THE REPOPULARISATION OF HISTORY, BEING THE OPENING ADDRESS OF THE HISTORICAL SECTION AT CANTERBURY.[1]

By Professor E. C. CLARK, LL.D., F.S.A.

For the very short address which I propose to give on opening the Historical Section, it seems that to a person in my position, as to greater men, three courses are open: he may furnish you with some historical information of a local character bearing on the particular objects of the meeting; he may inflict upon you a first draught of some historical subject to which he himself has paid special attention; or he may confine himself to some remarks which a more general—I am afraid I must say a less serious—study of history has suggested to him. As to the first—if I had the local knowledge I should scarcely have ventured to air it in the proximity of so eminent an authority as the Most Rev. Primate, who was to have honoured us by presiding over a Canterbury meeting, not to mention such Ciceroni as Messrs. Hope and Fox. As to the second—if I had a special historical subject, I should hesitate to put the patience of my friends a second time to a test which they endured with such good nature at Cambridge. So I fall back upon the third course—that of making a few remarks upon the present study of history in general. I cannot speak as a historian—not even as what in our elegant modern phrase is called a "researcher" in history—only as an amateur, but an amateur who cares really more for history than for any other subject. There is some use, occasionally, in an address by an amateur. He is, of course, fair game for the better informed: he is sure to expose his own ignorance; but, after all, he can speak, in a way that the professional cannot, to and for ordinary persons—persons with whom the particular subject, in this case history, cannot be the pursuit of their lives, but yet who may be very truly interested in it, who might derive a great deal of valuable education from it, and who are

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really grateful for such helps to the study as are within their capacity and opportunities. And though *I* am speaking as a non-historian, I mean to borrow my text from one or two very significant suggestions about the results of over-specialisation from a real historian's address —that of Dr. Hodgkin, delivered at our Edinburgh meeting. I take a little more hopeful view than he took, and style my address the "*Re*popularisation of History."

To omit what some one has called, speaking on another subject, the "usual panegyric" on historical study, I would yet dwell for a moment on one or two points which, to my mind, specially recommend that study for the present time. It is a time, as it seems to me, of impulse rather than judgment: of great devotion to material pleasure, with alternations of, may I venture to say, somewhat fantastic altruism: a time when the scientific doctrine of evolution has set our most fundamental ideas quivering: a time when political power has passed into the hands of those who cannot but be comparatively ill-informed. History is not, nor is anything else, a panacea for these ailments: but history at any rate furnishes a purely intellectual pleasure which appeals to a very wide circle of minds: it is essential for the accurate tracing out of our human development, whether in art, in literature, in religion, or in science itself: and it is of inestimable value as a corrective to the superficial conclusions and the interested statements which tend to form the staple of politics based merely on the present.

Among the commonplaces with which I am afraid I am regaling you, there is one other, which I will cut very short—I mean the fact that *our* subject, Archæology, has become a *science*—a science closely connected with, directly ancillary to, History, and that History has, greatly through this help, received within the last twenty or thirty years a development quite out of proportion to its previous bulk and growth. I need only refer to the practically new study of palæography, to the increasing discovery of ancient records, to the wide publication of such records as well as of the more modern ones, and to the growing solidarity of historical research among *savants* of every civilised country.

Amidst all this life and growth, I wonder if the result has been quite satisfactory for my brothers and sisters whom I venture to generalise as the "ordinary person." *Does* he know more than his ancestors knew, of a subject so interesting, so valuable, so almost indispensable? Is he, on the contrary, or was he till very recently, in danger of being repelled by a voluminousness intractable to any but a specialist, disposed to drop the whole subject in despair, or, to content himself with the kaleidoscopic omniscience of polite society, satisfied, if he can scamper through the articles or reviews of to-day, to forget all about them to-morrow?

No, there have always been, amongst *our* class, lovers of history *not* content with this kind of knowledge; but they have often been driven, by necessity, to a very partial study of their subject—to the study of what are prettily called "cameos," or to the examiner's favourite field of *special epochs*.

