

Chinese Monkeys on Our Backs

An eminent British statesman once confessed to Horace Walpole that he had learned all he knew of the Wars of the Roses from reading Shakespeare's histories. I do not recall who the statesman was, and I am only guessing that Walpole is the source of the anecdote. As is the case of most of what I think I know of history, I am a bit shaky on the details. I am scarcely alone in having an uncertain grasp of historical facts. Most of us pick up our historical erudition from dodgy sources: secondhand anecdotes from friends, scraps of potted history from textbooks and "this day in history" features, and History Channel programs on the secrets of Nostradamus or the mysteries handed down from the Knights Templar to the funny guys in fezzes who raise money for burn units.

Of what possible use is the past to Americans who believe (with Marx) that we make our own history? "History," in our fine barbaric yawn, is at its worst an obstacle to man's limitless progress toward the godhead and at best a useless relic of the contemptible past. "He's history," we say of a celebrity down on his luck or an Illinois governor trudging the well-worn path to the federal hoosegow.

Those who care enough about history to make a modest income by spending ten to twenty hours a week, eight months a year, in the academic asylums known as universities express their contempt for the past by learning as little as they can and by forcing that little into the latest fashions in "scholarship" — Marxism, "gender studies," and French literary theories that deny the meaning of meaning. If they are intelligent enough to know the difference between a truth and a lie, they choose to lie, or better still plagiarize one another's lies.

As Clyde Wilson explained to me years ago, most historians today are not even capable of the honest form of plagiarism that requires them to footnote the opinions they have appropriated. Think of historians as news anchors or columnists reporting on the past. Like Katie Couric or George Will, they rely on teams of assistants to pre-digest books and articles for them, and like poor dear Katie, they are too ill educated — no matter how much they might bone up on a particular specialty or event — to have even the most general understanding of periods more remote than the 1970's.

There are, to be sure, numerous honorable exceptions: useful pedants whose careful researches could provide the foundations for some future Hume or Gibbon. I would happily double their salaries and release them from the unpleasant duty of trying to teach America's youth who, to avoid the wormwood of learning and the gall of thinking, would prefer to have their teeth "extracted by terrified amateurs."

Most serious students I have known hated history class-

es with good reason. Given the choice between theoreticians of one school or another or comedy-club entertainers, a sane young man or woman would always choose Cedric

the Entertainer over apologists for crime — Carl Sandburg and Victor Davis Hanson come to mind, or boosters such as Moses Hadas and the Durants, or the terrible simplifiers who control the textbook industry. Better *Gone With the Wind* than *A Silence at Appomattox*.

As a graduate student, I shared the contempt for all things Roman so common among half-trained Hellenists. I used to boast that all I knew of the empire was a Frank Slaughter novel about Constantine. This was not strictly true, since I had studied Tacitus with T.R.S. Broughton and read haphazardly among the Roman historians, but my jest came close enough to the truth. A few years later, I might have said that everything I knew of Roman and Byzantine history came from Gibbon, and the truth of that statement can be measured by the years I have spent unlearning Gibbon's mistakes and prejudices.

Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* remains one of my favorite books. Half-sick with the flu or lazing about at the beach, I reach for Gibbon with the same anticipation of unfailing satisfaction with which I reach for Raymond Chandler or P.G. Wodehouse or a glass of George Dickel. With what pleasure do I read, as the cadences of the opening sentences wash over a mind fatigued by the unending gossip of daily news:

In the second century of the Christian Era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valor. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence: the Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on the emperors all the executive powers of government.

In these three balanced and supple sentences, Gibbon



conveys both his respect for the empire and his ironic detachment from what he regarded as its self-imposed hypocrisies. It is easy, these days, to miss the significance of Gibbon's accomplishment. Yes, it is true, he depended heavily on predecessors like Tillemont, who had covered the first six centuries of the Christian empire with a meticulous pedantry to which Gibbon did not aspire, but for the most part he read the original sources—historical, literary, theological—and, while greatly indebted to an earlier generation of scholars, he was generally wrestling with the original sources from his own point of view. The best way to begin to know something of late ancient and Byzantine history is to read Gibbon in the edition annotated by J.B. Bury, who corrects many of his errors and argues against some (though hardly all) of his prejudices: Bury, like his master, was a rationalist.

Gibbon is among the greatest masters of English prose, but he is also a storyteller of genius. Confronted with dubious and conflicting sources for the sale of the empire after the murder of Pertinax, Gibbon constructs a compelling tale. When news of the Praetorian Guard's auction spreads through the city,

It reached at length the ears of Didius Julianus, a wealthy senator, who, regardless of the public calamities, was indulging himself in the luxury of the table. His wife and his daughter, his freedmen and his parasites, easily convinced him that he deserved the throne, and earnestly conjured him to embrace so fortunate an opportunity. The vain old man hastened to the Praetorian camp, where Sulpicianus was still in treaty with the guards, and began to bid against him from the foot of the rampart. The unworthy negotiation was transacted by faithful emissaries, who passed alternately from one candidate to the other, and acquainted each of them with the offers of his rival. Sulpicianus had already promised a donative of five thousand drachms (above one hundred and sixty pounds) to each soldier; when Julian, eager for the prize, rose at once to the sum of six thousand two hundred and fifty drachms, or upwards of two hundred pounds sterling. The gates of the camp were instantly thrown open to the purchaser; he was declared emperor; and received an oath of allegiance from the soldiers . . .

