## CHAPTER XVII

## THE ERROR OF POMPOUS HISTORY

"REASON will tell you," wrote George Hakewill in 1627, "that old age or antiquity is to be accounted by the farther distance from the beginning and the nearer approach to the end, the times wherein we now live being in propriety of speech the most ancient since the world's creation." The same thought was expressed by Giordano Bruno in 1564, and by Pascal in his *Treatise on Vacuum*. "For as old age," the latter writes, "is that period of life most remote from infancy, who does not see that old age in this universal man ought not to be sought in the times nearest his birth, but in those most remote from it?" "These present times," says Bacon, "are the ancient times, when the world is ancient, and not those which we account ancient, *ordine retrogrado* by a computation backward from ourselves."

It is curious to notice how completely we have all fallen into the error which these writers expose. We speak naturally of "the olden days," and we attribute to any period of the "olden times" an age which is in reality the sum of all the ages since. We seem to forget that antiquity, viewed as a period, is only old when we falsely add to it our own weight of years; and that antiquities, as objects, are only hoary when they have taken upon them the marks of their slow attainment, century by century, to the venerable age in which we now live. It is the Present that is old and hoary, not the Past. It is To-day that is burdened with the cares of advanced life; and, as compared with its heavy accountability, the bygone ages are light-hearted, irresponsible and unsubdued: for it is our own epoch, not theirs, that is encrusted with the corrosion of time.

When we essay to study history we are accustomed to take the Present as our standpoint, and, looking back to some remote period, we find it old with the years we have crossed to reach it. But the historian should rather take the Past as his natural standpoint, and should forget To-day; for in dealing with bygone events it is surely obvious that we have no right to make the circumstances of our present existence our criterion. We must project ourselves into the youthful ages which we are studying, and must cast aside the cumbrous habits of thought which have been built up within us by the experiences of our riper maturity. There is only one right way to examine the past years of mankind: we must look at them as, individually, we look at our own childhood, remembering the sensations and emotions of those times and contemplating life with those eyes. We cannot hope to comprehend the outlook of the Past unless we divest our minds of a large part of the world's subsequent experience; for the Past is simply the nursery of the Present, and differs from it in just that degree in which a boy differs from a man.

The regarding of former ages as being ancient and hoary has led the historian to introduce them to the reader in an unnecessarily sober and heavy manner. It has long been the habit to write history as though the story of the Past were a solemn subject calling for a grave and even melancholy treatment. The writing of an historical treatise is usually regarded as a legitimate opportunity for the display of the author's turn for rhythmic prose or knowledge of punctuation and grammar. Rolling, dignified words, sentences which frown in their tremendousness, periods staid and smooth, are employed as the means whereby the picture of the Past, as he sees it, may be conveyed to the imagination of his readers. Macaulay even speaks of a certain subject as being "beneath the dignity of history." The historian fails to see that it is not the giving out of the facts, but only their discovery, which requires ponderous study.

The men and women who walked the earth in the days of its youth are not antiquated: the up-to-date young men and the modern young women are the real old fogies, for they are the tenants of the world's old age, the products of the most ancient phase of the human story. To the Past we must go as a relief from To-day's harshness; for the Past is spread out before us as a children's garden, where jolly laughter and sudden, quick-ended tears are to be experienced; where the waters are alive with mermen and the woods are filled with brownies; where nymphs and fairies dwell among the flowers, and enchanted castles crown the hilltops; where heroes die for fame, and the victors marry kings' daughters. There in that garden we may forget the mature cruelty and the sins of the present time; for if there be wickedness in the Past, we may usually name it the thoughtless mischief of childhood.

One contemplates with positive relief the tortures and massacres of the distant ages, for they are child's play as compared with the reasoned brutality of these wicked olden days in which we now live. How pleasant it is to turn from the organised beastliness of our own times to the irresponsible slaughter of the early Christians in Rome or to the wholesale impalings and flayings which followed an Assyrian battle! In the last-named cases we are but shocked at the suffering inflicted by the inhabitants of the world's nursery upon one another; but in the other we are appalled by the spectacle of humanity's old men gleefully slaughtering one another.

The historian should always remember that by rights it is to the days of long ago that he and his readers ought to turn for those scenes which make their special appeal to the ardent eyes of youth. It is into the early times that we must all wander when, sick of life's conformity and weary of the cramped stiffness of the conventions amongst which we move, we would breathe the unenclosed air of a freer order of things. He must not, therefore, amidst the stately forest of his phrases hide the

gateway of this joyou domain both from himself and his followers. It should stand open and unconcealed at the end of the highroad which leads from the Present to the Past; so that all those who make the great adventure and set out in search of the forgotten years shall, by his direction, find that gateway and pass through it into the land where the burden of To-day's old age drops from the shoulders and the buoyancy of the early times stimulates and enlivens.

There, in those enchanted regions, men are heroes and women are beautiful, and all that the heart desires is to be found. There, and perhaps only there, grow "the flower of peace, and the rose that cannot wither." Beyond that gateway stand the gorgeous palaces wherein sit the queens of the young world, of whose beauty the fairest women of our own age have but a semblance. There they rest upon their marble thrones, their loveliness causing the brain to reel and the heart to faint; and into their presence the initiate may penetrate, unchecked and unannounced. Here in this garden a man may at will become one with burly Antony; and with pleasant arrogance may mount the dais steps to Cleopatra's side, and put his arm about her bewildering shoulders. He may merge himself into splendid Lucullus, and watch with mild amusement the amazement of his self-invited guests, Cicero and Pompey, served at a moment's notice with a fifty-thousand drachmae dinner in the sumptuous apartment called "Apollo".

