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An Introduction to the History of Western by James Harvey Robinson

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[Illustration: PAGE FROM AN ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT]

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE

HISTORY OF WESTERN EUROPE

BY

JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY IN COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

History is no easy science; its subject, human society, is infinitely complex.

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PREFACE

In introducing the student to the history of the development of European culture, the problem of proportion has seemed to me, throughout, the fundamental one. Consequently I have endeavored not only to state matters truly and clearly but also to bring the narrative into harmony with the most recent conceptions of the relative importance of past events and institutions. It has seemed best, in an elementary treatise upon so vast a theme, to omit the names of many personages and conflicts of secondary importance which have ordinarily found their way into our historical text-books. I have ventured also to neglect a considerable number of episodes and anecdotes which, while hallowed by assiduous repetition, appear to owe their place in our manuals rather to accident or mere tradition than to any profound meaning for the student of the subject.

The space saved by these omissions has been used for three main purposes. Institutions under which Europe has lived for centuries, above all the Church, have been discussed with a good deal more fullness than is usual in similar manuals. The life and work of a few men of indubitably first-rate importance in the various fields of human endeavor--Gregory the Great, Charlemagne, Abelard, St. Francis, Petrarch, Luther, Erasmus, Voltaire, Napoleon, Bismarck--have been treated with care proportionate to their significance for the world. Lastly, the scope of the work has been broadened so that not only the political but also the economic, intellectual, and artistic achievements of the past form an integral part of the narrative.

I have relied upon a great variety of sources belonging to the various orders in the hierarchy of historical literature; it is happily unnecessary to catalogue these. In some instances I have found other manuals, dealing with portions of my field, of value. In the earlier chapters, Emerton's admirable *Introduction to the Middle Ages* furnished many suggestions. For later periods, the same may be said of Henderson's careful *Germany in the Middle Ages* and Schwill's clear and well-proportioned *History of Modern Europe*. For the most recent period, I have made constant use of Andrews' scholarly *Development of Modern Europe*. For England, the manuals of Green and Gardiner have been used. The greater part of the work is, however, the outcome of study of a wide range of standard special treatises dealing with some short period or with a particular phase of European progress. As examples of these, I will mention only Lea's monumental contributions to our knowledge of the jurisprudence of the Church, Rashdall's *History of the Universities in the Middle Ages*, Richter's incomparable *Annalen der Deutschen Geschichte im Mittelalter*, the *Histoire Générale*, and the well-known works of Luchaire, Voigt, Hefele, Bezold, Janssen, Lefebvre, Creighton, Pastor. In some cases, as in the opening of the Renaissance, the Lutheran Revolt, and the French Revolution, I have been able to form my opinions to some extent from first-hand material.

My friends and colleagues have exhibited a generous interest in my enterprise, of which I have taken constant advantage. Professor E.H. Castle of Teachers College, Miss Ellen S. Davison, Dr. William R. Shepherd, and Dr. James T. Shotwell of the historical department of Columbia University, have very kindly read part of my manuscript. The proof has been revised by my colleague, Professor William A. Dunning, Professor Edward P. Cheyney of the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Ernest F. Henderson, and by Professor Dana C. Munro of the University of Wisconsin. To all of these I am much indebted. Both in the arduous preparation of the manuscript and in the reading of the proof my wife has been my constant companion, and to her the volume owes innumerable rectifications in arrangement and diction. I would also add a word of gratitude to my publishers for their hearty coöperation in their important part of the undertaking.

The *Readings in European History*, a manual now in preparation, and designed to accompany this volume, will contain comprehensive bibliographies for each chapter and a selection of illustrative material, which it is hoped will enable the teacher and pupil to broaden and vivify their knowledge. In the present volume I have given only a few titles at the end of some of the chapters, and in the footnotes I mention, for collateral reading, under the heading "Reference," chapters in the best available books, to which the student may be sent for additional detail. Almost all the books referred to might properly find a place in every high-school library.

J.H.R.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, January 12, 1903.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF WESTERN EUROPE

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL POINT OF VIEW

[Sidenote: The scope of history.]

1. History, in the broadest sense of the word, is all that we know about everything that man has ever done, or thought, or hoped, or felt. It is the limitless science of past human affairs, a subject immeasurably vast and important but exceedingly vague. The historian may busy himself deciphering hieroglyphics on an Egyptian obelisk, describing a mediæval monastery, enumerating the Mongol emperors of Hindustan or the battles of Napoleon. He may explain how the Roman Empire was conquered by the German barbarians, or why the United States and Spain came to blows in 1898, or what Calvin thought of Luther, or what a French peasant had to eat in the eighteenth century. We can know something of each of these matters if we choose to examine the evidence which still exists; they all help to make up history.

[Sidenote: Object of this volume.]

