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Retrieved on 25th September 2020 from <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/godwin.history.html>
Godwin wrote this piece, according to a note in the manuscript, “while the Enquirer [1797] was in the press, under the impression that the favour of the public might have demanded another volume.”

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Of History and Romance

William Godwin

1797

The study of history may well be ranked among those pursuits which are most worthy to be chosen by a rational being.

The study of history divides itself into two principal branches; the study of mankind in a mass, of the progress the fluctuations, the interests and the vices of society; and the study of the individual.

The history of a nation might be written in the first of these senses, entirely in terms of abstraction, and without descending so much as to name one of those individuals to which the nation is composed.

It is curious, and it is important, to trace the progress of mankind from the savage to the civilised state; to observe the points of similitude between the savages of America and the savages of ancient Italy or Greece; to investigate the rise of property moveable to immoveable; and thus to ascertain the causes that operate universally upon masses of men under given circumstances, without being turned aside in their operation by the varying character of individuals.

The fundamental article in this branch of historical investigation, is the progress and varieties of civilisation. But there are many subordinate channels into which it has formed itself. We may study

the history of eloquence or the history of philosophy. We may apply ourselves to the consideration and the arts of life, and the arts of refinement and pleasure. There lie before us the history of wealth and the history of commerce. We may study the progress of revenue and the arts of taxation. We may follow the varieties of climates, and trace their effects on the human body and the human mind. Nay, we may descend still lower; we may have our attention engrossed by the succession of archons¹ and the adjustment of olympiads²; or may apply ourselves entirely to the examination of medals and coins.

There are those who conceive that history, in one or all the kinds here enumerated, is the only species of history deserving a serious attention. They disdain the records of individuals. To interest our passions, or employ our thoughts about personal events, be they of patriots, of authors, of heroes or kings, they regard as a symptom of effeminacy. Their mighty minds cannot descend to be busied about anything less than the condition of nations, and the collation and comparison of successive ages. Whatever would disturb by exciting our feelings the torpid tranquility of the soul, they have in unspeakable abhorrence.

It is to be feared that one of the causes that have dictated the panegyric which has so often been pronounced upon this series of history, is its dry and repulsive nature. Men who by persevering exertions have conquered this subject in defiance of innumerable obstacles, will almost always be able to ascribe to it a disproportionate value. Men who have not done this, often imagine they shall acquire at a cheap rate among the ignorant the reputation of profound, by praising, in the style of an adept, that which few men

¹ Archon: The Gnostic religion held that the cosmos were created by a hierarchy of archons, or angelic powers subordinate to the Deity. The archons were also the nine chief magistrates of ancient Athens.

² Olympiad: The period of four years measured between one Olympic Games and the next, by which the ancient Greeks computed time, taking 776 BC as the first year of the first olympiad. (OED)

venture so much as to approach. Difficulty has a tendency to magnify to almost all eyes the excellence of that which only through difficulty can be attained.

The mind of man does not love abstractions. Its genuine and native taste, as it discovers itself in children and uneducated persons, rests entirely in individualities. It is only by perseverance and custom that we are brought to have a relish for philosophy, mathematical, natural or moral. There was a time when the man, now most eagerly attached to them, shrunk with terror from their thorny path.

But the abstractions of philosophy, when we are grown familiar with them, often present to our minds a simplicity and precision, that may well supply the place of entire individuality. The abstractions of history are more cumbrous and unwieldy. In their own nature perhaps they are capable of simplicity. But this species is yet in its infancy. He who would study the history of nations abstracted from individuals whose passions and peculiarities are interesting to our minds, will find it a dry and frigid science. It will supply him with no clear ideas. The mass, as fast as he endeavours to cement and unite it, crumbles from his grasp, like a lump of sand. Those who study revenue or almost any other of the complex subjects above enumerated are ordinarily found, with immense pains to have compiled a species of knowledge which is no sooner accumulated than it perishes, and rather to have confounded themselves with a labyrinth of particulars, than to have risen to the dignity of principles.

Let us proceed to the consideration of the second great branch of the study of society. In doing so we shall be insensibly led to assign to the first branch its proper rank.

