

THE POLITICAL VALUE OF HISTORY

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The Political Value of History by W. E. H. Lecky

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W. E. H. LECKY

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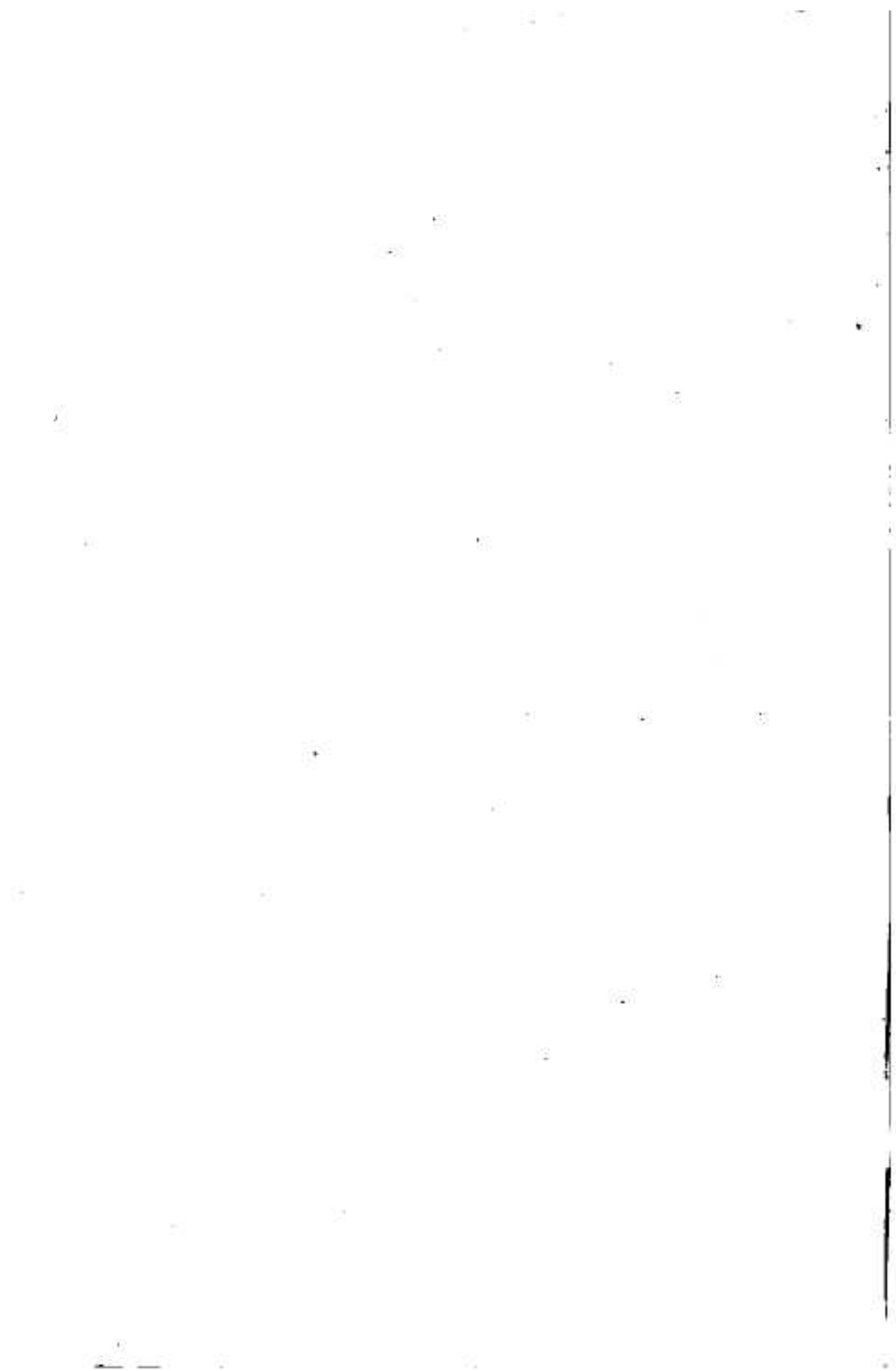
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WHEN shortly after I had accepted the honourable task which I am endeavouring to fulfil to-night, I received from your Secretary a report of the annual proceedings of the Birmingham and Midland Institute,—when I observed the immense range and variety of subjects included within your programme, illustrating so strikingly the intense intellectual activity of this great town,—my first feeling was one of some bewilderment and dismay. What, I asked myself, could I say that would be

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of much real value, addressing an unknown audience, and relating to fields of knowledge so vast, so multifarious, and in many of their parts so far beyond the range of my own studies? On reflection, however, it appeared to me that in this, as in most other cases, the proverb was a wise one which bids the cobbler stick to his last, and that a writer who, during many years of his life, has been engaged in the study of English history could hardly do better than devote the time at his disposal tonight to a few reflections on the political value of History, and on the branches and methods of historical study that are most fitted to form a sound political judgment.

Is History a study of real use in practical, and especially in political, life? The question, as you know, has been by no

means always answered in the same way. In its earlier stages history was regarded chiefly as a form of poetry recording the more dramatic actions of kings, warriors, and statesmen. Homer and the early ballads are indeed the first historians of their countries, and long after Homer one of the most illustrious of the critics of antiquity described history as merely 'poetry free from the incumbrance of verse.' The portraits that adorned it gave some insight into human character; it breathed noble sentiments, rewarded and stimulated noble actions, and kindled by its strong appeals to the imagination high patriotic feeling; but its end was rather to paint than to guide, to consecrate a noble past than to furnish a key for the future; and the artist in selecting

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