



The Mind of the Past

by James Bowman

OBAMA MAKES HISTORY," blared the headline in the *Washington Post* last November 5. A few days later in the same newspaper, Robert Kaiser acknowledged this as "a statement of the obvious," but then asked, "What does it mean to make history?" A good question! Mr. Kaiser thought that "History is made in two ways: By dramatic occurrences, often surprises, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989; and by the slow accretion of small changes over long periods." The election of President Obama, as he saw it, combined both. Well, I agree that his election made history, but I would like to propose a third way in which history is made—particularly when it is the kind of history that appears in newspaper headlines. History is also made when people find something happening in the present that makes them feel good about something that happened in the past.

The newly elected president, for example, made history not just by being elected, but also because to the kinds of people who work as writers and editors at the *Washington Post* his election was in an important respect a repudiation of history—a part of history that made them feel guilty and ashamed. The repudiation made them feel better about themselves and their country and so in a way represented to them what the fall of the Berlin Wall did to a popular author of a couple of decades ago who wrote, oxymoronically, of "the End of History." The End of History is history too. But it is interesting how much of what we call history in President Obama's America is now history of this third kind. A fortnight after the election, Washington saw the reopening, after three years of renovations, of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, which is full of it.

This museum has always had an interest in "social history," though not necessarily of the type practiced in universities, which usually involves a greater or lesser degree of Marxism, or the various sorts of neo-Marxist ideologies such as feminism or post-colonialism that are based on a Manichean

division of the world into oppressors and oppressed. It is actively hostile to traditional and "great man"-centered interpretations of the past. The story is *his-story* no longer, but rather that of the oppressed peoples—whoever you like them to be—struggling for liberation. There is some, mostly unobtrusive history of this kind at the newly reopened museum. At one point, for instance, as part of the history of industrialization in the 19th century, a wall card tells us that

affluent Americans developed their own class consciousness. They promoted a sense of their entitlement through institutions they established and through the popular press which they often controlled. To justify their wealth when so many were poor, some misapplied Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution, arguing that their rise reflected the survival of the fittest.

Here, "a sense of their entitlement" must refer to the quaint belief still harbored at the time by these "affluent Americans" that their wealth was actually their own and not ripped unjustly from the trembling fingers of the poor. The assumption that some are poor because others are rich and that the latter should be called on "to justify their wealth"—inevitably with some "misapplied" theory such as Social Darwinism—is a Marxian habit that few ideologues ever break themselves of, although it has never been one shared with the majority of Americans. Shouldn't the majority also have a voice here, we wonder?

Well, it does in a way. For under its superficially more benign aspect at the NMAH, social history presents itself mainly as nostalgia. Nostalgia is to history as celebrity is to fame. Both are ways for ordinary people to expropriate things that are *other*, and that insist on their difference from the ordinary, and to make them, instead, matters for their own feelings to feed on. The British novelist L. P. Hartley once was famous for writing that "the past is another country: they do

things differently there." Not anymore. By assimilating history to nostalgia, we enable the present, in effect, to colonize the past and erase its differences.

That's why the Museum of American History devotes so much of its exhibition space to the ephemera of pop culture. Here are to be found Carrie Bradshaw's Mac PowerBook from *Sex and the City* and Grandmaster Flash's turntable, as well as the original text of the Gettysburg Address and the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star Spangled Banner." By putting these artifacts on a level with each other, the museum creates in the present a feeling of familiarity not with the reality of the past—which, as R. G. Collingwood long ago demonstrated in *The Idea of History*, is mental—but with its artifacts. That is: with the part of the past that is still present.

This creates the illusion for us that we still possess it, though at the cost of being unable to make necessary distinctions. Julia Child's kitchen is here, for instance, presumably because she was on TV. She was a part of our lives—at least if we are of a certain age—and we therefore feel a warm glow on being reminded of her reassuring presence. George Washington's campaign chest and camp stool are here too, but without much to suggest that he was of any more significance for American history than Julia Child.

The assumption that the existence of poverty requires those who are not poor "to justify their wealth" is a form of unexamined egalitarianism common to the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and so fits in with those other contemporary crazes, less familiar to our ancestors, for celebrity and nostalgia. These are also egalitarian because they insist that our admiration for a thing gives us rights of equality with it—makes it somehow *ours* instead of its creators' or the context in which it was created. The old-fashioned cash registers and the Radio Flyers here, just like the costume of the original C-3PO from *Star Wars*, are the celebrity photographs of the past that make it our own. Before the renovation, there seemed something almost pleasingly tacky about going to the museum to see, preserved in a glass case, Dorothy's ruby slippers from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. These are still there, along with hundreds of similar officially preserved souvenirs, but it soon begins to seem that you can take a good thing too far.