The study of individual men can never fail to be an object of the highest importance. It is only by comparison that we come to know any thing of mind or ourselves. We go forth into the world; we see what man is; we enquire what he was; and when we return home to engage in the solemn act of self-investigation, our most

useful employment is to produce the materials we have collected abroad, and, by a sort of magnetism, cause those particulars to start our to view in ourselves, which might otherwise have laid for ever undetected.

But the study of individual history has a higher use than merely as it conduces to the elucidation of science. It is the most fruitful source of activity and motive. If a man were condemned to perfect solitude, he would probably sink into the deepest and most invariable lethargy of soul. If he only associate, as most individuals are destined to do, with ordinary men, he will be in danger of becoming such as they are. It is the contemplation of illustrious men, such as we find scattered through the long succession of ages, that kindles into flame the hidden fire within us. The excellence indeed of sages, of patriots and poets, as we find it exhibited at the end of their maturity, is too apt to overwhelm and discourage us with its lustre. But history takes away the cause of our depression. It enables us to view minutely and in detail what to the uninstructed eye was too powerful to be gazed at; and, by tracing the progress of the virtuous and the wise from its first dawn to its meridian lustre, shows us that they were composed of materials merely human. It was the sight of the trophies of Mithrades³, that recurred to break the infant slumbers of his more illustrious successor. While we admire the poet and the hero, and sympathize with his generous ambition or his ardent expressions, we insensibly imbibe the same spirit, and burn with kindred fires.

But let us suppose that the genuine purpose of history, was to enable us to understand the machine of society, and to direct it to its best purposes. Even here individual history will perhaps be found in point of importance to take the lead of general. General history will furnish us with precedents in abundance, will show us how that which happened in one country has been repeated in

³ Mithrades V, murdered in 123 BC and succeeded by his eleven-year-old son Mithrades VI, later known as Mithrades "the Great" for his military conquests.

the collections and the efforts of man, till absurdity and folly are extirpated among them, must be contented to remain in ignorance, and wait for the state, where he expects that faith will give place to sight, and conjecture be swallowed up in knowledge.

enthusiastic and the sublime licence of imagination, that belong to that species of composition. True history consists in a delineation of consistent, human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances, in showing how character increases and assimilates new substances to its own, and how it decays, together with the catastrophe into which by its own gravity it naturally declines.

There is however, after all, a deduction to be made from this eulogium of the romance writer. To write romance is a task too great for the powers of man, and under which he must be expected to totter. No man can hold the rod so even, but that it will tremble and vary from its course. To sketch a few bold outlines of character is no desperate undertaking; but to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine. We never conceive a situation, or those minute shades in a character that would modify its conduct. Naturalists tell us that a single grain of sand more or less on the surface of the earth, would have altered its motion, and, in the process of ages, have diversified its events. We have no reason to suppose in this respect, that what is true in matter, is false in morals.

Here then the historian in some degree, though imperfectly, seems to recover his advantage upon the writer of romance. He indeed does not understand the character he exhibits, but the events are taken out of his hands and determined by the system of the universe, and therefore, as far as his information extends, must be true. The romance writer, on the other hand, is continually straining at a foresight to which his faculties are incompetent, and continually fails. This is ludicrously illustrated in those few romances which attempt to exhibit the fictitious history of nations. That principle only which holds the planets in their course, is competent to produce that majestic series of events which characterises flux, and successive multitudes.

The result of the whole, is that the sciences and the arts of man are alike imperfect, and almost infantine. He that will not examine

another, and may perhaps even instruct us how that which has occurred in the annals of mankind, may under similar circumstances be produced again. But, if the energy of our minds should lead us to aspire to something more animated and noble than dull repetition, if we love the happiness of mankind enough to feel ourselves impelled to explore new and untrodden paths, we must then not rest contented with considering society in a mass, but must analyze the materials from which it is composed. It will be necessary for us to scrutinize the nature of man, before we can pronounce what it is of which social man is capable. Laying aside the generalities of historical abstraction, we must mark the operation of human passions; must observe the empire of motives whether grovelling or elevated; and must note the influence that one human being exercises over another, and the ascendancy of the daring and the wise over the vulgar multitude. It is thus, and thus only, that we shall be enabled to add, to the knowledge of the past, a sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity. We shall not only understand those events as they arise which are no better than old incidents under new names, but shall judge truly of such conjunctures and combinations, their sources and effects, as, though they have never yet occurred, are within the capacities of our nature. He that would prove the liberal and spirited benefactor of his species, must connect the two branches of history together, and regard the knowledge of the individual, as that which can alone give energy and utility to the records of our social existence.

