

HOW NOT TO WRITE LOCAL HISTORY

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Any one who wishes to avoid writing local history will find it perfectly easy to do so: he has only to switch on the radio or television; or he can just go to sleep. For present purposes, however, let us assume that somebody, somewhere, wants an occupation of a quasi-intellectual nature, and feeling no call to engage in some generally respected and lucrative pursuit, is determined at all costs to write the history of a local community. It is for his sake that I write; I shall try to show him how to reach the standard of performance that is expected of him: in other words, how to achieve that monumental flatness, tedium, and lack of acceptance which has been the hallmark of local history as too commonly practised.

It may be objected: "What need is there of teaching on this subject? The shelves of every big library creak under a dead weight of books, almost every one of which is a model of the way not to write local history. With so many exemplars to guide him, how can the beginner possibly go wrong?"

There is force in this contention. On the other hand, it is possible that our student might waste a certain amount of time hesitating over the choice of models. Moreover, while native genius may have saved the authors of those books from the need of taking thought, mere ordinary talent must be improved by study and practice. For these reasons it may be useful to set forth one or two general precepts, making explicit the principles which have guided the hands of the masters in this dim field of study. I ought perhaps to add, in the spirit of the novelist who declares that every character in this story is fictitious, that when I speak with less than entire respect of our predecessors, I am referring mainly to local historians who are already dead, though I may inadvertently include one or two who still move and breathe and are unaware how dead they are.

The first rule to be laid down is one that admits of no exception. Since fortunes are not made by writing local history, the writer's impulse can only proceed from a genuine enthusiasm for the subject, and the rule is: **TO ASSUME AN EQUAL ENTHUSIASM IN THE READER.** In his single-minded devotion to the *genius loci*, the historian finds an endless fascination in every aspect of his chosen theme,

and he takes it for granted that his readers will approach it in the same spirit; or rather, in his modesty, he assumes that nobody will read his narrative unless he cares about the place at least as much as the writer does. This assumption is usually correct; and it has the further merit of being immensely labour-saving. A historian who feels himself under an obligation to woo the interest of as many readers as possible, including people who have never set foot in the parish, will have to take thought about his narrative; and, as we all know, there is no pain like the pain of thought. He will have to introduce some order, art, and method into the work, to exercise a modicum of selection and compression, to polish up his literary style. But the golden rule I have enunciated will save him all this trouble. No need to shape his narrative, to give it a beginning, a middle, and an end; no need to enliven it with graphic touches, to season it from time-to-time with the salt of irony, to work on the imagination and sympathies of the audience. He can go straight ahead, spilling the contents of his notebooks pell-mell over the page, never pausing to ask himself whether he is becoming a bore. Addressing himself only to an imaginary company of like-minded enthusiasts, he goes on adding yet another to the long list of local histories which only the most pressing curiosity will impel anyone to read.

Now since our historian is by definition an enthusiast, and since he obviously depends on some other source for his livelihood, he will have scant leisure for comparative study. Even if he has any curiosity to spare for other parishes and other counties, it never occurs to him that some places are more significant historically than others, and that his own village may not need to be portrayed at the same length as an ancient market town or a big manufacturing city. Thus the element of comparison is lacking; he never knows what is peculiar to his own parish and what is common form. He finds that the churchwardens from time to time spent money on the destruction of vermin; that vagrants were driven out of the parish with all convenient speed; and that under the later Stuarts the parson was obliged to certify that deceased parishioners were buried in woollen shrouds. Happily unaware that the same things were being done in parishes all over the country, he naturally communicates these exciting discoveries to the reader, who, let us hope, will be equally uninformed.

Odd creature as he is, the local historian is sufficiently human to have his likes and dislikes; in fact, he is often a crotchety character. And since he cannot hope to erupt into print very often, he treats the history of his town or village as a heaven-sent opportunity for airing his crotchets. Every now and then he peppers its pages with fiery little outbursts against Henry VIII or Oliver Cromwell or the pope. This certainly gives the book a semblance of animation, but unfortunately it is not of a kind that really exhilarates the reader. He also has his antiquarian preferences: a passion for gothic architecture, perhaps, which leads him to describe the church at unconscionable length, while never sparing a glance for the Georgian manor-house or some uniquely interesting farmstead.

