

The Use of History

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THE USE OF HISTORY

T H E R E are two different ways the word "history" may be used. Both refer to the past, but one describes our knowledge or perception of the past and the other the actions and developments which have already taken place in the past. Since I believe that what happened can only be revealed through what is knowable, that is, through documents, records, oral accounts and other artifacts and remains of the past, I shall deal primarily with the former meaning of "history" as a kind of knowledge. As for the word "use", there are so many ways of using it that I am tempted to play with it awhile and range widely on the need to use history, our capacity and freedom to use it, the actual ways it can be used, and the many purposes for which it may be used. But it is not my intention to do so tonight. All I wish to do is to look at some of the ways historians and others have been conscious of the use of history and to reflect on the ways history may still be used today in our country. In this way, I shall, in any case, have to touch on questions concerning our need and our ability to use history. But the two main problems to be examined are the reasons for inquiring about our past and the methods employed for presenting the results of this kind of inquiry.

Let me begin by considering some of the main reasons men have consciously used history in the past. History begins with the desire to remember and the awareness that memory confers some degree of power on those who remember. In turn, those who remember are expected to answer questions like "How or why did it all begin?" They are led back to the search for origins and there appears in time at least three main purposes

for which we need to know the beginning of all things. Each of the three purposes satisfies some of man's needs but none of them really excludes the other two.

The first and probably the most common use of history is when the group, the family, or clan, or tribe, searches for a kind of folk-memory for the one past which will help preserve the group's identity and strengthen the group's capacity to survive.

The second is utilitarian in more specific ways. It assumes that history is useful knowledge, teaching lessons through past examples and therefore may be used to encourage both private and public morality. In addition, history is the cumulation of practical experience and shows man what to do and what to avoid in his efforts to improve himself.

The third probes much deeper than the other two and questions the meaning of life and death. By wanting to know how he began and how he must end, man is led to his God or his several gods. History then becomes a means of understanding man's place on earth and what is in store for him. History may help him know his destiny and comprehend his humanity.

All three purposes for studying history have prevailed at some time or another, in different parts of the world and at different times. At most times, one of them was dominant but very rarely did one exist alone. It was always complemented by the others.

Let me elaborate. The first use of history stems from the most basic need for group cohesion. This may be found even in the most primitive societies where their myths afforded them a solidarity they must have. Yet in the same myths are to be found useful knowledge about practical matters as well as the perception of spirits and deities which gave meaning to the society's existence. A fine example of how this need for cohesion was developed to its highest form may be found in the history of the Hebrews where mere group identity gave way to a belief that the Hebrews were the chosen people of God. In more modern times, complex kinds of identity developed around kingship, the state, the nation and these in turn produced more complex ways

of interpreting history in political, cultural, and national terms. It is enough for me to refer to the rise of English and French nationalism, its spread to new German, Italian and other European nation-states, and more recently, its prevalence in the post-colonial worlds of Asia and Africa, for us to realise how deep and pervasive is the desire for political identity. This kind of identity is historically based and it is to history that the modern nation-states turn to for their ultimate justification. These states vary in their search from Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic virtues to the glories of the Roman empire; from the compassion and civilising missions of Asoka to the magical powers of Majapahit and the traditional hegemony of the universal Confucian state. From the past, from history, these nations, big or small, try to draw strength and pride. In such nations, this first way of using history is dominant.

But groups, tribes, nations and peoples grow strong and prosperous. In time, the historians and others who turn to the past used history for the second purpose, for the practical and moral lessons it has for the present. This may be seen when the Chinese achieved their imperial structure, and history was turned into an instrument of sound, stable administration and used as a standard of public morality. It may also be seen at the height of Roman power, both as a republic and as an empire. Also, it was the prevalent view of Moslem historians during the stage of consolidation when history became more than a branch of theology; it became also a "mirror for princes." Modern Europe and America during the past two centuries also found history useful in similar ways. The main difference is that their historians have reached out much further, beyond morality and immediate usefulness to more accurate levels of knowledge, thought and truth, but they did so only after acknowledging that history was of some practical use.