From these considerations one inference may be deduced, which constitutes perhaps the most important rule that can be laid down respecting the study of history. This is, the wisdom of studying the detail, and not in abridgement. The prolixity of dullness is indeed contemptible. To read a history which, expanding itself through several volumes, treats only of a short period, is true economy. To read historical abridgements, in which each point of the subject is touched upon only, and immediately dismissed, is a wanton prodigality of time worthy only of folly or of madness.

The figures which present themselves in such a history, are like the groups that we sometimes see placed in the distance of a landscape, that are just sufficiently marked to distinguish the man from the brute, or the male from the female, but are totally unsusceptible of discrimination of form or expression of sentiment. The men I would study upon the canvas of history, are men worth the becoming intimately acquainted with.

It is in history, as it is in life. Superficial acquaintance is nothing. A scene incessantly floating, cannot instruct us; it can scarcely become a source of amusement to a cultivated mind. I would stop the flying figures, that I may mark them more clearly. There must be an exchange of real sentiments, or an investigation of subtle peculiarities, before improvement can be the result. There is a magnetical virtue in man, but there must be friction and heat, before the virtue will operate.

Pretenders indeed to universal science, who examine nothing, but imagine they understand everything, are ready from the slightest glance to decipher the whole character. Not so the genuine scholar. His curiosity is never satiated. He is ever upon the watch for further and still further particulars. Trembling for his own fallibility and frailty, he employs every precaution to guard himself against them.

There are characters in history that may almost be said to be worth an eternal study. They are epitomes of the [?] of its best and most exalted features, purified from their grossness. I am not contented to observe such a man upon the public stage, I would follow him into his closet.⁴ I would see the friend and the father of a fam-

⁴ Joanna Baillie makes a very similar statement in the "Introductory Discourse" of her *Series of Plays...on the Passions* (1798): "Let us understand, from observation or report, that any person harbours in his breast, concealed from the world's eye, some powerful rankling passion of what kind soever it may be, we will observe every word, every motion, every look, even the distant gait of such a man, with a constancy and attention bestowed upon no other. Nay, should we meet him unexpectedly on our way, a feeling will pass across our minds as though we found ourselves in the neighborhood of some secret and fearful thing.

comments of the actors come out afterwards; to what are we the wiser? Whitlock and Clarendon,¹¹ who lived upon the spot, differ as much in their view of the transactions, as Hume and the whig historians have since done. Yet all are probably honest. If you be a superficial thinker, you will take up with one or another of their representations, as best suits your prejudices. But, if you are a profound one, you will see so many incongruities and absurdities in all, as deeply to impress you with the scepticism of history.

The man of taste and discrimination, who has properly weighed these causes, will be apt to exclaim, "Dismiss me from the falsehood and impossibility of history, and deliver me over to the reality of romance."

The conjectures of the historian must be built upon a knowledge of the characters of his personages. But we never know any man's character. My most intimate and sagacious friend continually misapprehends my motives. He is in most cases a little worse judge of them than myself and I am perpetually mistaken. The materials are abundant for the history of Alexander, Caesar, Cicero and Queen Elizabeth. Yet how widely do the best informed persons differ respecting them? Perhaps by all their character is misrepresented. The conjectures therefore respecting their motives in each particular transaction must be eternally fallacious. The writer of romance stands in this respect upon higher ground. He must be permitted, we should naturally suppose, to understand the character which is the creature of his own fancy.