An even more fruitful source of tedium is the landed gentry. Many a so-called history seems to have been constructed on the principle that nobody ever lived in the parish but the squire and his relations. Dr Joan Wake, that doughty champion of local studies at their best, remembers overhearing a conversation between two elderly gentlewomen in Northamptonshire. The village of Isham happened to be mentioned; whereupon one lady asked: "Who's living at Isham now?" To which her friend replied: "You know quite well that nobody has ever lived at Isham." An overpowering interest in the class to which the historians themselves belonged, or would have liked to belong, has cast a genealogical blight over English local history from which it is only now beginning to recover.

Then a feeling for romance, impelling the writer to fill his pages with picturesque or sentimental anecdotes, can do wonders in putting the reader off. The ghost of the white lady who flits about the manor-house; the underground passage alleged to lead from the priory to a nunnery some five miles off; the bed that Elizabeth I or Charles II may have slept in; the local skirmish between Cavaliers and Roundheads; the minor cases of bad language, assault, and bloodshed recorded in the manor court rolls: if enough space is given up to trivialities like these, the writer can be sure of leaving out the topics of most interest to an intelligent reader. In the history of a Cheshire village published a few years ago we read of a secret tunnel and a murdered nun. "She was murdered," says the writer, "because she broke her vows and married." We naturally wonder who did the deed, her husband or the abbess; but on this point curiosity remains unsatisfied. "It is not known what the date of the tragedy could be," he tells us candidly, "but her habit was black."

Most historians naturally feel more at home in one period than another. Two excellent local histories; Roberts' *Medieval Farnham* and Fowler's *Medieval Sherborne*, make no pretence of carrying the story down into a period with which the authors felt unable to deal sympathetically. Contrast this with two other works, both of great merit in their different ways: Hine's *History of Hitchin*, and the more recent *History of Birmingham* by Gill and Briggs. Here the first thousand years or more are disposed of in about fifty pages, after which the writers settle down to write in earnest about the last century or two, which is all they really care about.

A FORESHORTENING OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE is one of the most common failings. It besets national as well as local history, notably in the Oxford History of England, which sets out to cover some nineteen hundred and fifty years in fifteen volumes, and devotes eight volumes to the last four centuries. The truly great local historian, when he appears, will deal faithfully with all periods.

Not so the chronicler for whom I am prescribing. He will probably begin by quoting the Domesday reference to the place; or perhaps he will first describe a round barrow and an earthwork which he incorrectly declares to be a Roman camp. Then the Domesday passage; and there is no better way of unnerving the average reader at the outset than to hurl a chunk of Domesday at him, without any

explanation of its terminology or so much as a hint that scholars are not altogether certain what some of the entries mean. Next, perhaps, a page about the church, and one on the descent of the manor; after which, having scampered through the first thousand years or so in fewer than a dozen pages, the writer settles down to regale the public with his gleanings from the parish registers, family papers, and the local newspaper, interspersed with anecdotes about the local worthies and unworthies, and finishing perhaps with a detailed account of the festivities got up to celebrate a royal jubilee.

This distortion of the time-scheme is usually defended on the ground that it is natural for a historian to write more fully when his materials become more abundant. Natural, indeed, it may be; but history is not a natural pursuit: it is a science and an art. The mere accident that records have survived in plenty does not by itself invest a subject with historical significance. Of all the reasons which may impel a man to undertake a piece of historical research, the fact that documents bearing on the subject are abundant and accessible ought to weigh least. In reality, people who advance this plea only do so because their conception of historical evidence is an unduly narrow one. They are thinking too much about written and printed documents, not enough about farm names and field names and parish boundaries; not enough about the shapes and sizes of fields, the roads, the hedges, the visible pattern of settlement and cultivation. There is plenty of material for reconstructing the early history of a local community if only they would go out of doors and look for it. And seeing that the earlier centuries were in fact the formative period in the life of most local communities, there is no excuse for shirking this essential part of the historian's task.

