

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Function of History A Philosophe View

Richard M. Saunders

Volume 34, numéro 1, 1955

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300373ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300373ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Saunders, R. M. (1955). The Function of History: A Philosophe View. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 34(1), 33–41.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300373ar>

THE FUNCTION OF HISTORY A Philosophie View

RICHARD M. SAUNDERS
University of Toronto

OF WHAT use is the study of history, of learning about the past? Questions these as old as man, asked and answered in the earliest records of man's thought, pondered in every subsequent age, today as in the Age of Enlightenment whose thinking bottoms so much of our own. The *philosophes* of that Age of Reason had answers for these questions as they had for most others. What use then did they find for teaching and studying history? Since the *philosophes* did not initiate the discussion, and needs must come upon the stage when it was well under way, it will be important to ascertain prevailing views on the matter at the dawn of the Enlightenment.

In France these appear most distinctly in the writings of two bishops, Bossuet and Fénelon, each of whom as tutor to a royal prince was required to draw up a suitable programme of studies. Both men gave history a high place. Bossuet in the preface of his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, an historical work first written as a text for the Dauphin, asserts in a forthright manner his conviction concerning the value of learning history, a subject which he regarded as essential to the training of an heir to the throne.

Even if history should be useless to other men it would be necessary to require princes to read it. There is no better way of showing them what [men's] passions and interests, the times and the conjuncture [of events], good and bad counsels, can do. Histories are composed only of actions which concern them, and seem entirely to be made for their use. If they need experience to acquire the prudence that makes for good rule, there is nothing more useful to their instruction than to join their everyday experiences to the examples of past centuries. Instead of learning to assess dangerous events only at the expense of their subjects and of their own glory, as ordinarily they do, through the help of history they can form their judgment on past events without hazarding anything.¹

When Bossuet made a report to Pope Innocent XI on the training of the Dauphin he took pains to point out that very special attention was being given to the study of history, since history is "the teacher of human living and of politics", and the Prince might be expected to learn from this subject the fit way of "conducting his affairs." To that end then, Bossuet informs the Pope, "We have noted the national habits, good and bad, the ancient customs, the fundamental laws, great changes and their causes, the secret of councils, unexpected events." And in order that the Prince might get used to such matters, and be prepared for anything, "the faults of Kings and the calamities resulting therefrom" have been indicated. No less so has "the faith" which the Kings of France "have preserved during the great stretch of time from Clovis to our own days, their constancy in defending the Catholic religion, and, all told, the profound respect which they have

¹ J.-B. Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle, Oeuvres*, (43 vols., Versailles, 1818), XXXV, 3-4.

always held for the Holy See, whose most submissive children they have gloried in being." From all the French kings examples of life and conduct have been drawn but Saint Louis alone has been held up as "the model of a perfect King", as "a perfect model of how to live, an excellent teacher of how to rule, and an assured intercessor before God." ²

In the next generation Archbishop Fénelon, faced with a similar problem, the education of an heir to the throne of France, adopted a similar view on the value of the study of history for the training of princes. Hence he made history one of the most important subjects in the curriculum which he prepared for the Duc de Bourgogne; and made it, as Bossuet before him, a vehicle of models of good rule and good living before his pupil, of teaching loyalty to France, to the Church, to God.

Across the channel in England, at the same time, John Locke, soon to be revered as the father-philosopher of the Enlightenment, was also meditating matters of education. Considering the place of history he concluded that this study for its own sake, or for mere amusement, was entirely useless. "For," says he, "the stories of Alexander and Caesar, no farther than they instruct us in the art of living well, and furnish us with observations of wisdom and prudence, are not one jot to be preferred to the history of Robin Hood" History may be "very useful, and very instructive of human life", but, avows Locke, "if it be studied only for the reputation of being an historian, it is a very empty thing; and he that can tell all the particulars of Herodotus and Plutarch, Curtius and Livy, without making any other use of them, may be an ignorant man with a good memory, and with all his pains hath only filled his head with Christmas tales." The study of history might, indeed, be worse than useless; in Locke's opinion, a person might even be led astray by it for "the greatest part of history being made up of wars and conquests, and their style, especially the Romans', speaking of valour as the chief if not the only virtue, we are in danger to be misled by the general current and business of history . . . we are apt to make butchery and rapine the chief marks and very essence of human greatness." ³