The third use of history leads men to try and find an even higher place and meaning for history. The Greeks admitted that history was really a kind of "philosophy teaching by example." The Hebrews used history to explain revelation and prophecy on

the road to understanding God and left part of this heritage to the Christians and Moslems who followed. Augustine openly claimed that our knowledge of the past would help us to know God's Plan, and that this would help us accept our present and prepare us for our future. But this third object of history is not limited to spiritual concerns. Even when man has lost faith in his God or gods, he may still find a similar role for history. He may also claim that his knowledge of the past will directly explain his present and guide his future. This was the product of 19th century Europe, during which period different kinds of challenges were addressed to the Augustinian view of history. Men transferred their faith from an unknowable God to scientific certainties and history was expected to provide new kinds of answers. For the most part, the accepted ways of studying the past were found wanting. With the new demands on history as the mirror and proof for progress, there had to be more scientific methods for revealing and explaining our picture of the past. There had to develop not only a more critical scholarship, but also a new vision which fused past, present and future together. In one form, all this was meant to heighten our humanity and prove the perfectability of man. In another form, the vision was messianic and projected a new world where injustice, tyranny, exploitation and conflict would cease. It is mainly in these two forms that the main contenders for power in the world today search for the meaning of life on earth and both may still be seen as belonging to an interregnum period when faith in God is in abeyance.

I have outlined very briefly the three reasons for historical inquiry above so that what I have to say about the use of history for us today and in the years to come may have some larger perspective. Now I must go on to describe the main methods or techniques employed for presenting our knowledge of the past. These may be completely independent of the three purposes for using history discussed above.

The methods of presenting history also divide into three main types. Firstly, in the form of narrative or story. There have been the epic, the collection of didactic anecdotes, the eye-witness

accounts and the chronicles and annals. There have more recently been the biographies of great men and the narration of great events in the novel-form. Most of them are didactic in purpose, whether through entertainment or through eulogy and condemnation, praise and blame. This is the dominant form, making the bulk of all the historical works that have come down to us and most of the books which are still being written by both professional and amateur historians. For the purposes of history I discussed earlier, this is probably still the most effective method because if for no other reason, it is the most widely enjoyed and frequently the most readable. It is a form which makes little claim to objectivity but does often aspire to accuracy of detail.

The second method of presenting history is more self-conscious and sometimes more pretentious. This is through the ever-developing forms of critical and analytical scholarship. When it is modest, it is meant to be one step towards the elusive true picture of the past, as it actually happened. When it is not, it may be either comprehensive with universalist claims and dull, or dressed up in "scientific" jargon and downright obscure. For this new scholarship, we are probably still at the beginning, with a great deal more to learn when the study of our past will be extended not only by social scientists but also by the natural scientists. For the moment, however, the modern historians struggle timidly with their simple tools of verification, criticism, and analysis of the surviving and vanishing records of the past.

Finally, the third method of presenting history is through an old form, often resorted to but never as perfect and as dangerous as it is at present, the form of propaganda. Propaganda is particularly prevalent when historical data are being used because the data are imperfect and therefore subject to different interpretations and because it is easy to make history sound simple as well as emotionally appealing. This is true for all three of the purposes in using history I discussed earlier. Whether it be in terms of national solidarity, moral uplift or universal explanation, it is easy to use the highly sophisticated techniques of

persuasion developed during the past few decades. The only important difference is whether the subtler methods of selection and omission are used instead of the cruder methods of invention, falsification and manipulation of facts. There are even subtler forms when history is quoted as moral justifications for doubtful actions, as when Mr. Richard Nixon of the United States spoke in this lecture theatre and defended U.S. involvement in Vietnam as an example of learning from history. The lesson was that a stand must be made against aggression, a lesson learnt from the European experience of Munich and appeasement. However, two Peking magazines defended the Chinese attitude towards what they called "American aggression" also in terms of learning a lesson from history, again using the same example of Munich and appeasement. Who now is learning from history? It is remarkable how two bitter enemies may use the same example to show that they are fighting each other for a superior moral reason - that is, because the other is as evil as Hitler. This method of using history can be termed propaganda and is perhaps the most dangerous because it is easy for your own people to believe that your picture is true.

Enough about the uses of history in general. What about the use of history in our country for the past few centuries? In terms of the three main purposes and the three methods of presenting history outlined above, we have had a share of all of them, though at different times and in different degrees.