I have not a word to say against either of these, as far as they go. The "cameo" has brightness and interest, with the merit of recognising the importance of great personalities, which some modern historians ignore too much, in their desire to resolve everything into tendencies and movements and "*zeit-geist*." Again, a detailed study of some one *epoch* is, I believe, essential for acquiring the power to estimate the conclusions of other people, in cases where we cannot ourselves go into detail. But yet—one visit to a Museum, whether of archæology or of arts or crafts; one of our own weeks of varied inspection; one perusal of such writing as Macaulay's Essays, will shew us that we cannot isolate the phœnomena of history. With all allowance made for local separation and for the initiative of great men, each event is, in some sort, the result of all that have gone before: we inevitably find that, concentrate our gaze as we will on a definite spot, we shall still need some general view of the whole field. As to the history of our own country I think this truth would always have been admitted: but that it has a wider application still may be seen more clearly in these days of foreign travel for all who can command any leisure, of cosmopolitan communication of ideas, of mutual comparison and improvement amongst national institutions.

Even the "ordinary person," then, who cares about the subject at all, does want some general outline, at least of European history and that of outside nations most connected with Europe. And I think he got such a general outline in older times, more than in recent. I do not attribute this merely to the undoubted fact, that what are called Standard books were more read, in days when there was less periodical literature. But I know there *were* just readable authorities, which would at least give some idea of the contemporaneity or the sequence of events —so that one would not put down the earlier as a result of the later, or attribute some definite reform to a man whose great-grandson might perhaps just see the beginning of it. Now I am not going to expose myself to the pitying contempt of the well informed by naming the sort of books which have sometimes saved *me* from such blunders: but I venture to mention two failings which have struck me as occasionally incapacitating our great works of modern research from giving the particular help required—apart from mere bulk. I will call these failings—as there is nothing like a strained metaphor for arresting attention—Indigestion of matter and Superiority of manner.

Accumulation of materials is the glory of this "researching" age. From the domestic accounts of a Pharaoh, or the minute books of a great Ecclesiastical Corporation, such as those on which Mr. Cross is about to address you, down to the parish register of Little Pedlington, few documents escape the modern investigator, who feels that "*this* ought to be in print," or the painstaking writer on history who holds, much to his credit, that nothing of human interest is beneath its dignity. But such writers do sometimes appear to forget that the business of a true historian is not merely to shoot down a lot of nuts for his readers to crack, but to extract the kernel for them himself—literally to *enucleate*, as Justinian said about the chaos of old law which came down to *him*. References, quotations in full, are thankfully received, or rather justly expected: but surely the reader may also expect some power of compression, some drawing of conclusions! And if the writer thinks, as he may, that conflicting views are too equally balanced for *him* to give

a resulting opinion, he can at least give a full table of contents and an index, both of which should be made by himself. Modern literature is immensely in advance of ancient, or rather perhaps of semi-modern, in these respects. A writer on history now generally performs the one-half of his duty—gives us the contents if no index, the index if no contents. Still, the protest is sometimes necessary. As to the man who omits both, he ought to be hanged without benefit of clergy, or bear whatever reviewing comes nearest that penalty.

As to "superiority," I admit that we do not often hear now of matter being beneath the dignity of history, and I ought not to spend much time upon faults of tone or sentiment. Still, I wish that modern historians would not sometimes act as if they had been bitten by a bad sort of young reviewer. Why is the last bit of information that has turned up, especially if "made in Germany," to be treated as if it had entirely thrown into the shade all that was known before? Why must some popular view, about which it is still not *too* certain that it is not right, be referred to as "the long exploded fallacy"? Why is some favourite old illustration to be sneered out of notice as "the hackneyed quotation from Noodle"? These faults, which *do* rather mark a certain school, not only make the reader lose his temper, but depreciate the value of their author's real contributions to his subject far more than he succeeds in depreciating his predecessors. But pray do not let me be understood as predicating this disagreeable peculiarity broadcast of the modern historian. The other day a high authority, treating of rather a well-known subject, to whom I hazarded the suggestion that he had no doubt some perfectly new documents in hand, replied, "No; I have only what have been in the hands of the public for some time—I find them quite enough." And I read with pleasure the following praise, given in a very recent review, to a writer on a semi-historical subject. Mr. ——— dares to be *quite elementary*, and that is one of his chief merits." I do not mean to say that such modesty and simplicity are rare among modern historians: only that they are very pleasant when one meets with them.