Yet, if the study of history may be futile, even corrupting, there is another side to the picture. To anyone who, as Locke says, "hath well settled in his mind the principles of morality, and knows how to make a judgment on the actions of men", to such a one Locke recommends history as one of "the most useful studies he can apply himself to", in which he will see a "picture of the world and the nature of mankind, and so learn to think of men as they are." ⁴ As to the settling of the mind on the principles of morality Locke was emphatic that only in the New Testament would one find "full knowledge of true morality". He also recommended the reading of Cicero for

² Bossuet, "De l'instruction de Mgr. le Dauphin", *Correspondance de Bossuet*, (15 vols., Paris, 1909), II, 148-151.

³ J. Locke, "Of study", *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, (Cambridge, 1889), Appendix B, 194-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

acquiring knowledge of the morality of the Ancient World.⁵ To a "gentleman", that is, to one "whose proper calling is the service of his country", if he be suitably grounded in moral principle, the study of history would, Locke thought, be very important, notably for learning "the art of government", wherein experience and history, particularly "that of a man's own country", should go hand in hand.⁶

In other words John Locke, thinking primarily of the education of English noblemen, or gentlemen, who are expected to undertake political and social responsibilities, expresses very much the same attitude towards the study of history as Bossuet and Fénelon, tutors to royal princes. If he did not accept certain lessons, such as loyalty to France, the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church, which they had history teach, he was in full agreement with them that the first function of history is to be a guide to human life and experience, and its second, — and the two are inseparable — to be a purveyor of good morality.

Curiously enough, so was Pierre Bayle, another founding father of the Enlightenment, in spite of his encyclopaedic *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, sometimes called "the Bible" of the *philosophes*, being one vast arsenal of weapons of attack not only upon Roman Catholicism but also on traditional religion, and moral and social beliefs of all kinds. History to Bayle was no less an introduction to human life, no less a teacher of lessons, though they were the lessons of skepticism, agnosticism and human frailty; lessons, which if properly learned, would, in Bayle's view, lead to a desperate harmony of non-belief, to a humankind, peaceful, cooperative and tolerant, because there was nothing believable enough to fight about.

Such negativism, though a recurrent theme in the Age of Enlightenment, scarcely represents the predominant thinking and main hopes of that optimistic period. Onward and upward, this was the motto of the age; and progress can best be achieved, Alexander Pope informed his generation, by strict adherence to that sound working principle, "the proper study of mankind is man." To such an outlook the study of history naturally would appear of great importance. It is not strange, therefore, that Pope's patron and philosopher-friend, Viscount Bolingbroke, should have so regarded it.

Writing on the study and use of history to Lord Bathurst in 1735, letters which were later published as a classic statement on the matter, Bolingbroke made the point that "Man is the subject of every history; and to know him well, we must see him and consider him, as history alone can present him to us, in every age, in every country, in every state, in life and in death." Simply collecting and presenting the facts of history is not, however, enough in itself, "To teach and to inculcate the general principles of virtue, and the general rules of wisdom and good policy, which result from such details of actions and characters," Bolingbroke says, "comes for the most part, and always should come, expressly and directly into the design of those who are

⁵ Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Reading and Study for a Gentleman, Works*, (10 vols., London, 1823), III, 296.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 293, 296.

capable of giving such details." ⁷ Historians who fail to do this, who are mere narrators, are neglectful of the true use of history. They forget that "history is philosophy teaching by examples how to conduct ourselves in all the situations of private and public life." ⁸ Many are the authoritative names of Greece and Rome whom Bolingbroke enlists in support of his assertions.

Like John Locke he has naught but contempt for any who read history for "nothing more than amusement," or who read only "to talk, to shine in conversation;" and, even of those who busy themselves making accurate copies of manuscripts, defining the meaning of words, compiling facts, he has little more opinion. The former he labels "forward coxcombs", and the latter, though they may, to be sure, serve others who know how to use history to better advantage, are likely to be but "prating pedants." ⁹ It should be remembered, he affirms, that any study that "tends neither directly nor indirectly to make us better men and better citizens is at best but a specious and ingenious sort of idleness, . . . and the knowledge we acquire by it is a creditable kind of ignorance." And this creditable kind of ignorance is, in his opinion, "the whole benefit which the generality of men, even of the most learned, reap from the study of history" ¹⁰