To begin with, there has been the keen perception of the past in the *Sejarah Melayu*, preserving a sense of identity for the Malay peoples through didactic stories, entertaining anecdotes and a vivid picture of social life and values at the Malacca Court. Together with the *Misa Melayu*, the *Tuhfat-al Nafis* and various *salasilah* and state *hikayat*, the *Sejarah Melayu* provides us with the materials not only to reconstruct part of the past but also to define a long-accepted idea of history. In this idea of history, there is a strong sense of group identity and solidarity which stretches beyond our present boundaries to Sumatra and the many smaller islands south of the peninsula. There is also an

awareness of the lessons of the past and what they do in the delineating of systems of authority and norms of public conduct. And, not least, pervading all these works is the presence of God and the enacting of God's will especially upon His Muslim believers.

Our history has had traditionally all the three uses outlined earlier. What is outstanding, however, is the feeling of pride which the writings rouse in their Malay readers, a pride in cultural distinction and political might and a pride in qualities of heroism and leadership. These works, read together with the large corpus of literature, have been a rich heritage for the revival of historical consciousness in the country.

There are obvious limitations in this form of history-writing. The works are narratives, varying from the anecdotal to the continuous story, and unsuited for the methods of analysis. They were also lacking in causal explanations. But to expect them to be analytical is to expect them to do what later readers look for, to view them from our present standpoint and judge them by our present standards. What is important, in any case, is not to revive their limited functions but to seek a continuity today with the society they portrayed then and thus recognise the underlying social and political processes of our own age.

That continuity was temporarily broken by a period of foreign intervention, in particular the extension of British power and influence from the beginning of the 19th century. For more than 100 years, events in Europe increasingly dictated the course of history in our country. It was a period when local power was fragmented and weak and political leadership ineffectual. Foreign interference was inevitable; it was only a question of which of the European powers should come to dominate at a time when strategic and economic considerations and questions of power determined history and not matters of right, culture or morality.

The economic transformation was the most notable. Indeed a revolution of far-reaching political and social consequences took place within a hundred years. There is now no turn-

ing back, nor are there many who really wish to do so if it were possible. But it would be a mistake to think that because of a period of British rule the continuity with our pre-19th century past is gone. It is necessary to distinguish between the desire to look forward to our future and the recognition that our past is still very much with us. It is in this context that we must evaluate the developments in the use of history in the country during the past hundred years.

Let me begin by referring to the developments in historiography in Europe during the 19th century, some features of which I outlined earlier this evening. There was the increasingly conscious nation-state, of which Britain was possibly the primary model. There was the growing practice of teaching practical lessons from the past - it is not irrelevant to refer to the importance of Roman studies for the preparation of the new British imperial elite. And there had just begun, more on the European continent than in Britain itself, the application of scientific methods to historical scholarship and the glimmerings of the idea that a scientific humanism may make history a substitute for religion.

Thus the British officials, travellers and scholars who studied any Asian region, people or culture during this period did so for a Britain which was conscious of its national superiority and its imperial responsibilities, and with perhaps a more modest view of its civilising mission in Asia. We must read their books bearing this clearly in mind. The books were not written for us but for British audiences and it was the requirements of Britain, whether official or private, that they had to meet. And in terms of the three purposes in the use of history I have discussed, it was mainly the second type that was written, that is, works which may be valuable for sound administration, for justifying imperial policies and for satisfying standards of public morality. A few were unmistakably jingoistic, but these were jarring to the educated British. They were never long in fashion and gradually disappeared after the First World War.

But what was really important was the principle which emerged

in the writings of the best of these historians. This was the principle which came from the scientists and technologists that whatever was to be useful must first be accurate. It soon developed into the aloof and amoral attitude of mind which argued that the scientific scholar did not care who used his work or how it should be used. His only concern was that his work should be as accurate as possible. In the course of development, this attitude greatly influenced the writers of history. By the 20th century, a few British historians of Malaya were claiming that the truth was all they wished to tell.

