THE REINTERPRETATION OF HISTORY*

I have been asked to set the ball rolling as it were, i.e. to give a general introduction to the more topical papers which are to follow. What I have to offer is no more than a few brief, if not perfunctory, remarks on the general problem of reinterpretation in history.

There is no need to remind you that the term "history" has at least three meanings, two of which are germane to our discussion this morning. History can either denote the actual course of events in the past, or it can signify the historian's account of those events. Clearly I have two distinct things in mind when I speak of the history of South Africa and when I speak of Walker's History of South Africa. The one refers to the actual events, the other to Walker's account of them. Authoritative history (in the second sence) is history which accords most closely to the actual past. But the connection between the two is, I fear, often tenuous, if not non-existent. Yet there *can* be no "true" history because we can never know whether it is true. True history is a contradiction in terms. It is easy enough to say *that* the Great Trek occurred (and even that term is, significantly enough, of much later date), it is impossible to say *why* the Great Trek happened.

It is of history in the latter sense, i.e. of history as an account, or, if you like, a reconstruction of past events that we shall be speaking this morning. For that is interpretation. History cannot be a photographic reproduction of the past; it is at best — and at its best — an imaginative reconstruction of the past. The historical imagination (which is something different from the poetical imagination) is being brought to bear on the incomplete and scattered fragments or traces which the past has left.

All history then is interpretation, and all new history is, inevitably, reinterpretation. So that the reinterpretation of history is after all no problem at all. It is the normal and natural principle of growth in historical scholarship. But perhaps a few thoughts on its nature and its implications will not be out of place.

I have said that true history is impossible. It is impossible because, first, our knowledge of the past is incomplete, secondly because our understanding of the past is inadequate, and thirdly because our view of the past is conditioned by our own temperament, environment and age, in short by what is known as subjective factors. And these are the three levels on which reinterpretation proceeds.

* Hieronder volg vier referate wat op 23 November 1963 in Pretoria gelewer is tydens die tweede byeenkoms kan KLEIO, die studiegroep ter bevordering van geskiedenisonderrig in ons skole. Die simposium het as onderwerp gehad *The Reinterpretation of South African History and the School Text-book.* Dit word veral onder die aandag van geskiedenisonderwysers gebring, maar origens dek die referate so 'n wye veld dat dit ook die aandag van die gewone leser verdien.

There is then, first, the purely quantitative accumulation of facts. Our reconstruction of the past is necessarily incomplete if it is based on incomplete evidence. A historian describing the events of a particular period before, say, the archives for that period have been made accessible, will not be able to give as complete a picture of that period as a subsequent historian who has free access to such material. Much of so-called historical research is always devoted to the ferreting out of fresh data which may (but need not) lead to an amplification of our knowledge of the past. Not only archival i.e. Official Material but private papers, a long-forgotten diary e.g., a letter-book, even an account-book, may shed fresh light on the past. Hancock's recent biography of General Smuts has revealed the wealth of untapped material of this nature which has added to our knowledge of the man and his age. And what is true of so relatively recent a period applies, though probably to a lesser degree, to even more remote ages and climes. And it is here that the so-called auxiliary and related sciences have time and again come to our rescue. Archaeological excavations are a case in point. To this very day the shifting sands of the Near East are a veritable mine of information on the early history of man in the cradle of our Western civilization.

The finding of fresh evidence on the past can add to our knowledge in two ways. It can either support and confirm, or it can invalidate accepted notions about a particular period of past history. In the former sense it confirms our interpretation; in the latter it may call for an entirely new interpretation, i.e. a reinterpretation of the past.

Though it is, as I have suggested, by no means precluded, the chances of reinterpretation on these grounds are becoming increasingly improbable. There are few, if any, periods of the history of the Western world at least, which hold promise of fresh discoveries. I do not think e.g. that there is much hope of unearthing a diary of some Voortrekker leader, to say nothing of a ship's log of the 16th century. The indefatigable labours of generations of historians and antiquarians have made it very improbable that any significant traces of man's past, or at least his written past, remain to be uncovered.

But for that very reason, if for no other, the second cause or occasion for reinterpretation assumes greater importance. History proceeds from the working of the historical imagination (and I use the word in its widest sense) upon a given set of facts. Of the complicated technical and intellectual processes involved in this activity, ranging from criticism to interpretation and exposition, I do not wish to speak. But clearly an activity which ranges from the dispassionate investigation of sources to the often not so dispassionate literary presentation of findings based on that investigation provides unlimited possibilities of divergent opinions. Virtually all human faculties are brought to bear, the exercise of even one of which cannot lead to the same issue in any two individuals. We can say what we like, but the interpretation of the facts of history — as

of daily life — is an eminently personal matter and depends so much upon a person's disposition, training and general aptitude that its outcome must necessarily differ from one person to another. If contemporaries did not agree on the causes and nature of the French Revolution, what possibility is there of their posterity reaching agreement?