The writer of romance is to be considered as the writer of real history; while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contented to step down into the place of his rival, with this disadvantage, that he is a romance writer, without the arduous, the

¹¹ Bulstrode Whitelocke (1605–75): author of *Memorials of the English Affairs from the Beginning of the Reign of Charles I to the Happy Restoration of Charles II* (1682). Clarendon (Edward Hyde, 1609–74): 1st Earl of Clarendon, chief advisor to Charles II and author of *True Historical Narrative of the Rebellion and Civil Wars of England* (1702–4).

which, upon a slight substratum of fact, all the license of romantic invention is to be engrafted, is contrary to the principles of a just taste. History is by this means debauched and corrupted. Real characters are wantonly misrepresented. The reader, who has been interested by a romance of this sort, scarcely knows how to dismiss it from his mind when he comes to consider the genuine annals of the period of which it relates. The reality and the fiction, like two substances of disagreeing natures, will never adequately blend with each other. The invention of the writer is much too wanton not to discolour and confound the facts with which he is concerned; while on the other hand, his imagination is fettered and checked at every turn by facts that will not wholly accommodate themselves to the colour of his piece, or the moral he would adduce from it.”

These observations, which have been directed against the production of historical romance, will be found not wholly inapplicable to those which assume the graver and more authentic name of history. The reader will be miserably deluded if, while he reads history, he suffers himself to imagine that he is reading facts. Profound scholars are so well aware of this, that, when they would study the history of any country, they pass over the historians that have adorned and decorated the facts, and proceed at once to the naked and scattered materials, out of which the historian constructed his work. This they do, that they may investigate the story for themselves; or, more accurately speaking, that each man, instead of resting in the inventions of another, may invest his history for himself, and possess his creed as he possesses his property, single and incommunicable.

Philosophers, we are told, have been accustomed by old prescription to blunder in the dark; but there is perhaps no darkness, if we consider the case maturely, so complete as that of the historian. It is a trite observation, to say that the true history of a public transaction is never known till many years after the event. The places, the dates, those things which immediately meet the eye of the spectator, are indeed as well known as they are ever likely to be. But the

ily, as well as the patriot. I would read his works and his letters, if any remain to us. I would observe the turn of his thoughts and the character of his phraseology. I would study his public orations. I would collate his behaviour in prosperity with his behaviour in adversity. I should be glad to know the course of his studies, and the arrangement of his time. I should rejoice to have, or to be enabled to make, if that were possible, a journal of his ordinary and minutest actions. I believe I should be better employed in studying one man, than in perusing the abridgement of Universal History in sixty volumes. I would rather be acquainted with a few trivial particulars of the actions and disposition of Virgil and Horace, than with the lives of many men, and the history of many nations.

This leads us to a second rule respecting the study of history. Those historians alone are worthy of attention and persevering study that treat the development of great genius, or the exhibition of bold and masculine virtues. Modern history indeed we ought to peruse, because all they we wish must be connected with all that we are, and because it is incumbent upon us to explore the means by which the latter may be made, as it were, to slide into the former. But modern history, for the most part, is not to be perused for its own sake.

The ancients were giants, but we, their degenerate successors, are pygmies. There was something in the nature of the Greek and Roman republics that expanded and fired the soul. He that sees not this, if he have had an adequate opportunity to see it, must be destitute of some of the first principles of discrimination. He that feels not the comparative magnitude of their views, must be himself the partaker of a slow-working and unelevated soul.

To convince us of this, we need do no more than look into the biographical collection of Plutarch.⁵ Plutarch is neither lucid in his

If invisible, would we not follow him into his lonely haunts, into his closet, into the midnight silence of his chamber?” (11)

⁵ Plutarch (46–120 AD): Biographer and philosopher, most famously author of *Parallel Lives*.

arrangement, eloquent in his manner, nor powerful in his conceptions. The effect he produces upon us, is the effect of his subject, and is scarcely in any respect aided by the skill of the writer.

From Plutarch let us turn to the collections in English, French and Italian, relative to the persons who in modern times have reflected most honour upon any of these nations. We sometimes no doubt admire, occasionally we sympathise. But the greatest personages there upon record, appear in the comparison encumbered with their rank. Their march is slow, weighed down as they are on every side with prejudices and precedents. They are disciplines to dull monotony. They are cast together in one characteristic mould. There is something in the nature of modern governments and institutions that seems to blight in the bud every grander and more ample development of the soul. When we attempt to display the agility or the grace, the capacity for which inheres in our nature, we resemble a vaulter or *figurante* that should undertake to dance in fetters.