Whatever their claims, however, historical truth is much more elusive and demanding than most historians realise. And the British officials who wrote their history in their spare time found it difficult to rise above the practical use expected of their books by their colleagues and friends here and in Britain. It is never easy to write good history; to do so with the conscience of an imperialist, however well-meaning, must have been extremely difficult. In fairness, it must be said that most British writers who tried to be objective did so only within a narrowly British historical framework; only a few, like Wilkinson and Winstedt, thought they could be objective about the peoples living in the Malay States they worked in.

So far, I have been speaking of more or less dedicated scholar-officials and amateur historians writing largely for their own times. Many have deservedly been forgotten for having done neither harm nor good; a few still await the judgment of history itself. This is indeed a terrifying thought even for historians - how posterity will judge us! But it is far less justifiable for us to pass easy judgment on those who worked on scholarly projects above the call of duty than on those professionals who began to appear in the country with the foundation of Raffles College in Singapore.

I now come to one of the conventions of inaugural addresses in universities, that is, to outline the history of the discipline, the department concerned with it and some of the outstanding personalities among my predecessors. I had not wished to take ad-

vantage of this convention to dole out praise and blame in the best traditions of my field of study. My choice of topic for this evening, however, leads me to it and I shall briefly describe how history has been used in higher education in the country.

Perhaps the kindest thing I can do is not to mention the work of Raffles College before World War Two except to say that one of the lecturers, now Professor Brian Harrison of Hong Kong, was later (in 1954) to publish an intelligent and readable *first* history of Southeast Asia which is still one of the most useful textbooks on the subject. The history taught at Raffles College was mainly British and European and no noticeable effort was made to encourage the students to take an active interest in the country's history.

The War changed that. Britain retreated from her empire and it was only a matter of time before Malaya would become independent. New men came to Raffles College and then, from 1949, the University of Malaya. Among them were C.D. Cowan, a lecturer who later became Professor of Southeast Asian History at the University of London, and Professor C.N. Parkinson the first head of the university department at Singapore. Neither of them pretended to be more than imperial historians and when they turned their attentions to the reasons for British intervention in Perak and Selangor in 1874, they were both clearly writing in the imperial tradition. Indeed, Professor Cowan's book on the subject in particular is an excellent piece of work in that tradition.

But what was radically changed was Professor Parkinson's seven-year effort at turning his students towards Asia in general and towards Malaysia in particular. The courses taught were still largely in terms of European activities in India, Southeast Asia and China, but the meaning was clear. He and his colleagues sought to make history relevant to their students, and relevance included the use history should have for the new graduates. There were far-reaching consequences. The syllabuses for schools and pre-university classes were also changed. Students had to be prepared for university and the university was now preparing

the graduate teachers to teach the new courses.

It was not until Professor Parkinson's departure in 1958, one year after the independence of Malaya, that the changes began to bear fruit. A new generation had become aware that many historians in Europe, America and all over Asia were turning away from the imperial or colonial interpretations of Asian, and particularly Southeast Asian, history. So strong was this trend that my predecessor, John Bastin, found it necessary to warn against it in an address given in this lecture theatre in 1960, and a lively controversy followed in the pages of the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* edited by Professor K.G. Tregonning in Singapore.

The professional historians since 1949 have added a new awareness to the study of history in the country. There is certainly a debt which we must acknowledge. But from the point of view of the uses of history, they had only begun to point to new directions which later historians may take. They were very much men in transition, serving in between the end of one era and the beginning of another. They must be credited with facing up to that transition with realism and goodwill, but they had not really moved far from the accepted use of history, which was to use history as valuable information or methods of thought for a given situation, that is, as normative knowledge to be transmitted to those who inherited the British values and institutions in a post-colonial Malaya. My predecessor, John Bastin, will appreciate this statement as this is the framework of his latest book (jointly edited with Robin Winks of Yale) of selected historical readings on Malaysia published earlier this year. I do not doubt that he and Robin Winks go by the highest standards of the modern historiographical traditions. I merely question the colonial framework they seem to have set themselves to work in. By this I mean the continued tendency to look upon the period of British rule to be pivotal to the whole of Malaysian history, the period from which to look back and to look forward. As this ignores the more fundamental problems of Malaysia's location, and its involvement in the past of all Nusantara and Southeast

Asia, it fails to explain many of the changes and continuities of our cultures, politics and society. To continue with this colonial framework then is to ignore other more legitimate uses of history.

