

# *The Past as an Extension of the Present*

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IF WE INQUIRE into the historical philosophy and the historical vision of the generation that founded this Society and its sister institution in Boston—the generation of Isaiah Thomas and Jeremy Belknap—we meet, at the very threshold what seems to us a paradox. This is the contrast between the formal political and the formal historical writing of the American Enlightenment. The generation that gave us indubitably the most profound and eloquent political treatises of our literature, from the Declaration of Independence and *Common Sense* to the debates in the Federal Convention and the *Federalist Papers*, gave us not a single formal historical work that anyone but a scholar can remember, or an Antiquarian read with pleasure, or indeed except as an act of piety. Hutchinson's *Massachusetts Bay* is accurate and judicious and pedestrian but in all fairness we cannot claim Hutchinson after destroying his library and scattering his manuscripts to the winds; Gordon's *American Revolution* is plagiarized from the *Annual Register*; Ebenezer Hazard gave us collections, Noah Webster was a dilettante, Mercy Warren, though occasionally sprightly, was, as John Adams made clear, unreliable; John Marshall's ponderous five volumes on Washington, much of it cribbed from other books, is universally unread. Something is to be said for the Reverend Jeremy Belknaps' *New Hampshire* and for the good Dr. Ramsay's history of the Revolution, but it is sobering to reflect how long these have been unobtainable. Of all that generation only the grotesque

Parson Weems wrote histories that survive, and everyone acknowledges that he was not really an historian at all and that he belongs to the era of romanticism, not to the Enlightenment.

Yet no other generation in our history has been so preoccupied, we might say so obsessed, with history as the generation of the Founding Fathers, that generation to which our founder Isaiah Thomas indubitably belonged, and none, it is safe to say, wrote better history. For the great historical writings of this generation, we turn to John Adams, Franklin, Paine, Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, Madison, Wilson, Rush, and their associates among the Argonauts; and the great historical treatises are not formal histories but such works as *The Defense of the Constitutions*, *Notes on Virginia*, *The Rights of Man*, *The Federalist Papers*, *Wilson's Lectures on the Constitution*, and similar statements.

Turn where you will in the writings of the statesmen and you are launched on the seas of history—often, it must be admitted, the Aegean and the Mediterranean seas. In all the thinking of the Founding Fathers history occupied a central position. History, wrote Benjamin Franklin, would ‘give occasion to expatiate on the advantage of civil orders and constitutions; how men and their properties are protected by joining in societies and establishing government; their industry encouraged and rewarded; arts invented, and life made more comfortable; the advantages of liberty, mischiefs of licentiousness, benefits arising from good laws, and from a due execution of justice, etc. . . .’ Jefferson, too, was confident that history was essential to wisdom and statesmanship. It taught the young, he observed, the virtues of freedom; ‘by apprizing them of the past it will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and nations, it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men, it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise . . . and, knowing it, to defeat its views.’ There is no need to multiply examples of anything so familiar.

What is clear, at once, is that the generation of the Enlightenment, European and American alike, thought of history not as we customarily think of it, as the reconstruction of the past, but as a moral enterprise. Perhaps it was not history at all; let us call it philosophy and be done with it. They had no use for the pedantry of the annalists, and the erudites; they would have had little interest in the research of a Niebuhr or a Ranke, both born in the eighteenth century, who addressed themselves to what actually happened.

They were, in short, in the great tradition of historical thinking, and writing—the tradition that stretches almost unbroken from Herodotus to Gibbon—history as philosophy. In the ancient world the philosophy had been predominantly secular; in the Middle Ages it was philosophy as a revelation of God's purpose with man; since the seventeenth century it had once again become covertly, if not always overtly, secular. Bolingbroke had put it with wonderful succinctness: History is philosophy teaching by examples; and what was this but a restatement of the axiom of Dionysius of Halicarnassus? This was Voltaire's notion of history, Voltaire who towered above all of his contemporaries, and Montesquieu's too—the Montesquieu of the *Grandeur and Decadence of Rome*; it was the Abbé Raynal's idea of history, and that of Turgot and his tragic disciple Condorcet; of the Swiss, Johannes Müller, who inspired Schiller's *William Tell* and of the Dane, Ludwig Holberg who wrote *Universal History*, and of the great Gibbon himself, the only one of them who can be called a professional historian.