The ancients on the other hand are men of a free and undaunted spirit. There is a conscious dignity in their mien that impresses us with awe. Whatever they undertake they undertake with a full and undivided soul. They proceed to their object with an unerring aim, and do not lose themselves in dark, inexplicable windings. He that shall study their history with an unbiassed spirit, will almost imagine that he is reading of a different species. He will not be blind to their mistakes, their abuses and their crimes, but he will confess that their minds are of a more decisive character, and their virtues more attractive and sublime.

We are sometimes told that the remoteness of the object in this case misleads us, and that we admire the ancients for this reason merely, because they are ancients. But this solution will not account for the phenomenon. Read on the one hand Thucydides and

the whole scum and surcharge of the press. But surely this is not the way in which literature would teach us to consider the subject.

When we speak of poetry, we do not fear to commend this species of composition, regardless of the miserable trash that from month to month finds its way from the press under the appellation of poetry. The like may be said of history, or of books of philosophy, natural and intellectual. There is no species of literature that would stand this ordeal.

If I would estimate truly any head of composition, nothing can be more unreasonable, than for me to take into account every pretender to literature that has started in it. In poetry I do not consider those persons who merely know how to count their syllables and tag a rhyme; still less those who print their effusion in the form of verse without being adequate to either of these. I recollect those authors only who are endowed with some of the essentials of poetry, with its imagery, its enthusiasm, or its empire over the soul of man. Just so in the cause before us, I should consider only those persons who had really written romance, not those who had vainly attempted it.

Romance, then, strictly considered, may be pronounced to be one of the species of history. The difference between romance and what ordinarily bears the denomination history, is this. The historian is confined to individual incident and individual man, and must hang upon that his invention or conjecture as he can. The writer collects his materials from all sources, experience, report, and the records of human affairs; then generalises them; and finally selects, from their elements and the various combinations they afford, those instances which he is best qualified to portray, and which he judges most calculated to impress the hear and improve the faculties of his reader. In this point of view we should be apt to pronounce that romance was a bolder species of composition than history.

It has been affirmed by the critics that the species of composition which Abbe Prevost and others have attempted, and according to

weaves a number of happy, ingenious and instructive inventions, blending them into one continuous and indiscernible mass. It sufficiently corresponds with the denomination, under which Abbe Prevost¹⁰ acquired considerable applause, of historical romance. Abbe Prevost differs from Sallust, inasmuch as he made freer use of what may be styled, the *licentia historica*.

If then history be little better than romance under a graver name, it may not be foreign to the subject here treated, to enquire into the credit due to that species of literature, which bears the express stamp of invention, and calls itself romance or novel.

This sort of writing has been exposed to more obloquy and censure than any other.

The principal cause of this obloquy is sufficiently humorous and singular.

Novels, as an object of trade among booksellers, are of a peculiar cast. There are few by which immense sums of money can be expected to be gained. There is scarcely one by which some money is not gained. A class of readers, consisting of women and boys, and which is considerably numerous, requires a continual supply of books of this sort. The circulating libraries therefore must be furnished; while, in consequence of the discredit which has fallen upon romance, such works are rarely found to obtain a place in the collection of the gentleman or the scholar. An ingenious bookseller of the metropolis, speculating upon this circumstance, was accustomed to paste an advertisement in his window, to attract the eye of the curious passenger, and to fire his ambition, by informing him of a “want of novels for the ensuing season”.

The critic and the moralist, in their estimate of romances, have borrowed the principle that regulates the speculations of trade. They have weighed novels by the great and taken into their view

¹⁰ Abbe Prevost (1697–1763): French novelist most famous for writing historical romances.

Livy,⁶ and on the other Hume and Voltaire and Robertson.⁷ When we admire the personages of the former, we simply enter into the feelings with which these authors recorded them. The latter neither experience such emotions nor excite them. The ancients were not ancients to their contemporaries,

- Les anciens etaient contemporains de leurs historiens, et nous ont pourtant appris a les admirer. Assurement si la posterite jamais admire les notres, elle ne l’ausa pas appris de nous.

Rousseau: *Nouvelle Heloise*, Lettre XII

[The ancients were contemporary with their historians, but they have taught us to admire them. Assuredly, if posterity should admire our own men, it will do so not because of us]

No: the difference is intrinsic, and the emotions will be generated as long as history endures.