How unfortunate this is! History, suitably understood, is the study "the most proper to train us up to private and public virtue." ¹¹ Through it "place is enlarged and time prolonged", so that any man who begins the study of history early "may acquire in a few years, and before he sets his foot abroad in the world, not only a more extended knowledge of mankind, but the experience of more centuries than any of the patriarchs saw." ¹² History teaches perspective and balance. For example, says Bolingbroke,

There is scarce any folly or vice more epidemical among the sons of men, than that ridiculous and hurtful vanity, by which the people of each country are apt to prefer themselves to those of every other; and to make their own customs and manners and opinions the standards of right and wrong, of true and false Now nothing can contribute more to prevent us from being tainted with this vanity, than to accustom ourselves early to contemplate the different nations of the earth in that vast map which history spreads before us, in their rise and their fall, in their barbarous and civilized states, in the likeness and unlikeness of them all to one another, and of each to itself. ¹³

Yet, at the same time the study of history will create in us a reasonable "preference of affection for our own country" ¹⁴; our country, that is, as seen in its true place in the world and amidst humanity. But the main value of this study is to enable us to learn how to live properly for

⁷ Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, (2 vols., London, 1752), 170.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-6, 57

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

There are certain general principles, and rules of life and conduct, which always must be true, because they are conformable to the invariable nature of things. He who studies history as he would study philosophy will soon distinguish and collect them, and by doing so will soon form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these rules and principles in all ages, and on the confirmation of them by universal experience. ¹⁵

History, it will be seen, is still teaching lessons, only now the lessons of life are monitored by reason and philosophy, and are seemingly pragmatic. Bolingbroke does not require students of history to learn their morality in the New Testament before they start to read history because he is sure they will find all the ethic that is necessary through the study of history itself.

Both strands of *philosophe* thinking, that of Bayle and that of Bolingbroke, are to be found in the opinions of Voltaire who saw in the study of history both a weapon of war to be used against *l'infâme*, the world of unreason, and a useful tool for the cultivation of one's garden, even for the building of a better world, through the proper study of mankind. If the latter aim, having an eye to the future, might be thought the more significant, the former must always remain as a purgative and a preventive. The basic utility of historical study, we are told by Voltaire, is to teach us "our duties and our rights"; and, being something of a psychologist, he adds, "without apparent pretense of teaching them to us." ¹⁶ This can be accomplished by setting forth both good and bad examples in our history books. The good examples serve as guides, the bad as warnings; and Voltaire was particularly desirous of stressing the latter for, he contends, you cannot display "the crimes and the misfortunes" of the past too much before people's eyes since "it is possible, whatever may be said, to prevent both one and the other." For instance, he says, if one did not often write upon "the usurpation of the popes, the scandalous discords of their schisms", the "horrors which their disputes and persecutions have aroused.

If one did not make this familiar knowledge for young people, if only a small number of informed savants knew of these facts, the public would be as imbecile as in the days of Gregory VII. The calamities of those times of ignorance would inevitably be reborn for the having taken no precaution to prevent them . . . Annihilate the study of history, you will see perhaps another St. Bartholomew's Day in France, another Cromwell in England. ¹⁷

But if it is desirable that history books should be filled with salutary warnings, lessons in what not to do, through the portrayal of evil policies and bad men, it is equally desirable that historians should not, though they only too commonly do, praise wicked men who have been of service to a dominant sect or to their country, men like Clovis, and King Henry VIII of England, both "monsters of cruelty." ¹⁸ This may be the act of a zealous citizen but such zeal

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64-5.

¹⁶ Voltaire, "Histoire", *Dictionnaire philosophique, Oeuvres*, (52 vols., Paris, 1879), XIX, 354.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 357-8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 368.

outrages humanity. History, fitly written, that is, in a philosophic spirit, will serve, moreover, not only as a moral guide but as a stimulus to progress since the leaders and citizens of one nation may compare the laws and ways of other nations with their own, and so learn from each other. It is this practice "which excites the emulation of modern nations in the arts, in agriculture, in commerce."¹⁹ Voltaire's friends and disciples, the Encyclopedists, wholeheartedly acknowledged this view of the use of history; and the pages of the *Encyclopédie* are in consequence filled with its application.²⁰