Which has brought us imperceptibly to the third, perhaps the most important kind of reinterpretation. If history is interpretation, it is the present interpreting the past, not only by its own lights but also by its own needs and desires, its own view of the present and its own hope of the future. Objective history is impossible, not only because of our personal inclinations which are projected into the past (I may have an instinctive liking for Napoleon because his portrait reminds me of some favourite uncle) but also because we cannot escape the influence of the age in which we live. All history, it has been said, is contemporary history. Every age writes its own history because its history must accord to its own, often unconscious, conceptions, needs and aspirations. A single example will suffice. German historians are at present engaged in a somewhat painful reassessment of their past because they have discovered that the traditional view of their past is not only unable to explain the two catastrophes which have befallen them but may even have contributed to them. Here in South Africa we are I think coming to a more detached view of the so-called Anglo-Boer struggle of the 19th and early 20th centuries, not because we are unaware of its existence, but because its topicality has been obscured by more urgent problems which make its perpetuation an anachronism, if not a luxury. If I may coin a phrase I would say that all history is topical history. It is not that the past changes but that it assumes new meanings to an ever-changing present. We Afrikaners are coming to think that British Imperialism was perhaps not such a bad thing after all, and hidebound jingoes are beginning to wonder how good it really was. We can ignore the past, we cannot escape the present. And it is the present which determines our view of the past.

Let us go a step further. All historical writing is pragmatic, even if history is not. We are told that history teaches us no lessons; historians certainly do. But if history does not instruct, I can see no point in it. I can see no point in the laborious accumulation of facts and the meticulous examination of those facts in order to determine their validity and to extract from them some account of the past, if that account is not to be put to some use other than the edification of an esoteric circle of fellow-antiquarians. Philosophy is sterile if it does not lead to a philosophy of life — or rather of living; the splitting of the atom surely is of no value if it cannot be used for some constructive or destructive purpose. How then can we expect the study and writing of history to have no educational purpose or effect? History cannot teach by example but it can teach by analogy. If we cannot match the achievements of our forefathers, we

may avoid their errors. Perhaps Bacon had a too optimistic view of human nature when he said that history makes men wise; but at least it should make them humble and tolerant.

It has been said that history has lost its appeal, that people are no longer interested in their past. This may be true, yet I am inclined to wonder whether we are not confusing the two kinds of history I have spoken of — whether it may not be true that people have lost interest not in their past but in the accounts of their past which historians are dishing up to them. Gibbon, Macaulay, Motley, Prescott were best-sellers not because they wrote history but because they wrote history well. I know that this is a very one-sided explanation, that habits and tastes and fashions have changed. Yet I think it equally true that historians have become so obsessed by the importance of collecting and testing their material that they forget the importance of the form it is ultimately to take. The stigma attached to popular history and to the popularizer of history will disappear if we apply "popular" to the presentation and not to the investigation.

But I have been digressing — and I must conclude. I have said that history is constantly being rewritten and reinterpreted because new facts are brought to light — because a new approach leads to a review and revision of accepted notions about the past (think e.g. of the influence of Marx on the writing of history) — or because the history which is being written — or taught — no longer accords with the demands of the age in which it is written and taught.

Now where does the school text-book come into all this? I think it does in two ways. Clearly we cannot expect the writer of a school text-book to undertake that basic research which will lead to a personal reinterpretation of vast stretches of the world's past. But he can certainly be expected to take cognizance of and to incorporate into his own exposition the findings of those doing research on limited sectors of the past. The text-book must be a distillation of the fruits and findings of the most recent research on the topics it covers. This may suggest limited editions which can regularly be revised; it certainly does suggest that the writer of the text-book must be and must remain a student. There are, I fear, in all countries text-books which are so dated (often unwittingly) that even their dates are sometimes wrong. I well remember how long it took the discovery (it was a major discovery) that the Cape was discovered in 1488 and not in 1486 to penetrate the hide-bound South African text-books.

But that is a minor failing. The sins of omission are always less serious than the sins of commission. If the writer of academic history has a relatively small and a critical audience, the writer of school history has a very large and uncritical one. He presents to persons at the most receptive and impressionable stage of their lives a view of the past which must inevitably determine their view of the present and shape their actions

in the future. All history, I have said, instructs. It often does this unwittingly; school history sometimes does it deliberately. We all know about the perverted, falsified and dangerous views which in other countries have been, and still are, disseminated by means of the writing and teaching of history. I do not think there is much danger of that happening here. But all history is written with a purpose — and that purpose is the inculcation and the perpetuation of a view and a way of life.

Wedgwood writes: "If we believe ourselves to be a great democratic nation, if we believe in a broadening tradition of liberty, we believe it to a great extent because Macaulay wrote history in a manner which conquered generations of readers and filtered through text-books into the schools to become part of the common conviction of a whole people."

History text-books teach more than the facts of history. What else must they teach? The other speakers this morning will, I presume, come down to brass tacks, but in general terms I think it should teach two things. It should teach a way of looking at things and at life, and it should teach a way of life which accords with the demands of the age in which we live. Historians should not be too obsessed with the demands of the past to be deaf to the more urgent calls of the present. I honestly believe that in this Republic of ours we have entered a new era and that we have to prepare for full participation in it. We cannot build a better future by perpetuating the misunderstandings and the errors of the past. We must learn and we must teach mutual understanding not suspicion, pride not arrogance, love not hate, faith not despair.

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