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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

THE INACCURACY OF HISTORY

Napoleon the First, that master arbiter of human destinies (H. G. Wells to the contrary notwithstanding), once expressed the opinion that history was nothing more than a fable agreed upon. And no less a scholar than Thomas Carlyle characterized history as "a distillation of rumor". The upshot of such testimony is recognition of the fact that the writing of history is more of an art than a science.

The historian's skill lies in the art of abridgment. There is neither time nor space to state all facts, to describe all events, or to recount the multifarious activities of everybody everywhere throughout the ages. The historian, like other artists, deals in symbols wherewith he seeks to vivify whatever is typical. Whether he writes of a simple experience in pioneer Iowa or surveys the whole history of man, his technique is essentially the same as that of the painter who tints a miniature or who expresses his theme on a mural canvas. Both are guilty of half truths. In the picture, whether it be printed or painted, only those circumstances or objects are included which contribute to unity, balance, and perspective.

Edward Gibbon complained that history is "little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind". Insofar as the pages of history are filled with "the spoils of time" to the exclusion of more worthy exploits they perpetrate falsehood, for most of the people in every period have been less concerned with the gestures of rulers and the trend of public events than they were with the absorbing occupations of making love and money. Dramatists and poets learned that long ago.

Though the writing of history is an art and though the substance of history consists merely of examples which all too often tend to distort actuality, still the historian should strive to approximate absolute truth. To that end the critical dissection and evaluation of the source materials of history is the prime requisite. No expenditure of time and energy is too great to establish a relevant fact, and no fact is too trivial to merit consideration. Yet despite every precaution error will sometimes occur. Positive mistakes may be relatively rare, but misleading statements, inadequate information, and the sin of omission seem inevitable. It is a tremendous task to keep history straight.

J. E. B.