May I also enter here some timid plea for what is so

frequently decried as "fine writing," and for those touches of brightness and colour which are held up to scorn as "purple passages"? When I hear a critic inveighing against "fine writing" I of course conclude that he has been well advised in abstaining from that class of literature himself: but I also fear that he may sometimes succeed in deterring others from work which we, of the generality, would not willingly lose. The most Puritan of us have long come to the conclusion that a church is not necessarily the better for closely resembling a barn, nor need a theatre be exactly modelled upon a gas-holder. Then do not let us discourage, or allow to be discouraged, the occasional touches of enthusiasm and gleams of poetry in which a generous writer will warm to the subject that he loves. Let us be as judicial as impartial as we can: but we do not lose those qualities, because we can still delight in the majestic periods of Macaulay's History or the glowing picture of Stanley's Memorials.

But, after all, *bulk* is the great obstacle to a general knowledge of history, as brought up to date, being widely diffused. And here I hope and believe that our present outlook justifies me in the title which I have chosen for these remarks — the *re*-popularisation of History.

It is a little over twenty years since a series of short histories—for *schools* in the first instance, but calculated to be useful for other readers as well—was projected by one of the best and soundest teachers of History we have ever had—the late Professor Freeman—and inaugurated by him with an admirable general sketch. This has been followed, some ten years ago, by a series of rather fuller histories—the "Story of the Nations"—which seem to me very nearly to supply the requirements of the ordinary student of history: and the series has been supplemented by the "Heroes of the Nations"—works more in the nature of what have been called "Cameos," but in many cases so widely treated as to constitute the continuous history of a whole important period.

These books, being from different hands, are, of course, of very various degrees of merit. One of the best of the "Stories" is the work—unfortunately the last work—of the great historian whom I have just named. One of the

best of the "Heroes" is by an eminent writer still, I am glad to say, among us, who has grouped round Theodoric just what we most want to know of Italy and her invaders during one of the most eventful centuries in the history of the world.

These books vary much, as I have said, in excellence: their utility might I think, in many cases, be increased by the addition of tabulated chronologies; but they have most of them these good points: They are written simply and readably; they contain results, generally of the latest investigations, in a definite form; they are illustrated by good maps and by artistic contributions from archæology which give just the touch of human life and reality that histories so often want. Finally, some of the most valuable of them are written by men who have compiled larger books, of more detailed reference, on the same subject, and have thoroughly worked over all the available authorities, but have not thought it beneath them to compress their work for the popular use of those who cannot essay the longer study. There is great truth in what Freeman said of his own shorter history of Sicily, that in order to write a small history you must first write a large one. In looking forward to the future of historical study among the class to which I address myself, I would rather put a converse sentiment; and hope that all the writers of our good large histories may be induced to write short ones also. They could not do a more useful work, nor one, I believe, which would conduce more both to their own repute and interest.

Let me conclude by instancing a most admirable specimen of a short but complete history by a well-known writer of larger works on the same subject—Gardener's *Student's History of England.* Whether one agrees with the author's political views or not, I certainly think that the events of our history are put more clearly and succinctly; that the vast subject is made into a more interesting and digestible whole for the ordinary student; that our national life, character, and art are better illustrated by trustworthy engravings than has ever been done before. The services rendered in the last department, by our friend Mr. Hope's direction, well deserve an independent notice of honour. Perhaps some future edition

may add, from the publications of the Chaucer Society, some contemporary portraits of that brilliant bit of fourteenth century life—the group of Canterbury pilgrims—to which Mr. Gardener refers, and which Dean Stanley describes. At present you have to see them in Stoddart's excellent but not quite authentic portraiture—the Knight, the Franklein, the wife of Bath, and the rest. May I add, for the mind's eye, a brief finish drawn from the last "tales" themselves? The "Coke" has recovered, we hope, from that lick with the rough side of the Manciple's tongue, assisted by what I am afraid I must term a hair of the dog that bit him. The company have composed themselves under the discourse—prepared, Professor Skeat thinks, for some other occasion—of that excellent "poore Person," against whose merits it can only be said that he is perhaps a little *long*—like others who have not his excuse. However, here I end, with a last testimony to the wisdom of incorporating *all* matters of human life and interest in this genuinely popular style of history which I have been commending. If such books as Mr. Gardener's continue to be written, I do not think we need fear that over-specialisation against which Dr. Hodgkin warned us five years ago, and against which a worthy antidote has also been supplied in the shorter works of Dr. Hodgkin himself.