# TWO "PARTIAL" HISTORIANS

WHEN we Plebeians say that we are "partial" in writing history, we do not mean that we are partial in the sense that we tell all the good stories about our own side and all the atrocities about the others. Dr. Johnson, in writing his early anticipation of Hansard "always let the Whig dogs have the worst of it." If we wrote history "partially" like that, then we should deny that there was ever a Terror in the French Revolution. We should spend good ink attempting to defend Carrier of Nantes. We should be arguing always that the workers who cheered Bottomley were at the same time possessed of remarkable qualities of restraint, judgment, intelligence and tenacity. We should very soon, in fact, find ourselves talking worse rubbish than our opponents.

What we do mean by our partiality is this—that we recognise there is existing in society a fundamental cleavage——the class war. We recognise that the past history which we study is fundamentally the history of that and other class struggles. We insist on writing and reading history with that knowledge in our minds—the knowledge that all the conflicts which are recorded in past history under the label of some political principle had their roots in some social and economic clash.

This means, then, that *all* history written from the point of view of one side or the other is of value to us, so long as it recognises this clash. For example, Phillips Price's history of the Russian Revolution is excellent. But one can equally well imagine a history written by a full-blooded White which would have been of use to us if Price had not written. An out-and-out reactionary, though he might make us roar with rage at his comments, would not hide the fact that a class war was on, that the two classes were in conflict. We should see the battle from the angle of the enemy's G.H.Q.—but there would be no attempt to conceal the fact that it was a battle. The sort of history, however, that would be utterly useless to us would be a history written by one of Kerensky's followers. There would be all muddle and confusion. Everything slimed over and altered in an attempt to bring it into relation with "the essential unity of the nation," "the national spirit," "the ideas of democracy and nationality that transcend class"—with every sort of imaginary nonsense that clouds the ordinary textbook.

Briefly, what we want is what an idiotic cant calls a "partisan

history." It does not matter much which side the writer takes, if he takes it honestly. Two fairly well-known historical works, written from the point of view of a class that is not ours, illustrate this excellently.

The first book is *The Early History of Charles James Fox*, by Sir George Otto Trevelyan. I imagine it is in most decent public libraries. Sir George is a Whig of the old school, belonging to an old Whig family. He writes like this—the passage deals with Lord Holland :—

> Intent upon keeping up a colossal fortune, which his sons were to dissipate even more quickly than he had amassed it, he tamely consented to abandon everything which makes ambition honourable and self-seeking respectable. He sank from a Cabinet Minister into an underling, and from the spokesman of a Government into the mute occupant of a remote corner of the Treasury bench. Rich and inglorious, he played Cassius to his rival's Cæsar, until an unexpected turn in politics tempted him to quit that comfortable obscurity from which it would have been well for his memory if he had never emerged.

After such a passage the diligent reader, like Amelia, " exclaimed suddenly, *Oh ! Sir !*" Though Lord Macaulay would not have expressed his feelings in those terms, he would certainly have admired the conscious dignity of his imitator and biographer.

Sir George's style is like that of a follower of the Marquis of Rockingham ; his partisanship is equally undisguised. For that reason he has written an excellent history. Right at the beginning he avows his prejudice — or rather, makes a general statement of facts that seem obvious to him.

> Moral considerations apart, no more desirable lot can well be imagined for a human being than that he should be included in the ranks of a highly-civilised aristocracy at the culminating moment of its vigour. A society so broad and strongly based that, within its own borders, it can safely permit absolute liberty of thought and speech ;—whose members are so numerous that they are able to believe, with some show of reason, that the interests of the State are identical with their own, and at the same time so privileged that they are sure to get the best of everything which is to be had ;—is a society uniting, as far as those members are concerned, most of the advantages and all the attractions, both of a popular and an oligarchical form of government.