It was all history as philosophy, not history as fact. 'Let us begin by laying facts aside' wrote Rousseau in his *Dissertation on the Inequality of Mankind*, and that is pretty much how all of them began, all but Gibbon and Justus Möser of Osnabruck, anyway. In America too, perhaps especially in America, it was morality that was important, not facts; it was wisdom and justice, and virtue. Here is the eminent Dr. Rush urging the trustees of

the new Dickinson College to exchange a set of the *Journals of the House of Commons* for books on mathematics. 'It would distress me' he wrote, 'to hear that a student at Dickinson College had ever wasted half an hour in examining even their title pages. He would find nothing in them but such things as a scholar and a gentleman should strive to forget.' Just before the Revolution John Adams praised Mrs. Macauley's *History of England* because 'it is calculated . . . to bestow the reward of virtue, praise, upon the generous and worthy only. . . . No charms of eloquence can atone for the want of this *exact historical morality*.' And just a few months later the young Jefferson was writing that he considered history as a 'moral exercise.' It was, he added, interchangeable with fiction in inculcating moral lessons.

Now how could the philosophers so confidently rely on history to provide lessons that would be relevant to their own times and their own problems? Easy enough. We have learned to distrust all analogies taken from remote times or different societies, but to the Enlightenment no societies were different and no times remote. After all, mankind was everywhere the same: Hume said it, once and for all: 'Mankind are so much the same in all times and places that History informs us of nothing new or strange. . . . Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.'

Constant and universal: those are the key words. If history was not everywhere the same, human nature was, and it was human nature that the *philosophes* studied. That is why they could move with ease from Greece and Rome to China or Peru. That is why Leibniz could recommend Chinese as the universal language and his disciple Christian Wolff could assert that the teachings of Confucius were quite as acceptable as those of Jesus, a heresy for which he was promptly banished from Prussia by an indignant monarch; that is why Diderot could go to Tahiti for lessons that Bougainville failed to teach, and Dr. Johnson to Abyssinia. That is why the *philosophes* had so little

interest in individuals as such, only in individuals as a type, and why the Enlightenment produced so few good biographies: Boswell was, of course, a romantic, and so too Parson Weems. That is why artists insisted on depersonalizing their historical characters, dressing them all in Roman togas or, perhaps, in nothing—even the practical Franklin wished to be painted ‘with a gown for his dress and a Roman head.’ ‘A history painter paints man in general; a portrait painter a particular man, and consequently a defective model’ said Sir Joshua Reynolds, who knew everything. That is why the eighteenth century—outside England anyway—delighted in the nude, for if you are going to portray Man in General then away with clothing, which was always of time and place. The human body, after all, was the same in every clime and every age. How wonderfully apt was the astonished cry of the boy Benjamin West when they took him to see the Apollo Belvedere, ‘My God, how like a Mohawk Indian.’

Thus the Founding Fathers could confidently draw from their study of history, chiefly Greek, Roman, and English, moral lessons that were applicable to their own day. But now we come to something that still has the power to excite us. All read the same history, all drew from its examples much the same body of conclusions. But here what we may call the school of Adams and the school of Jefferson parted company, and the disagreement is basic to an understanding of the two men, and an understanding of the way in which the American Enlightenment differed from the European.

For in his interpretation of history, Adams belonged to the Old World, not the New. As he surveyed history, a survey that covered more than a score of societies, he found men everywhere the same, and governments everywhere the same. Men were creatures of passion, greed, ambition, and vanity; animated, all of them, by an ungovernable lust for power; governments tended everywhere to tyranny; you can read the melancholy record in the chaotic volumes of the *Defense*. And Adams

drew from this reading of history conclusions which he thought inescapable. If human nature was everywhere the same and government everywhere the same, what reason was there to suppose, or even to hope, that these would be different in America? And as Adams looked about him, he concluded that they were not, indeed, different. The moral lesson which he drew from history then was clear and simple: the supreme task of statesmanship was to contrive so many checks and balances that the innate depravity of men would be frustrated.