So too is La Chalotais' famous plan for national education, drawn up in the 1760's when, after the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in France, the discussion of the problem of education was very much to the fore. The author of this plan was the *Procureur-Général* of the Parlement of Brétagne whose indictment of the Jesuits had played a large part in effecting their destruction in France. One of the chief charges he had levelled at the Society was that its system of education was useless and contrary to the national interest. Feeling impelled to work out an alternative to the condemned system La Chalotais produced a plan that called for a nationally-controlled secular scheme of public education which would aim fundamentally at fitting citizens for their several functions in the state. The possibility of expanding education in a democratic and universal direction on the basis of these principles is obvious to us at this date though La Chalotais, being as undemocratic or as aristocratic as his brother *philosophes*, believed that the education of common people "should not go beyond their occupations."²¹ Nonetheless his insistence upon the principle that the interests of State and Nation should be made the basis of any system of education was a significant forecast of the future.

History, along with geography, natural history, physical and mathematical recreations, is, in La Chalotais' plan, one of the subjects given in the first grades of instruction. Education, he feels, should begin with things perceptible to the senses, that is to say, "with the facts", with what may be seen, touched, weighed, measured, depicted and described. And history, La Chalotais emphasizes, presents "the facts about man."²² Moreover, the historian in portraying the past is really doing no more than describing what is taking place every day all around us. Consequently, if we know how to guide them rightly, "children can see the one as well as the other"; and there need be no great taxing of the child's mind in all this.²³ The one real difficulty with the subject of history is the question of memory; it is because of this that the study of history should be begun in the earliest years. As with all subjects it should be made useful which in this case means an emphasis upon modern history, the most useful period to be studied. Hence this part should be taught in greater detail, and read before the history of earlier times. Lives of famous people, of all conditions and

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 356-7.

²⁰ Cf. N. N. Schargo, *History in the Encyclopédie*, (New York, 1947).

²¹ L. R. de La Chalotais, *Essai d'éducation nationale ou plan d'études pour la Jeunesse*, (Paris, 1825), 43.

²² *Ibid.*, 80-1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 82-3.

professions — "heroes, scholars, celebrated women and children" — are of particular importance, as well as vivid descriptions of great events, and "memorable examples of vice and virtue, of misfortune, and prosperity", since the most useful studies are those that have the greatest good effects upon morals, the conduct of life, and upon public and private affairs. For these ends there is no doubt, La Chalotais insists, that "modern history is more useful . . . than ancient, that of Europe more than the histories of Egypt and of China, and the history of our own country more than those of foreign countries." For this opinion he offers the authority of "the learned Grotius" and "of all sensible people".²⁴

Through the teaching and study of history, if the history books be written by men of a philosophic mind, it would be possible, La Chalotais felt, to reach both "the hearts and the minds" of children. They would early become accustomed "to judge men and actions", and would be "inspired with humanity, generosity, and beneficence." What is more, "their minds would open little by little and be brought without effort to value the good and detest the bad." They would soon learn that "we must not do to others what we would not wish others to do to us, that one is truly great only through the good which he does to his fellowmen, and that we must do to others all the good that we can do." In fact, "the morality of children, and . . . of grown-ups may be reduced almost wholly to these two points." Of such as these are the "maxims taught by all the philosophers of the universe" which will be revealed in the study of history.²⁵

In the later years of national education La Chalotais continued to give history a leading role. Its function was to remain the same but an intensification and elaboration was to take place. The older students would be given histories in which "the moral would be more clearly explained, the reflections more profound, the maxims of the law of nations, the principles of right and wrong, and those of good administration more strongly established by dealing at greater length . . . with modern history." This meant especially French history for, asks La Chalotais, "Does anyone doubt that a collection of the lives of the famous men of France would be a monument of great worth to the Nation? . . . Let a French Plutarch be born, and from the ashes of the heroes whose memory he will celebrate, will arise men who will do honor to their homes, to their century and to humanity."²⁶

If, however, young people are really "to read history with profit" they must be instructed in the correct principles and rules. This, it cannot be too strongly pointed out, is possible only if teachers and writers are of a truly philosophic outlook. Under such guidance students will know "what use to make of [history], what aims they should have in mind" in studying it. They will be able to distinguish between "proven and unproven facts", and not let themselves "become the fools of ignorance, prejudice and superstition." They will come to know those "historians upon whom they may rely with some con-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 85-91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 155-6.