Both the praise and the qualifications of that paragraph give us fair warning of the character of our host. He shows us the life of the later eighteenth century through the windows of Holland House, from Almack's, or from the benches of the House of Commons behind Edmund Burke. We might perhaps have preferred to see it from John Wilkes' comfortable cell in prison, but what Sir George tells us is good enough, for with only a little thought we can imagine how the Wilkites saw all the events that he has told us from the point of view of the Marquis of Rockingham.

Because he is secure in his own convictions, and has no trouble to disguise them, Sir George conceals nothing. Take, for example, the case of the Duke of Portland. Perhaps the severest check to the system of personal government through corruption of the Commons, which King George III. was endeavouring to complete

in this period, was suffered in 1768. In that year, the King's Government was unwise enough to lend its support to an attempt to seize, by a legal device, some of the great wealth of the Whig Duke of Portland, and transfer it to a supporter, the infamous Sir James Lowther. Upon this question Edmund Burke and George Savile rose to their fiercest efforts of oratory. Upon this question—a question merely of the security of a parcel of land—the Whigs, defenders of the people's rights, of liberty, of honest and clean government dealt out heavier blows than ever before. Imagine how an ordinary historian would cover it up. How our school textbooks would talk and talk of Burke's idealism until all memory of it had disappeared. The central point, the greatest victory of these liberal reformers a plain question of keeping estates pilfered from the Church —impossible.

Nothing like this in Sir George's history. As a man of property —and if you are not the same he urbanely assumes your sympathy— he takes it for granted that nothing can be more serious than for a government to call in question a landed gentleman's right to his revenues, and tells the whole story straightforwardly, seeing nothing to hide. Indeed, remarking on the defeat of the Government's shelving motion for an inquiry, he adds, " Even political rancour was driven to confess that there were subjects too sacred for a parliamentary inquiry." These subjects, as he has previously explained, were the origin of the fortunes of the large noble families. Can you ask your history written plainer than that ?

I have not much space left to deal with the second book—Mr. C. Gill's *The Naval Mutinies of* 1797—which is less usually found in public libraries. It is perhaps even an odder phenomenon than Sir George's history. Mr. Gill wrote then—I do not know if he would still write—with a partisanship that gives me a more violent revulsion than perhaps any other would. His attitude was that of an admirer of the lower and more insolent official. We all know the upper-clerk person that swarms in Government and business offices. The sort of creature whose delight is in insulting the unemployed, whose only victories are over applicants for relief. Both the high and low ranks of Government service have always contained a notable proportion of men who lacked talents, generosity, or humanity, but were of value for their delight in petty tyranny. To insult fallen greatness, to torment the helpless, to lie to and bully the simple—these tasks they do with gladness. Let them have an opportunity to humiliate a great scientist, to dismiss an office-girl, or to drive a farmer to ruin and they are equally happy.

Such bureaucrats must have, I presume, their admirers. Mr. Gill, when writing this work, admired them. If Dundas, or some jack-in-office even lower than Dundas, made some cowardly and spiteful

attack on the Nore mutineers, Mr. Gill admired his Parliamentary courage. If the Government of Pitt prepared, not to grant their just demands, but to inveigle and murder the men that afterwards won the battle of Camperdown, Mr. Gill commended their firmness. Yet, with all this, he wrote an excellent history. Because he believed the Government officials to be incontestably right, he did not attempt to tell us that the seamen of Nelson's days won their victories in transports of patriotic enthusiasm. He tells us instead that the salt pork handed out to the average sailor was hard and polished through age and saltness, also that he had to take 14 ounces as a pound.

Here, then, we have two good and valuable histories—both "partisan," but not on our side. This I claim does not matter, so long as they have definitely taken a side. It is, of course, not merely the taking of a side that matters. Historical scholarship is the first essential. Without the accurate and admirable historical knowledge of Mr. Gill or Sir George Trevelyan, their works would have been valueless. But without their frank partisanship they would have been almost certainly worse than valueless—misleading.

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