

**THE MEANING OF
HISTORY:
TWO LECTURES**

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The Meaning of History: Two Lectures by Frederic Harrison

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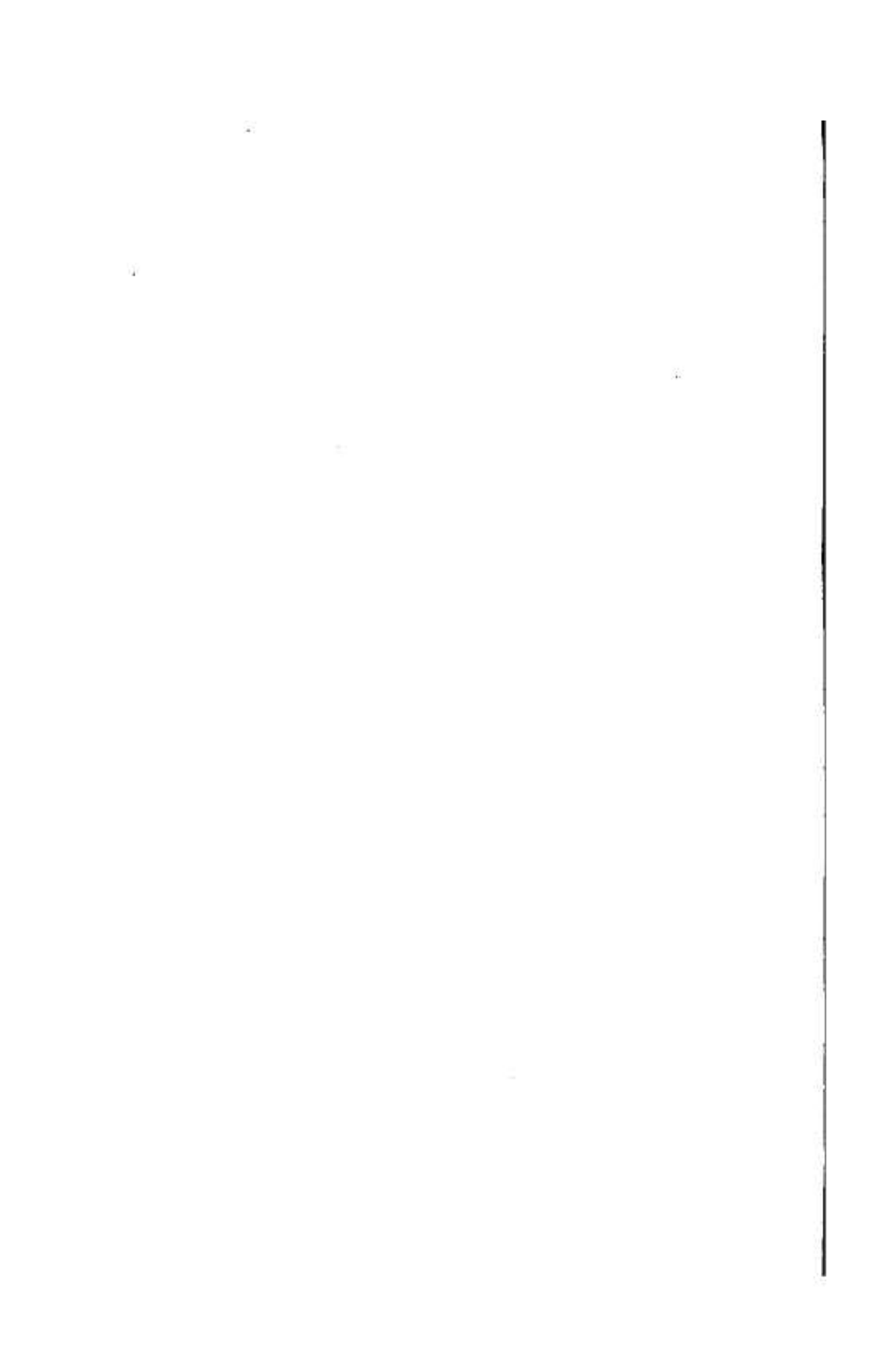
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FREDERIC HARRISON

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PREFACE.

The following pages contain two lectures recently addressed to a mixed audience in London, as an introduction to a course of teaching in History, which was subsequently commenced by the writer. They are printed (nearly as they were spoken) at the request and chiefly for the use of those who heard them. It will be seen that they belong to the most elementary kind of popular instruction, and they will have little interest for the general reader, much less for the regular student of history. I was led to attempt the course of lectures, and afterwards to print these pages, by my conviction that the first want of our time is the spread amongst the intelligent body of our people of solid materials to form political and social opinion. To stimulate an interest in history seems to me the only means of giving a fresh meaning to popular education, and a higher intelligence to popular opinion.