fidence, and the centuries upon which some light can be cast." And it is very important that they should be so guided for if we read history only "to amuse ourselves, without aim or principles" we merely fill our memories with facts, and "after reading many histories we know neither men nor [their] ways, neither laws nor the arts and sciences, neither the present world nor the world of the past, nor the relations between the one and the other." ²⁷

La Chalotais and the Encyclopedists, under the influence of Locke, Bolingbroke, Voltaire and other *philosophe* thinkers, considered history a fit, even a highly desirable subject, for the education of children. Their cantankerous colleague, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, so often out of line with his fellow *philosophes*, considered such a view sheer nonsense. Children's heads were not made to be filled with useless names and dates, and what is more, he argued, they are not experienced enough to comprehend the moral lessons admittedly to be found in the study of history. Therefore this study should be postponed until young people have been formed into sane and natural beings. ²⁸

Rousseau's views are expressed chiefly in his *Emile, ou l'Education*, considered by many the most influential work on education to be published in the eighteenth century. So far as history is concerned Rousseau's model child, Emile, is not introduced to the subject until he is eighteen years old, when the study of the moral order is deemed fit. To enter upon this stage of his education Emile must begin, Rousseau feels, by becoming acquainted with "the human heart", by seeing man as he really is beneath the social mask. Yet it is unwise to start a youth on the business of ferreting into the lives of other people too early in his development or he may become viciously hypercritical. Nor is it any better to fill him with abstract principles, to give him "lessons that sound like lessons", to substitute your own authority for his experience. Therefore, "to put the human heart within his reach without risk of spoiling his own", Rousseau proposes to show him "men at a distance . . . in other times and places" in order that he may be able "to watch the [human] scene without having to take part therein." "There," says Rousseau, "is the moment of history." ²⁹ And he goes on,

In order to know men you have to see them act. In society you hear them speak; they show their talk and hide their actions, but in history they are unmasked. One judges them on the facts. Even what they say helps us to evaluate them for by comparing what they do with what they say we can see at one and the same time what they are and what they wish to appear; the more they disguise themselves the better are they known. ³⁰

Truly, it is difficult, thinks Rousseau, to have history properly written since historians are inclined to stress the seamy more than the good side of humanity, and to distort the historical picture according to their own biases. This is especially true of modern history,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁸ J. J. Rousseau, *Emile, ou l'éducation, Oeuvres*, (22 vols., Paris, 1819-20), 186-191.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 472-7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 477.

making it thus of far less use than ancient; for of what value is the study of history if you can't be sure of the accuracy of the accounts in the history books. Thucydides, Rousseau considers the best of historians since he "reports the facts without judging them."³¹ But in any case a biographical approach to the subject is to be preferred to general history since it is knowledge of the human heart that is being sought, and, though man must be studied in the mass he has to be seen as an individual first. Of all writers Plutarch is the master of this art.³² What is ultimately to be acquired is moral wisdom, and if this may be learned best through direct experience, where this way would prove too dangerous it is better to learn "the lesson from history."³³ The lesson most to be learned, Rousseau forcibly reminds Emile, is, "To thine own self be true."³⁴ Jean-Jacques, in other words, however much he may challenge or invert the propositions of his fellow *philosophes*, is not so far removed from them as he or they thought. His proposal to use history as a teacher of moral wisdom is partial evidence of this. And with his stress upon learning from history without endangering oneself he brings us back even to Bishop Bossuet.

In the century, then, from Bossuet to La Chalotais and Jean-Jacques Rousseau the different lessons which men hoped to teach and to learn through the study of history are an indication of the transition which was ushering in the Age of Enlightenment, the era of the *philosophes*. Lessons of religious faith, of loyalty to Church and Pope, to a King divinely instituted, give way to those of reason and common sense, of loyalty to state and nation, of love of humanity and of individual integrity. Yet, through every change, there remains this belief in common—the uniting faith that binds Voltaire and Rousseau to Bossuet — that the study of history is an entrance way into human life, an initiation into human wisdom — political, social, and above all, moral. So, to the thinkers of that age, history must ever be a teacher of lessons. This to them is the function of history; and if historians should fail to fulfill that function they and their subject must be counted as useless, even worse than useless, for they might then become corrupters of men.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 477-482.

³² *Ibid.*, 484.

³³ *Ibid.*, 501.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 492.