The present volume deals with a small but very important portion of the history of the world. Its object is to give as adequate an account as is possible in one volume of the chief changes in western Europe since the German barbarians overcame the armies of the Roman Empire and set up states of their own, out of which the present countries of France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Spain, the Netherlands, and England have slowly grown. There are, however, whole libraries upon the history of each of these countries during the last fifteen hundred years, and it requires a volume or two to give a tolerably complete account of any single important person, like St. Francis, Cromwell, Frederick the Great, or Napoleon. Besides biographies and general histories, there are many special treatises upon the Church and other great institutions; upon the literature, art, philosophy, and law of the various countries. It is obvious, therefore, that only a very few of the historical facts known to scholars can possibly find a place in a single volume such as this. One who undertakes to condense what we know of Europe's past, since the times of Theodosius and Alaric, into the space of six hundred pages assumes a very grave responsibility. The reader has a right to ask not only that what he finds in the book shall be at once true and clearly stated, but that it shall consist, on the whole, of the most important and useful of all the things which might have been selected from the well-nigh infinite mass of true things that are known.

We gain practically nothing from the mere enumeration of events and dates. The student of history wishes to know how people lived; what were their institutions (which are really only the habits of nations), their occupations, interests, and achievements; how business was transacted in the Middle Ages almost without the aid of money; how, later, commerce increased and industry grew up; what a great part the Christian church played in society; how the monks lived and what they did for mankind. In short, the object of an introduction to mediæval and modern European history is the description of the most significant achievements of western civilization during the past fifteen hundred years,—the explanation of how the Roman Empire of the West and the wild and unknown districts inhabited by the German races have become the Europe of Gladstone and Bismarck, of Darwin and Pasteur.

In order to present even an outline of the great changes during this long period, all that was exceptional and abnormal must be left out. We must fix our attention upon man's habitual conduct, upon those things that he kept on doing in essentially the same way for a century or so. Particular events are important in so far as they illustrate these permanent conditions and explain how the western world passed from one state to another.

[Sidenote: We should study the past sympathetically.]

We must learn, above all, to study sympathetically institutions and beliefs that we are tempted at first to declare absurd and unreasonable. The aim of the historian is not to prove that a particular way of doing a thing is right or wrong, as, for instance, intrusting the whole government to a king or forbidding clergymen to

marry. His object is to show as well as he can how a certain system came to be introduced, what was thought of it, how it worked, and how another plan gradually supplanted it. It seems to us horrible that a man should be burned alive because he holds views of Christianity different from those of his neighbors. Instead, however, of merely condemning the practice, we must, as historical students, endeavor to see why practically every one in the thirteenth century, even the wisest and most tender-hearted, agreed that such a fearful punishment was the appropriate one for a heretic. An effort has, therefore, been made throughout this volume to treat the convictions and habits of men and nations in the past with consideration; that is, to make them seem natural and to show their beneficent rather than their evil aspects. It is not the weakness of an institution, but the good that is in it, that leads men to adopt and retain it.

[Sidenote: Impossibility of dividing the past into clearly defined periods.]

[Sidenote: All general changes take place gradually.]

2. It is impossible to divide the past into distinct, clearly defined periods and prove that one age ended and another began in a particular year, such as 476, or 1453, or 1789. Men do not and cannot change their habits and ways of doing things all at once, no matter what happens. It is true that a single event, such as an important battle which results in the loss of a nation's independence, may produce an abrupt change in the government. This in turn may encourage or discourage commerce and industry and modify the language and the spirit of a people. Yet these deeper changes take place only very gradually. After a battle or a revolution the farmer will sow and reap in his old way, the artisan will take up his familiar tasks, and the merchant his buying and selling. The scholar will study and write and the household go on under the new government just as they did under the old. So a change in government affects the habits of a people but slowly in any case, and it may leave them quite unaltered.

The French Revolution, at the end of the eighteenth century, was probably the most abrupt and thoroughgoing change in the habits of a nation of which we have any record. But we shall find, when we come to study it, that it was by no means so sudden in reality as is ordinarily supposed. Moreover, the innovators did not even succeed in permanently altering the form of government; for when the French, after living under a monarchy for many centuries, set up a republic in 1792, the new government lasted only a few years. The nation was monarchical by habit and soon gladly accepted the rule of Napoleon, which was more despotic than that of any of its former kings. In reorganizing the state he borrowed much from the discarded monarchy, and the present French republic still retains many of these arrangements.

[Sidenote: The unity or continuity of history.]

This tendency of mankind to do, in general, this year what it did last, in spite of changes in some one department of life,—such as substituting a president for a king, traveling by rail instead of on horseback, or getting the news from a newspaper instead of from a neighbor,—results in what is called the *unity* or *continuity of history*. The truth that no abrupt change has ever taken place in all the customs of a people, and that it cannot, in the nature of things, take place, is perhaps the most fundamental lesson that history teaches.

Historians sometimes seem to forget this principle, when they claim to begin and end their books at precise dates. We find histories of Europe from 476 to 918, from 1270 to 1492, as if the accession of a capable German king in 918, or the death of a famous French king in 1270, or the discovery of America, marked a general change in European affairs. In reality, however, no general change took place at these dates or in any other single year. It would doubtless have proved a great convenience to the readers and writers of history if the world had agreed to carry out a definite programme and alter its habits at precise dates, preferably at the opening of each century. But no such agreement has ever been adopted, and the historical student must take things as he finds them. He must recognize that nations retain their old customs while they adopt new ones, and that a portion of a nation may advance while a great part of it stays behind.