength, were needed to meet a succession of world crises — and we still dwell in a crisis era. Had we applied restrictions to keep our economy small, tame, and timid, we would have lost the First World War. Had the United States not possessed the mightiest oil industry, the greatest steel industry, the largest automotive factories, the most efficient machine-tool industry, the best technological schools, and the most ingenious working force in the world, we would indubitably have lost the Second World War. Were we significantly weaker today in technical skills, in great mills and factories, and the scientific knowledge which gave us priority with the atomic bomb and hydrogen bomb, all Western Europe would be cowering — we ourselves would perhaps be cowering — before the knout held by the Kremlin. The architects of our material growth — the men like Whitney, McCormick, Westinghouse, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Hill, and Ford — will yet stand forth in their true stature as builders of a strength which civilization found indispensable. As that realization spreads, industrial archives like that created in Dearborn by the vision of the Ford Motor Company will take their place as equal in importance to the

political and cultural archives so long indispensable to students of our past.

It will yet be realized that the industrial revolution in the United States came none too soon and none too fast; and that the ensuing mass-production revolution, as yet so little understood by Americans, was not born a day too early. That is a fact which may well be stated in this birthplace of mass production — Detroit. It is a fact well appreciated in Manchester and London, in Paris and Berlin, and in Moscow. We shall also come to realize that the turmoil and human suffering which inescapably accompanied the industrial revolution and the mass-production revolution were not after all a tremendous price to pay for their benefits. The price was smaller in the United States than in foreign lands. The industrial revolution cost less in human travail here than it did in England, where it first came to birth; less than in Germany or Japan; far less than it is costing in Russia. Here is a wide field for the rewriting of American history and for the re-education of the American people, a field in which all archivists may contribute their due share.

Our material might, to be sure, is valuable only as it supports and carries to victory great moral ideas, only as it buttresses a civilization in which spiritual forces are predominant. But the fundamental difference between the democratic world and the totalitarian world lies precisely in the superior position which we give to moral and spiritual values. It is we, not our enemies, who have the right to talk about what Lincoln called man's vast future, for we really value men as individual souls. Behind our dreams of man's vast future, we mobilize an unconquerable strength. In time, when future historians look back on this period, which to us is so full of struggle, sacrifice, and anxious uncertainty, they will perhaps give it an interpretation of exalted character. They may say: "The era in which the United States, summoning all its strength, led democracy in winning the First World War, the Second World War, and the ensuing struggle against the Communist tyranny, was one of the great eras of history. It stands invested with all the radiance of the Periclean era, the Elizabethan era, and the era of Pitt and the long struggle against Napoleon."