Even when documents are plentiful, however, a really accomplished bungler will contrive to overlook them. The Reverend Roderick Dew comes to mind here as a conspicuous example. In his *History of the Parish and Church of Kilkhampton*, in Cornwall, he lamented that "the early churchwardens' accounts have not been preserved, and many ancient writings dealing with the church and church property have disappeared." Mr Dew was rector of Kilkhampton from 1908 to 1940. In 1948 his successor found in the vestry a rusty key which fitted the lock of an iron safe standing in the south-west corner of the church. The safe had been there, visible to all, as far back as the church cleaner could remember, and she was getting on for ninety. It proved to be crammed with parochial documents, including a fine set of churchwardens' accounts. It may be added that if Mr Dew had looked into Dugdale's *Monasticon*, that rich quarry for historians, he could have found a valuable clue to the history of Kilkhampton in the Saxon period. On the same page Joseph Fowler would have found - in fact, he did find - an equally valuable clue to the early history of Sherborne. He found it, and made nothing of it; so appreciation of his book must be qualified by the criticism that although he devotes a chapter to the pre-Saxon history of the place, he has missed a vital link in the evidence. It must be added that his ample quarto, which is full of topographical detail, includes

no map, so that for readers who do not enjoy the privilege of living in Sherborne, many pages are completely unintelligible.

This brings us to another sovereign rule for the type of local historian we have in view. DON ' T PROVIDE A MAP; or if you do, see that it is not drawn by a professional cartographer. Draw it yourself, or get it drawn by a friend who likes drawing maps. No matter that your or his idea of lettering would disgrace a class of infants. Make sure that several of the places named most frequently in the text are omitted from the map. Then let the blockmaker reduce it so drastically that most of the names become illegible; and finally let the binder insert it into the book in such a way that it tears every time you open it.

Many a local historian, sooner than face the exertion of shaping his facts into an ordered narrative, contents himself with printing the documents and leaving them to speak for themselves. Instead of a local history he produces a collection of raw materials. Even this admits of judicious mishandling. If you provide a transcript or translation which may justly be suspected of inaccuracy; if you leave out bits which you think unimportant, without giving any indication that you have done so; if you omit to state whether you are reproducing the original document or someone else's edition of it: then, in addition to presenting the materials in an undigested form, you will have done your best to rob them of any value to the trained student and the professional historian.

Some compilers pay homage to the muse of history after their fashion by serving up the contents of their notebooks in a kind of substitute for narrative. Each fact is presented in a paragraph quite unconnected with the paragraphs before and after, or connected only by some transparent thread like that phrase which came so readily to the pens of the young women who used to write the chapters on monastic life in the Victoria County Histories. Finding in the bishop's register two complaints against a monastery, with perhaps the better part of a century between them, the author gives the substance of the first denunciation, then opens anew paragraph saying: "*Things were no better* eighty-five years later." It need hardly be said that such a thin coating of narrative, far from making the mixture really palatable, only helps to set the reader's teeth on edge.

A word must be said, too, about the erudite person who thinks it unnecessary - if he thinks at all - to render the jargon of bygone centuries into plain English. His pages are sprinkled with final concords, assizes of novel disseisin, inquisitions post mortem, fines and recoveries, writs of *Monstraverunt*, and the like. Here is another rule, then, complementary to the rule enunciated at the beginning of this discourse. ASSUME THAT THE READER IS ON PAR WITH YOURSELF, not only in enthusiasm for the subject, but also IN ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE TECHNICALITIES. He ought to feel pleased and flattered; unfortunately, so perverse is human nature, he very seldom does.