Having said so much about others, I must now come to what I think lies ahead for our historians. Let me say straight-away that I am but one of the twenty or so professionals of Malaysia and Singapore who have been trained at the University of Malaya and elsewhere since the coming of C.N. Parkinson to Singapore in 1950. Let me also say that much of what I have said about the expatriate professionals probably still applies to most of us. The difference is that we have ourselves begun to explore the margins of our discipline - we have begun to re-examine the purposes of historical inquiry and also some of the methods of presenting what we know.

To begin with what lies ahead, let me consider the three purposes in using history which I discussed earlier this evening. I see all three as valid for our times and that they are complementary and not mutually exclusive. Firstly, there is every need for history to be used responsibly and intelligently to help us in the task of building a nation. The more complex this task, the more carefully we must study our history in order to enable us to use our history constructively and effectively. A denial of this use is to deny our past and also to deprive a historian of his vital place in his country's present and future.

Secondly, no country can do without a knowledge of its past successes and failures, the origins of its existing customs, laws and institutions and the rationale of the hundreds and thousands of decisions made on the country's behalf. This is the more so in a country desiring to move towards a more sophisticated democracy in an age when the needs and aspirations of the ordinary citizen are expected to be taken into account. For the *rakyat* to participate in public affairs, whether social, economic or political, they need to know the historical basis of what they have at the moment and thus hope to know what to expect in the future. They should also be equipped to understand their country's place in the region, in the Asian continent and in the wider world

of the Great Powers and the international conflicts that exist. Where there are suitable lessons to learn from history, we should all know what they are and, perhaps just as important, what their limitations are.

As for the third kind, the deeper probings of the historical mind, whether as supplementary to, or as a substitute for, philosophy or religion, there is also an important use for this in our age. For there is indeed much to think about when man contemplates his past. If it is not God's Plan, or natural rights, or universal moral principles preserving our humanity, it may be a little of all three to help us comprehend our hopes and fears. This is not an European or American or Afro-Asian problem; nor is it only for the historians of big and powerful nations. In fact, it is the right of all who find meaning in their past over and beyond the limited and immediate needs of their state, society or civilisation.

To give some examples of how much there is already to be learnt from modern historians: we have been shown that there is no such thing as ethnic purity or racial superiority; and that there are not only no advantages in cultural exclusiveness but that this may actually lead to the fossilisation and death of a society. We have been shown again and again that tyranny does not pay and that greed and exploitation and monopolistic practices pervert the economic drives of free men. We have seen that, even though man is far from perfect, he can be improved in his awareness of, and in his humanity towards, other men. For much as we deplore Hitler's barbarism, the racism in Rhodesia and the killings in Vietnam, it is a revolution in man's humanity that the conscience of the greater part of the world has been aroused to try to make amends or seek solutions to these problems. If this does not give cause for us to believe in a better and juster world, probably nothing will. But the extent of our improved humanity will not be grasped if we did not have our history to look at and compare with. Ours may be a small country but no less human than the biggest and no less capable of throwing light on the human condition.

I maintain then that all three uses of history are open to us whether we are professionals or not. What remains to be decided is how history is to be presented and what methods we are to use to write our history. Objections have been raised about the dangers of abuse if we are narrowly nationalistic or moralistic or messianic. Indeed it is easy to use history as an instrument to control the hearts and minds of men. From our knowledge of history, we know that there can be no absolute guarantees that history is not thereby perverted and wrongly used. Furthermore, we now know that even the best of historians is not free from his own background and his predilections and biases. But these objections are not valid reasons for arguing against the use of history for nation-building, for teaching practical lessons or for explaining our humanity. What is important is that there be an increasing awareness of the nature of historical studies and that there be a sharper distinction made between the different methods of presenting our historical knowledge.

I had suggested earlier that there are three main ways history has been and still is being written. The commonest, the narrative form, may be adopted for all the three purposes of history, but it is perhaps best suited for the first, that is, for nation-building. The second, the critical or analytical scholarship, is also suitable for all three purposes of history, but may be more effective for presenting useful knowledge and being the basis of reflection on man's progress. The third method of presenting history as propaganda is also commonly applied to all three uses of history, but most frequently for rousing patriotic emotions and for proselytizing among the nonbelievers or disbelievers.