In the twinkling of an eye, for so mighty is the magic of the garden, he may turn from Lucullus to become that Roman's enemy, the swift-footed royal athlete Mithradates, wooing the reluctant Monime in the palace of Miletus on the banks of Meander. Now he is young Cimon, intoxicated by the beauty of Asteria of Salamis; and now he is Demetrius in the happy toils of the fair Lamia. Mounting the magic carpet he may leap over the seas and deserts to Babylon, where, with a gesture, he may become one with Sargon, and may parade the hanging

gardens in the light of the tremendous moon. Away he may fly once more to the valley of the Nile, whence, in the guise of King Unis, he may ascend the "ladder of the sun", burst open the "double gates of the sky", and play with "the imperishable stars"

There is no end to the entertainment which he may enjoy in the Garden of the Past; and, coming back, happy and breathless, to his home in the Present, is it to be supposed that he, who is bursting with what he has seen and done, will desire to record in heavy and stately language the adventures he has experienced in that irresponsible playground? He who writes the history of the Past in pompous phrases has never left the Present.

If, in revolt against his urban inaction, a man desires to kick his heels in the freedom of other lands, he need not travel to Monte Carlo or to Paris, there to shock the astonished natives by behaving himself in a manner not permitted in the city of his birth: he may, instead, seat himself by his fireside and, book in hand, may transport his cumbrous form to countries and periods which will view his eccentricities without amazement. Who will there question his sanity if he dress himself in seaweed and flounder about the floor, pretending to be a fish? Did not the Society of Inimitable Livers thus amuse themselves in the royal palace at Alexandria? Or who will accuse him of intemperance if he take his place amongst the guests at a feast in Memphis, and dance a jig for the applause of Pharaoh? Has not Pharaoh himself said, as Herkhuf tells us, "My Majesty desires to see this man dance more than the treasure of Sinai, more than the gifts of Pount"?

If he be in search of joke and jest, can he do better than read the tales of mankind's youth? By his fireside, and exerting no muscle in the search for a merry atmosphere, he may see the worthy Antigonus, now grown old, walking the paved street of his city to pay a visit to his son, Demetrius who lies ill in yonder house. He may watch the stern old man, as he is about to enter the door, met

by a beautiful damsel who is coming out through it. Antigonus passes her without a sign, and entering the sickroom sits himself down by his son's bed and feels his pulse. "The fever has just left me," he may hear the young man say. "Yes," replies his father, looking straight before him, "I met it going out at the door." Or again, with no effort of the ears or eyes, he may see Marcus Appius rise in his place in a court at Rome and open his final speech for the defence with the words "I have been desired by my client to employ on his behalf industry, eloquence and fidelity . . ."; and he may hear the caustic Cicero respond in an undertone "And how have you had the heart not to accede to any one of his requests?

If he be in search of love, there in the Past he will find it, for the bygone ages contain in themselves all the love of every man and woman who has ever lived. If he be concerned in the pursuit of beauty, there will he behold it; for all the loveliness that the sun and moon have looked upon are now become part of the Past. But, above all, if he be in quest of his childhood, of the high hopes and the beating pulse of youth, there in the playground of the Past he will find them.

In recent years there has been a very considerable tendency amongst jaded people to revive within themselves the pleasures of their childhood by an ardent, though often somewhat forced, emulation of the habits of infancy. The charm of the grown man or woman who can play joyously with children, and can enter enthusiastically into their amusements, has been perceived, and an attempt has been made to acquire this faculty. To play with children, however, requires the employment of a rare talent, of a difficult art; and there are many who, though loving the society of the young, feel aware after a while of the loss of a real interest in their pretences. It is no longer a pleasure, nay it is an agony, to fall headlong upon the lawn in the manner of a slain warrior; it is with a distressing effort of body and mind that we may

now crawl under the bed and believe ourselves thus to have penetrated into an Oriental castle.

To those who desire to retain their childhood's atmosphere yet are conscious of these difficulties: a study of the days when the world was young comes as the supplying of a long-felt want. We who in our individual lives realise with sorrow how very far we have travelled from the schoolroom and the nursery, need not struggle vainly to revive interest in our own forgotten games; we may hasten instead to the world's childhood, there wholeheartedly to romp and wrestle, laugh and cry, make-believe and frolic, with the men and women of the Past. We shall not find ourselves too clumsy to play with *their* toys, nor too big to crawl into *their* houses, for their toys are real armies and kingdoms, and their houses real palaces of marble.

The writing of the history of the Past—I do not mean the collection of the data upon which the narrative is based—must no longer be regarded as the particular field of the very serious: rather let the deeds of To-day claim the dignified treatment of weighty men; for the Present and not the Past is the antiquated age, the age hung with cobwebs, the age that is as old as the hills. The story which the historian has to tell should be made to glow in the imagination, to be young and virile and full of the element of life; for of all men the student of the Past is the most closely in touch with Youth.