The rule which bids us omit no triviality has for its corollary and counterpart that other rule bidding us EXCLUDE ALL THAT MATTERS. Faithful to this principle, the bungler is as maladroit in his silences as in anything he actually says. He gives the reader to understand that in what he calls the middle ages the village soil was cultivated under the open-field system; but where the fields were, whether there were two or three or more, what crops were grown, what stock was kept: of these topics he has not a word to say; and the suspicion arises that what he does say about the open fields is merely repeated from the textbooks. He mentions, without a flicker of curiosity, that "in some ancient records the place is styled a borough;" but leaves you guessing how or when it acquired that status, whether it was co-extensive with the manor, and how it was governed. Changes of incumbent, he remarks, were unusually frequent in the sixteenth century, but he omits to say which parson, if any, was evicted as being too fervent a papist, and which because he was too extreme a protestant. He states that the common fields and pastures were enclosed in 1786, but whether this left the mass of inhabitants richer or poorer, and whether the population went up or down in consequence, remains obscure. The local industries come and go without a word of explanation. The history of a Lincolnshire parish, recently published, gives not the slightest hint that land may have been gained in past centuries by reclamation from the sea, or lost by coastal erosion, though the author has seen erosion taking place in his own lifetime.

A word or two now on the subject of references The obvious and simple course of not giving any has much to commend it, to the publisher if to no one else, for footnotes are so expensive that he groans every time he sees one, and feels more keenly than ever that he has taken the book on against his better judgement. The reader, on the other hand, likes to have some clue to the evidence on which the work is built, and the author for his part is not as a rule unwilling to furnish it, for although references put him to a certain amount of trouble, they also provide the best possible opportunity for displaying his erudition. There again the problem resolves itself into that of seeming to provide what is wanted but not really doing so. Even in the works of reputable historians examples of this technique are to be found. I once wasted the best part of a day in a vain attempt to follow up a footnote reference in Round's *Feudal England*. It consisted of the single word "Hermannus." The catalogue of the London Library gives twenty-one different authors named Hermann or Hermannus; and by the time I had looked up their dates in various works of reference, eliminated those who were not early enough, and ransacked the works of the remainder, darkness was beginning to fall. It was only some weeks later, through the kind help of a correspondent, that I discovered how the footnote ought to have been worded: it should have read "Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, CLVI, col. 983."

On another occasion, while reading H. S. Bennett's *Life on the English Manor*, I was forcibly struck by the statement that monastic landlords from time to time "caused their serfs" - to do what? - "to marry free women with inheritances."

Feeling naturally curious to know more in detail how the abbots contrived to practise this refined form of cruelty, I endeavoured to follow up the author's footnote, which consisted of the one word "Walsingham." This presumably meant the St Albans chronicler Thomas Walsingham, but the eight volumes of his works printed in the Rolls Series threw no light on the subject; so I wrote to Mr Bennett for more information. He replied that while our country was at war he was not in a position to consult his notes. Thereupon I appealed to Dr Coulton, editor of the series in which Mr Bennett's work appeared, and a redoubtable stickler for accuracy. Thanks to his good offices, it was presently established that reference should have been made, not to Walsingham, but to Rotuli *Parliamentorum*, III, p. 319. And when I looked it up, it did not tell me how, if I had a serf, I should set about "causing" him to marry an heiress; it only said that when such marriages took place, as occasionally happened, they slipped through a loophole in the Statute of Mortmain.

Apart from the obvious course of giving no references at all, or giving the wrong ones, there are other ways in which they can be used to baffle the reader. One of them is the simple trick of quoting "Smith, *op. cit.*," thus forcing him to search through the undergrowth of perhaps a hundred and fifty pages before he can tell which of Smith's works is being cited. A more subtle device is to use printed sources, like the *Calendars of Close Rolls* and *Charter Rolls*, but to cite them in such a form as to suggest that reference is being made to the original manuscripts. This effectually deters most readers from following the reference up. It sometimes happens that a writer will give abundant and correct references to support what he has to say about the battle of Hastings or the dissolution of the monasteries or some equally well-known event, while giving none at all for the more striking and unusual incidents in the local scene. Or he will cite a manuscript without saying where he found it ("From a court-roll of the manor we learn" so and so), or without indicating its character ("a manuscript volume in the possession of Mr X"). He will quote a work in many volumes without specifying volume and page. Mr L. J. Ashford, in his otherwise excellent *History of High Wycombe*, goes even further. On p. 285 he quotes an unprinted document with no other reference than the words "Public Record Office." The usefulness of such a footnote can be measured by recalling that the number of documents in that repository, according to the estimate of their official custodians, approximates to fifty million.

