

**A LETTER TO  
AMERICAN TEACHERS  
OF HISTORY**

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A Letter to American Teachers of History by Henry Adams

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HENRY ADAMS

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WASHINGTON  
1910



1603 H STREET,  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

*Dear Sir:*

Availing myself of the privilege commonly granted, in the liberal professions, to age and seniority, I use the freedom of an old colleague in offering this small volume for your acceptance.

Some fifteen years ago, on retiring from the Presidency of the Historical Association, I made a short address on the relations of the Historical Department to society; and, had such a custom existed, I should have gladly enlarged the paper to the dimensions of a Report. The volume now sent you, is, in effect, such a Report, unofficial and personal.

Touching, as it does, some of the most delicate relations of University Instruction in rival departments, the book has too much the air of provoking controversy. I do not know that

controversy would do harm, but I see nothing to be gained by provoking it. For the moment, the problem is chiefly one of technical instruction; of grouping departments; at most, of hierarchy in the sciences. Some day, it may become a question whether one department, or another, is to impose on the University a final law of instruction; but, for the present, it is a domestic matter, to be settled at home before inviting the world to interfere. Therefore, the volume will not be published, or offered for sale, or sent to the press for notice.

For the same reason, the volume needs no acknowledgment. Unless the questions which it raises or suggests seem to you so personal as to need action, you have probably no other personal interest than that of avoiding the discussion altogether. Few of us are required to look ten, or twenty years, or a whole generation ahead, in order to realise what will then be the relation of history to physics or



physiology, and even if we make the attempt, we are met at the outset by the difficulty of allowing for our personal error, which is, in so delicate a calculation, an element of the first importance. Commonly, our personal error takes the form of inertia, and is more or less constant and calculable. For myself, the preference for movement of inertia is decided. The risk of error in changing a long-established course seems always greater to me than the chance of correction, unless the elements are known more exactly than is possible in human affairs; but the need of determining these elements is all the greater on that account; and this volume is only a first experiment towards calculating their past, present and future values.

Mathematicians assume the right to choose, within the limits of logical contradiction, what path they please in reaching their results, provided that when they come to the end of their process, they consent to test their result

by the facts of experience. More than this cannot fairly be asked of historians.

If I call this volume a letter, it is only because that literary form affects to be more colloquial or more familiar than the usual scientific treatise; but such letters never require a response, even when they invite one; and in the present case, the subject of the letter involves a problem which will certainly exceed the limits of a life already far advanced, so that its solution, if a solution is possible, will have to be reached by a new generation.

Henry Adams -

16 February, 1910.

CHAPTER I  
THE PROBLEM

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The mechanical theory of the universe governed physical science for three hundred years. Directly succeeding the theological scheme of a universe existing as a unity by the will of an infinite and eternal Creator, it affirmed or assumed the unity and indestructibility of Force or Energy, as a scientific dogma or Law, which was called the Law of the Conservation of Energy. Under this Law the quantity of matter in the universe remained invariable; the sum of movement remained constant; energy was indestructible; "nothing was added;