Of the three, there are obvious reasons why the first two methods of presenting history must first be distinguished from the third. It is not a question of simply saying that narrative and analysis are better than propaganda. It is necessary to say that propaganda is designed to convert and therefore deliberately puts forth only *one* point of view. In other words, it is employed for a different reason from the other two. I have already noted that propaganda may be subtle or crude and may even be used

for self-deception. The crude forms provide no problems. They are indeed easy to detect and are rarely believed except by the most ignorant and by those who want to believe. The subtler and self-deceptive forms, however, are more difficult to deal with. They have the outward appearance of narrative with an interesting story or even analysis with cogent logic; only careful study of the contents and the assumptions made can show them up for what they are.

I need hardly say that, for the historian, propaganda based on historical data is not history. He has the duty not only not to write it, but also to expose it whenever he can.

As for narrative and analytical history, the historian has the duty to be accurate and honest to the best of his ability. He recognises that intention is no guarantee of achievement and that objectivity is an attitude of mind which he may consciously seek and yet unconsciously undermine. But provided he is aware of the possible treachery within himself and seeks to prevent it at every turn, he is still a historian. Provided he is committed to seeking the truth, however elusive that may be, he may use history for all the purposes outline above. And committed he must be. He must be committed to believing that nation-building can only be served by knowing the history of a nation; that the more he really knows, the more he understands the nature of that nation and the better the chances of its success. He must be committed to believing that knowledge is practical and valuable only when it is accurate; the more reliable the knowledge, the more people can depend on it and apply it to concrete situations. He must not least be committed to believing that history can show how man has progressed in his awareness of man; the deeper he studies and the longer the period studied, the better he can show how man has struggled to escape from his past.

But for all this committment, he is only at the beginning. There is indeed a great deal to learn from our store of history and a great deal yet to be done before we can begin to learn. The study of history is not for the faint-hearted because he will be frightened by the amount there is to know. It is not for the

opportunist nor the propagandist because they are only too willing to abuse it. And it is not for the cynic because the cynic will too easily despair. History is only worth studying if the historian is sceptical or curious, or if he is a man of faith. If he is all three, he will have much to contribute.

I cannot end without referring to the present state of knowledge about the history of our country. Until a few years ago, our own people have been known to say that the country has little history, and what little history there is has been made by various types of Europeans. This was partly because the indigenous historical traditions had been neglected or decried and pushed aside. It was also partly because only very few had become aware of the changing modern attitudes and techniques of historical scholarship which can easily disapprove the myth that we have very little history. Today the myth is exposed and such a view would be ridiculed by local and foreign scholars alike. We seem to have come a long way by our tenth year of independence.

But this is not simply a matter of growth and age. There is, of course, the effort to free ourselves of the colonial framework, so that we may now see our history in better perspective. But more important has been the conscious effort to extend the limits of traditional historiography. A new generation of historians has appeared who are increasingly less timid about using new tools for research and more ready to seek out new materials and forward new interpretations. They have better appreciated the value of the social sciences, of sociology and anthropology, of economics and politics. Methods once the inner skills of the mathematicians and the scientists have filtered through to the social scientists and now reach the historians. Not all the skills have been found suitable, but the willingness to test them alone has brought forth new types of questions and produced new insights. And with these new questions and new insights, we are beginning to know more about the history of the indigenous peoples, their political and social structure, and their strength and weaknesses. Similarly, we are also re-framing our questions about our immi-

grant communities, their economic institutions, their successes and failures in adaptability and their potential roles in the country. And not least, by perceiving our plural society in a different light, we can also better understand the historic part the British played in giving shape and form to the new nation.

There is no doubt that all this has come with our independence. We are free not only to use the new methods in our own ways but also, by facing up to our present, we are rapidly achieving a newly perceived past. Having experienced this transformation for ourselves, we can confirm that present history makes past history afresh. For although what happened in the past has not changed, our awareness of it certainly has.

With this in mind, it is perhaps appropriate for a historian to end with a quotation from the past which touches on our future. Confucius said,

後生可畏。焉知來者之不如今也

“Those who are born after us are indeed to be regarded with respect. How do we know that their future will not be equal to our present?”