What has been said here about references applies also *mutatis mutandis*, to the index. The obvious course of providing no index at all has many precedents, particularly in the work of foreign scholars. One French academy set out to print and publish the whole series of papal registers, and did actually print about a score of them; but for all the use they have been to students they might just as well have remained unpublished, for hardly any of them are indexed. The concept of an index, in fact, as we understand the term, has found no secure lodging in the Gallic mind. But in this country we like our books to have an index; so it may be as well to make a show of giving the reader what he wants. One sure method of letting him

down is to get your wife or a friend to make the index for you. Another is to give about fifty page-references under one entry, without any classification or subdivision. The entries may be confined to personal names, omitting placenames; or vice versa. These are the more obvious inadequacies. A really subtle practitioner will improve upon them. The index he provides will look exhaustive, will in fact be so in all the minor entries, and only prolonged use will reveal that some of the most important references are missing. For a crowning touch, he can add a note apologizing for any shortcomings, like the writer who at the end of five hundred closely printed pages gave what he rightly called a "limited index" and explained that it was "prepared under somewhat difficult conditions on board the *Queen Mary* between Southampton and New York."

I have left to the last the most important matter of all. Hutchins, writing a monumental history of Dorset in 1773, remarked: "Works of this kind are of all others least capable of any advantages of style." How wholeheartedly most local historians have agreed with Hutchins on that point is plain for all to see. Moreover, in these days, when a torrent of letterpress roars past us day and night in full spate, and every other sentence is an outrage against one literary canon or another, it is easy enough to write badly: a bad style is in the very air we breathe. It does not take long to discover that one grand object of the contemporary prose-writer is NEVER TO USE ONE WORD WHERE YOU CAN POSSIBLY USE FOUR. A single illustration will suffice. I quote it from a meritorious recent work on suburban history. The writer wished to make the point that if a speculative builder believed house-building likely to bring in fat dividends, he might be tempted to build too many houses; if not, he would build few or none. Our historian put it in this way: "The profitability of house-building, and therefore of the supply of new houses, depended among other things on the alternative earnings of the capital used in it, and this meant that the provision of suburban houses could either be retarded for lack of capital which had been put to more profitable employment elsewhere; or, conversely, it could be expanded far beyond current needs when idle capital was put to what was considered safe use."

It will be noticed that the structure of this passage rests upon a foundation of impersonal abstract nouns. The figure of the moneyed man, contemplating his swollen bank-balance and pondering how best to employ his spare cash, is completely hidden from view under a cloud of verbiage. This too is in strict accordance with contemporary practice. A crude statement, such as "Balbus built a wall," is not acceptable in this day and age. Anything sooner than give the impression that history is concerned with human beings. The living, breathing Balbus, the fellow-creature with a mind of his own, must be got rid of at all costs, reduced to a statistical abstraction, an economic trend. The historian who consistently adheres to this great principle may well find it leading him on to higher things. He may end by quitting the lowly plane of history for good and soaring into the empyrean of Sociology, a subject, incidentally, which is much better endowed.

No one who can drive a pen or bang a typewriter should find any difficulty in following the simple precepts enunciated in the foregoing pages. And though success in any literary undertaking is not a thing which can be guaranteed, I believe there is a fair chance of it for the local historian who faithfully and consistently applies the principles I have ventured to lay down for his guidance. If he does this, he can be reasonably confident that his work will be as uninviting to the general reader as exasperating to the well-informed, and that when it has joined the older local histories on the shelves, it will gather as much dust as any of them.