But here is Jefferson with a very different interpretation. He was not alone, to be sure; he was anticipated by Thomas Paine and supported by Joseph Priestley and others of the American Philosophical Society. He had read the same histories that Adams had read and found in them, too, the same moral lessons. But beyond this he would not go. On the central issue of the application of historical laws to America he challenged Adams and the whole body of Enlightenment thought, and into this challenge we can read not only the beginnings of Americanism but of American romanticism.

Where Adams saw history as retrospective, Jefferson saw it as prospective. Adams took for granted that Americans were prisoners of the past, doomed forever to repeat the errors of the past, at least unless he could stop them. But Jefferson was confident that man was not the prisoner of history, but might triumph over history; that he was not condemned forever to repeat the errors of the past but could avoid them; that human nature was not always the same but that in a new and favorable environment, physical, political, and cultural, human nature itself would change.

Here is the most original contribution to historical thought ever to come out of the New World: that history is not exhausted. In a new world the world may begin anew.

It was not Puritanism: Jefferson had no use for the sifted grain thesis, for he thought all grain potentially good. It was not millennialism—Freneau with his boast that 'Paradise anew

shall flourish, no second Adam lost'—for Jefferson did not believe in original Sin and perhaps not in any sin not the product of Law or Religion. There was exultation, to be sure, and hope: 'I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past' he wrote to Adams, who was not much given to dreams. But as with most of Jefferson's ideas, these ideas about history were firmly rooted in logic and experience. For never before had man been vouchsafed a chance to achieve the good life, under ideal auspices. In America nature was abundant and, for the most part, beneficent. Where environment was not beneficent, science could change it, for men were masters of their environment—just what Lester Ward was to say almost a century later in his stunning refutation of Herbert Spencer. What is more—another new idea this—Government was part of environment and men flourished in freedom as they could not in tyranny, flourished in peace as they could not in war. Learning and science, now to be the universal possession of the people, would teach wisdom and confer happiness. In such an environment the lessons of the past were irrelevant, or were there only as an example and a warning.

Not content with rejecting the lessons of the past, the Jeffersonians added a new dimension to the idea of Progress, Americanizing that idea, as it were, just as they had Americanized the character of history by making it do service for the future rather than for the past. Progress was a darling notion of the Enlightenment, but progress as the *philosophes* imagined it was a narrow and elitist concept: the advance of arts and letters and the sciences, the conquest of superstition and tyranny. Americans—we cannot assign this to any one group or school, so general it was—democratized and vulgarized the idea. Progress was the welfare of the common man: it was not merely something to delight members of the Academies or the Courts; it was something to lift the standards of living. It was not merely the avoidance of ancient evils—that could be taken for granted—it was the achievement of positive good. Thus they

took progress away from the Utopianists—the fiction writers and the imaginary Kingdom-contrivers like Thomas More or Campanella or St. Pierre or Holberg, and placed it squarely in America. They not only democratized it, they realized it; and every *philosophe* in the Old World acknowledged that Utopia was indeed America and differed only on whether it was to be found in Pennsylvania or in Connecticut.

But all this did not mean that Americans were bereft of a past: if that had been the case there would be no American Antiquarian Society and we would not be here tonight. The Founding Fathers, men like Jefferson and Rush, like Isaiah Thomas and Jeremy Belknap, were not merely men of the Enlightenment; they were romantics as well. These two disparate philosophies blended in the Old World as in the New, in a Rousseau and even in Diderot, in Lessing and Kant and, in a fascinating manner, in Goethe. As romantics they were deeply concerned with the past, for it is the very essence of romanticism to look to the past, and cherish it.

There was of course a very special reason why Americans needed a past, and that was that they were engaged in creating—bringing forth, as Lincoln put it—a new nation. Nationalism is, needless to observe, the political equivalent of romanticism, and everywhere, in the Old World as in New, nationalism immersed itself in a past, real or conjectural, to provide an appropriate cultural and psychological foundation. This is not the place to elaborate on the nature of modern nationalism; it is sufficient to say that one of its essential ingredients was a common past. It was an ingredient easy for the French to come by, the Germans, the Italians, the Danes, or, later the Bohemians, the Irish, the Norwegians. But it was not easy for Americans to come by, for as a people the Americans did not, in fact, have very much of a past. With characteristic energy and resourcefulness they set about repairing this omission.