What sort of an object is the history of England? Till the extinction of the wars of York and Lancaster, it is one scene of barbarism and cruelty. Superstition rides triumphant upon the subject neck of princes and of people, intestine war of noble with noble, or of one pretender to the crown against another, is almost incessant. The gallant champion is no sooner ousted, than he is led without form to the scaffold, or massacred in cold blood upon the field. In all these mighty struggles, scarcely a trace is to be found of a sense

⁶ Thucydides (460–395 BC): Greek historian, most famously author of *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Livy (59 BC – AD 17): Roman historian noted for his history of Rome.

⁷ David Hume (1711–76): Scottish philosopher and historian, noted for *A Treatise on Human Nature* and his *History of England*, as well as other books and essays. Voltaire (1694–1778): French philosopher of the Enlightenment, author of *Lettres Philosophiques* and *Candide*. William Robertson: Scottish historian, friend of Hume, Adam Smith, and prominent member of Edinburgh group of thinkers usually gathered under the term “the Scottish Enlightenment.”

of the rights of men. They are combinations among the oppressors against him that would usurp their tyranny, or they are the result of an infatuated predilection for one despotic monster in preference to another. The period of the Tudors is a period of base and universal slavery. The reign of Elizabeth is splendid, but its far-famed worthies are in reality supple and servile courtiers, treacherous, undermining and unprincipled. The period of the Stuarts is the only portion of our history interesting to the heart of man. Yet its noblest virtues are obscured by the vile jargon of fanaticism and hypocrisy. From the moment that the grant contest excited under the Stuarts was quieted by the Revolution,⁸ our history assumes its most insipid and insufferable form. It is the history of negotiations and tricks, it is the history of revenues and debts, it is the history of corruption and political profligacy, but it is not the history of genuine independent man.

Some persons, endowed with too much discernment and taste not to perceive the extreme disparity that subsists between the character of ancient and modern times, have observed that ancient history carries no other impression to their minds than that of exaggeration and fable.

It is not necessary here to enter into a detail of the evidence upon which our belief of ancient history is founded. Let us take it for granted that it is a fable. Are all fables unworthy of regard? Ancient history, says Rousseau, is a tissue of such fables, as have a moral perfectly adapted to the human heart. I ask not, as a principal point, whether it be true or false? My first enquiry is, "Can I derive instruction from it? Is it a genuine praxis upon the nature of man? Is it pregnant with the most generous motives and examples? If so, I had rather be profoundly versed in this fable, than in all the genuine histories that ever existed."

⁸ The so-called "Glorious" or "Bloodless" Revolution of 1688, which set up a balance of power between the Crown and Parliament, effectively setting up an oligarchy.

It must be admitted indeed that all history bears too near a resemblance to fable. Nothing is more uncertain, more contradictory, more unsatisfactory than the evidence of facts. If this be the case in courts of justice, where truth is sometimes sifted with tenacious perseverance, how much more will it hold true of the historian? He can administer no oath, he cannot issue his precept, and summon his witnesses from distant provinces, he cannot arraign his personages and compel them to put in their answer. He must take what they choose to tell, the broken fragments, and the scattered ruins of evidence.

That history which comes nearest to truth, is the mere chronicle of facts, places and dates. But this is in reality no history. He that knows only what day the Bastille was taken and on what spot Louis XVI perished, knows nothing. He professes the mere skeleton of history. The muscles, the articulations, every thing in which the life emphatically resides, is absent.

Read Sallust.⁹ To every action he assigns a motive. Rarely an uncertainty diversifies his page. He describes his characters with preciseness and decision. He seems to enter into the hearts of his personages, and unfolds their secret thought. Considered as fable, nothing can be more perfect. But neither is this history.

There is but one further mode of writing history, and this is the mode principally prevalent in modern times. In this mode, the narrative is sunk in the critic. The main body of the composition consists of a logical deduction and calculation of probabilities. This species of writing may be of use as a whetstone upon which to sharpen our faculty of discrimination, but it answers none of the legitimate purposes of history.

From these considerations it follows that the noblest and most excellent species of history, may be decided to be a composition in which, with a scanty substratum of facts and dates, the writer inter-

⁹ Sallust (86–34 BC): Roman historian and statesman, author of histories of the Catiline conspiracy and the Jugurtha War.