I am aware that nearly every sentence in this outline, were it not too slight, might give room for serious question, and possibly for severe criticism. But if opposite opinions are not noticed, they have still been carefully weighed. If I have spoken of many still debated topics almost as though they were decided, it is only because in such a plan as this any sort of controversy is out of place, not that I forget or slight all that has been urged on the other side. But discussion, like research, must have an end

PREFACE.

somewhere, and the great need now is not to increase but to use our stores of historical learning. After all, the only real answer to any theory of history, professing to be complete and not manifestly inconsistent, is the production of a counter theory at once more complete and consistent. The view of history here put forward it will be seen is in no sense my own. It is drawn with some care from the various writings of Auguste Comte. Although far from being able to adopt all his philosophical and religious conclusions, I am persuaded that the conception of the past, which is embodied in his works, and the political and social principles of which that conception forms the basis, point out the sole path towards all future improvement.

F. H.

THE MEANING OF HISTORY.

LECTURE I.

THE USE OF HISTORY.

THE question for which we are about to seek an answer is this:—What is the use of historical knowledge? Is an acquaintance with the events, with the men, with the ideas of the past, of any real use to us in these days? has it any practical bearing upon the happiness and conduct of each of us in life?

Now, it must strike us at once, that two very different, nay, contradictory answers may be given, in fact, are very frequently given, to this question. But, opposite as they are, I hardly know from which I more thoroughly dissent. Some persons tell you roundly, that there is no use at all. We are, they would say with Bacon, the mature age of the world; with us lies the gathered wisdom of ages. To waste our time in studying exploded fallacies, in reproducing worn-out forms of society, or in recalling men who were only conspicuous because they lived amidst a crowd of ignorant or benighted barbarians, is to wander from the path of progress, and to injure and not to improve our understandings. What can be the good to us, they ask, of the notions of men who thought that the sun went round the earth; who would have taken a steam-engine for a dragon or a hippogriff, and had never even heard of the rights of man? On the other hand, the other class of

persons would say of historical knowledge, that it has fifty different uses. It is very amusing to hear what curious things they did in by-gone times. It is highly entertaining to know about forefathers of our own who were nearly as funny as Chinese. Then, again, it is very instructive as a study of character; we see in history the working of the human mind and will. Besides, it is necessary to avoid the blunders they committed in past days: there we collect a store of moral examples, and of political maxims; we learn to watch the signs of the times, and to be prepared for situations whenever they return. And it cannot be doubted, they add, that it is a branch of knowledge, and all knowledge is good. To know history, they conclude, is to be well-informed, is to be familiar with some of the finest examples of elegant and brilliant writing.

Now, between the two, those who tell us plainly that history is of no use, and those who tell us vaguely that history is of fifty uses, I do not see much to choose. I thoroughly disagree with them both, and of the two I would rather deal with the former. Their opposition, at any rate, is concentrated into a single point, and may be met by a single and a direct answer. To them I would say, Are you consistent? Do you not in practice follow another course? In rejecting all connection with the facts and ideas of the past, are you not cutting the ground from under your own feet? You are an active politician and a staunch friend of the principles of the liberal party. What are the traditional principles of a party but a fraction, small, no doubt, but a sensible fraction of history? You are a warm friend of free trade. Well, but free trade has a history of its own; its strength lies in the traditions of a great victory achieved by right over might. You believe in the cause of progress. But what is the cause of progress but the extension of that civilization, of that change for the better which we have all witnessed or have learned to recognize as an established fact? Your voice is always

heard for freedom. Well, but do you never appeal to Magna Charta, to the Bill of Rights, to the Reform Bill, to American Independence, or the French Revolution? You will suffer no outrage on the good name of England. You are ready to cover the seas with armaments to uphold the national greatness. But what is the high name of England if it is not the memory of all the deeds by which, in peace or war, on sea or land, England has held her own amongst the foremost of the earth? Nor is it true that you show no honours to the men of the past, are not guided by their ideas, and do not dwell upon their lives, their work, and their characters. The most turbulent revolutionary that ever lived, the most bitter hater of the past, finds many to admire. It may be Cromwell, it may be Rousseau, or Voltaire, it may be Robert Owen, it may be Thomas Paine, but some such leader each will have; his memory he will revere, his influence he will admit, his principles he will contend for. Thus it will be in every sphere of active life. No serious politician can fail to recognize that, however strongly he repudiates antiquity, and rebels against the tyranny of custom, still he himself only acts freely and consistently when he is following the path trodden by earlier leaders, and is working with the current of the principles in which he throws himself, and in which he has confidence: For him, then, it is not true that he rejects all common purpose with what has gone before. It is a question only of selection and of degree. To some he clings, the rest he rejects. Some history he does study, and finds in it both profit and enjoyment.

Or, again, let us suppose such a man to be interested in any study whatever, either in promoting general education, or eager to acquire knowledge for himself. Well, he will find, at every step he takes, that he is appealing to the authority of the past, is using the ideas of former ages, and carrying out principles established by ancient, but not forgotten thinkers. If he studies geometry he will find