WHERE HISTORY AS TRADITIONALLY understood still exists at the museum, there is an attempt wherever possible to repatriate it

to the present. The best thing by far about the renovation is that it includes an extensive exhibition on the top floor titled "The Price of Freedom: Americans at War." Sponsored by Kenneth E. Behring, whose generosity was responsible for much of the museum's face-lift, it gives a relatively straightforward account of America's wars from the French and Indian to Desert Storm, though there is almost nothing about the war in Iraq of the last six years. Too controversial, I suppose. But controversy is also on display, especially in the part of the exhibition devoted to Vietnam—which was apparently nothing *but* controversy. I'm guessing that that's what gets it the spread it has. It was on TV too, after all. The Korean War, by contrast, is barely mentioned.

Even World War II—still, obviously, very much "The Good War" so far as the Museum of American History is concerned—had its share of controversy, it seems. "In July, 1945," one bit of the display informs us, "President Truman made his controversial decision to use atomic weapons." But in July, 1945, the decision was *not* controversial. Only in recent years, as the circumstances in which the decision was made have faded from memory, has an air of controversy been projected back onto it. People are constantly being encouraged to look at the past with the sensibility of the present and never for a moment cautioned that there might be anything wrong with this.

To understand the past, you have to understand the mind of the past, which once provided the context for all these dead artifacts. Once taken out of that context and deposited in a museum, they can only mislead those who have not taken the trouble to inform themselves about the context—even so much of it as that dry and boring list of facts and dates that the Museum director has told interviewers he wants to eschew. To make the past attractive, it seems, all that makes it the past has had to be taken out of it. But, then, why should we expect a celebrity-struck museum to do otherwise, when academic history is quite as likely to be found filleting selected bits of the past from the circumstances that give them meaning in order to make it more palatable to a narcissistic public? ❄

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Essential Company

IHAVE KNOWN RICHARD LANGWORTH, initially by reputation and then personally, for 40 years. In the late 1960s, when I was a research assistant to Churchill's son, Randolph, Langworth wrote to my boss about the work he was doing in the United States in assembling and publicizing the many postage stamps that had been issued to commemorate Churchill's death in 1965. Langworth went on to establish the International Churchill Society (now the Churchill Centre), to edit the society's journal, *Finest Hour*, and to supervise the publication of several important monographs about Churchill. Year in and year out he was vigilant in combating innumerable misrepresentations of the Great Man.

In this magisterial volume, Langworth—the consummate editor—puts all those interested in Winston Churchill in his debt. This book is a marvelous compendium of Churchill's written and spoken words, a true encyclopedia of wit and wisdom, and by far the most comprehensive yet published. It is an essential companion for writers, teachers,

and students alike, as well as for anyone in any walk of life who wants to gain a real sense of Churchill in his own words: who Churchill was and what he stood for.

Churchill saw far into the future. In an article published in both Britain and the United

States in 1924 he asked: "Might not a bomb no bigger than an orange be found to possess a secret power to destroy a whole block of buildings—nay to concentrate the force of a thousand tons of cordite and blast a township at a stroke? Could not explosives even of the existing type be guided automatically in flying machines by wireless or other rays, without a human pilot, in ceaseless procession upon a hostile city, arsenal, camp, or dockyard?"

It is clear from the material Langworth has assembled that Churchill not only knew war at first

hand, but understood it. In his book *The River War*, first published in 1899, he wrote: "I may have written in these pages something of vengeance and of the paying of a debt. It may be that vengeance is sweet, and that the gods forbade vengeance to men because they reserved for themselves so delicious and intoxicating a drink. But no one should drain the cup to the bottom. The dregs are often filthy-tasting." In his book *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria*, first published in 1900, is the sentence: "Ah, horrible war, amazing medley of the glorious and the squalid, the pitiful and the sublime, if modern men of light and leading saw your face closer, simple folk would see it hardly ever." On May 13, 1901, within three months of entering the House of Commons, Churchill told his fellow members of Parliament: "We do not know what war is. Even in miniature it is hideous and appalling."

It did not take the First World War to determine Churchill's attitude. To his wife, Clementine, in a letter written on September 15, 1909—a year after their marriage—while a guest of the Kaiser at German Army maneuvers, Churchill confided: "Much as war attracts me & fascinates my mind with its tremendous situations—I feel more deeply every year—& can measure the feeling here in the midst of arms—what vile & wicked folly & barbarism it all is." To his brother, Jack, then serving at the Dardanelles, he wrote on June 19, 1915: "The war is terrible: the carnage grows apace....The youth of Europe—almost a whole generation—will be shorn away." To the House of Commons, a year later, having himself served five months in the trenches of the Western Front, Churchill declared: "I say to myself every day, What is going on while we sit here, while we go away to dinner or home to bed? Nearly a thousand men, Britishers, men of our own race, are knocked into bundles of bloody rags every twenty four hours, and carried away to hasty graves or field ambulances." Commenting, in 1920, on the reluctance of the



Churchill by Himself: The Definitive Collection of Quotations

Edited by Richard Langworth
(PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 656 PAGES, \$29.95)

Reviewed by
Sir Martin Gilbert

Among **Martin Gilbert's** books are *Churchill: A Life* (Holt), *Churchill and the Jews* (Holt), and *Churchill and America* (Free Press).