The ingredients were there, to be sure, more ample than one might suppose, more ample, certainly, than those available for



the documenting of the origins of most of the Old World nations, for however inadequate the sources for the founding of Virginia or the Bay Colony, they were richer by far than those available for the founding of Rome by Remus and Romulus—or was it Noah?—or of Britain by Gog and Magog, or even by the Angles and Saxons and Jutes.

The materials were there, and the historians, too, let us call them Antiquarians and take pride in the term. Most of them were content with state history, and very good these histories were, too: models, some of them, which we have not yet surpassed; Belknap's *New Hampshire* and Williamson's *North Carolina* and Samuel Williams' *Vermont* and Ramsay's *South Carolina* among them, and Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, too, with its arguments and its eloquence. They were local histories, but with wider implications: with a great deal of what we now call cultural anthropology and with philosophical overtones.

For they were *philosophes*, American type, Belknap and Williamson and Williams and many of the others. They were romantics, too, those two things blended happily enough in the New World, interested in what was distinctly American because conscious of writing a new page in history. They could, even, be erudites, not perhaps as erudite as Muratori down in his archives in Modena, or Peter Suhm in Copenhagen with his library of 125,000 volumes, or that remarkable Johann Jacob Moser of Tübingen who notwithstanding five years in solitary confinement managed to publish 227—or was it 600?—books during a busy life. That was not the American pattern.

As philosophers they drew from history such moral lessons as seemed appropriate to the new nation, and above all the moral lesson that the moral lessons of the past might be irrelevant because Americans were embarked upon something new. As romanticists they were called on to provide an historical past for a people almost without a past, and this task they performed with astonishing success, merging the past with the

present so that the Founding Fathers, many of them still alive, came to seem like Jason and the Argonauts, just as even now our cowboys seem like Robin Hood and his men. As scholars they delighted in just such enterprises as that we celebrate tonight, the collecting of source materials and the founding of historical societies.

When we consider the scanty resources, the want of patronage, official or ecclesiastical, the absence of a learned class, we cannot but be astonished at how well they performed these tasks.

It is all very distant now, and, in an age of technical history, almost alien, this belief that the New World was opening a new chapter in history, that Man was in control of his own destiny, that virtue was the distinguishing character of a republic and that collectively the American people could achieve virtue; this concern for the happiness of man, the progress of society and the prosperity of the Commonwealth. But these were the principles, and the hopes, that animated the generation of Isaiah Thomas; the sentiments, too, that inspired the achievement of independence, the founding of the nation, and the advancement of science and learning, and that provided posterity with the materials by which it could know its forebears.

Yes, it is all very distant now, and we are in a time of disillusionment, one that questions the value of history, the relevance of the past, and the achievement of the Founding Fathers. Our history now is increasingly history as recrimination and history as indictment. Perhaps something is to be said for the simple and naïve views of the past. Let me conclude with a passage from one of the letters of Thomas Paine, who so wonderfully combined the spirit of rationalism—did he not write *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason*?—with romanticism—was he not prosecuted for his defense of the *Rights of Man*? He had no sense of history—Edmund Burke made that clear in his *Reflections*—but he had a feeling for the future denied the great Burke.

A thousand years hence, perhaps in less, America may be what Europe is now. The innocence of her character that won the hearts of all nations in her favor may sound like a romance, and her inimitable virtue as if it had never been. . . . The ruin of that liberty which thousands bled for or struggled to obtain may just furnish materials for a village tale.

When we contemplate the fall of empires and the extinction of the nations of the ancient world, we see but little to excite our regret but the mouldering ruins of pompous palaces, magnificent museums, lofty pyramids, and walls and towers of the most costly workmanship. But when the empire of America shall fall, the subject for contemplative sorrow will be infinitely greater than crumbling brass and marble can inspire. It will not then be said, here stood a temple of vast antiquity, here rose a Babel of invisible height, or there a palace of sumptuous extravagance, but here, ah painful thought, the noblest work of human wisdom, the grand scheme of human glory, the fair cause of freedom, rose and fell.

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