It was now incumbent on the Praetorians to fulfil the conditions of the sale. They placed their new sovereign, whom they served and despised, in the centre of their ranks, surrounded him on every side with their shields, and conducted him in close order of battle through the deserted streets of the city. . . . After Julian had filled the senate house with armed soldiers, he expatiated on the freedom of his election, his own eminent virtues, and his full assurance of the affections of the senate. . . . From the senate Julian was conducted, by the same military procession, to take possession of the palace. The

first objects that struck his eyes, were the abandoned trunk of Pertinax, and the frugal entertainment prepared for his supper. The one he viewed with indifference, the other with contempt. A magnificent feast was prepared by his order, and he amused himself, till a very late hour, with dice, and the performances of Pylades, a celebrated dancer. Yet it was observed, that after the crowd of flatterers dispersed, and left him to darkness, solitude, and terrible reflection, he passed a sleepless night; revolving most probably in his mind his own rash folly, the fate of his virtuous predecessor, and the doubtful and dangerous tenure of an empire which had not been acquired by merit, but purchased by money.

Much like the Emperor Tiberius, Gibbon had contempt for the obsequious senators of the empire, and, after Constantine, his contempt turns to disgust with a civilization that has betrayed (in his view) its foundations by accepting an alien and unmanly religion. As the barbarians came pouring into the provinces, Gibbon almost seems to side with the sturdy Germans against the degenerate representatives of Romanitas. Many Christians (Catholics in particular) are disturbed by Gibbon's incessant sneering at the Church, but I have never heard of a sound Christian whose faith was unsettled by Gibbon. A father or teacher, in giving Gibbon to young people, will quite properly point out his prejudices.

The same caution should be given to young readers of an equally magisterial, if less well-known, work of ancient history, George Grote's *A History of Greece*. If Gibbon was a kind of skeptical conservative, Grote was an enthusiastic Whig liberal, a disciple of David Ricardo and the Mills. As the son of a wealthy banker, young George was sent not to university but to the bank. Thus, after he left Charterhouse school at the age of 16, Grote was an autodidact, though it must be said that a Charterhouse boy in those days knew more Greek and Latin than whole departments of classics in major American universities today. (Other distinguished Carthusian classicists include Lewis Crusius, Henry Nettleship, Sir Richard Jebb, and Henry Liddell.)

Grote was not a placeholder heir at the bank, any more than he was an amateur scholar. In a great age of economic theory, he distinguished himself by his understanding of how markets work, and in politics he was a leading advocate of parliamentary reform. He served in three parliaments. In other words, he is probably the only ancient historian in our language who possessed a practical understanding of business and government. (Arnold Toynbee, who compiled economic statistics, is a partial exception, but he was a Byzantine specialist.)

The negative way of looking at Grote is to say that he imposed the Whig theory of history on ancient Greece, and if you were taught about the Golden Age of Pericles, the glo-

ries of the Athenian democracy that liberated itself from the shackles of tradition, religion, and kinship, you have George Grote to thank. On the other hand, until the Afrocentrists, Marxists, and feminists came along with their lies, the Whigs' great lie was probably the only way in which the modern world could grapple with the Greeks.

I think I have done my duty in recommending two great works of history that anyone who wishes to fancy himself an educated man would wish to read. I deliberately picked two historians with whose strongly expressed points of view I strenuously disagree. I am, if anything, more offended by Grote's liberal faith in progress than by Gibbon's childish contempt for the Faith. (Gibbon—the quondam convert—was more than half in love with the Church he professed to hate.) The study of history should do more than confirm our prejudices or comfort our ignorance. If we once understand that this side of the moon there is no such thing as objectivity, we can begin to understand what history is good for. Absolute historical truth, even about very recent times, is an impossibility. That much should be clear to anyone who has watched Akira Kurosawa's *Rashômon* or John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

There is, I believe, no more terrible lie than the liberal historian's pretension to impartiality and no mask more unlike its wearer than the mask of objectivity. How can any normal human being judge his mother as if she were the mother of a neighbor, an alien, or an enemy? How can we pretend to put our church or country on the same plane as any other church or country? The idea is not simply ridiculous: It is disgusting. The man who says he can be "objective" about his family and nation is really saying that he despises his family and nation in the sense that he is looking down on them from above.

The pretense to objectivity is one of the great Enlightenment fallacies that reaches the pinnacle of absurdity in the writings of Adam Smith and William Godwin. Smith perversely claimed that since to love our fellow man is the greatest commandment (conveniently overlooking the first and greatest commandment to love God) we should love ourselves no more than our neighbor, while Godwin urged us, in making moral decisions, to assume the position of an angel looking down on the earth. But even angels cannot be entirely objective, as the story of Satan and his rebellion shows. Objectivity, if it means anything, is an attribute belonging only to divinity. To attempt it is to play at being a little god, who has to lower the rest of humanity in order to elevate himself. Objectivity is not merely a lie; it is among the greatest and most obscene lies.

To chase down historical truth, while not impossible, is a task requiring more courage and skill than hunting lions with a spear and a finer-tuned intelligence than is possessed by the greatest of physicists. If particles are not entirely predictable, how infinitely less predictable are men and their motives? Historical truth is a worthy pursuit for a few historians; the rest of us have to con-

tent ourselves with studying not history but the historians themselves. That is only one of many reasons why it is more important for historians to be storytellers than to be well-trained specialists who cannot see the forest or even the trees for all the lichens and termites they put under the microscope.

All writers and readers who aspire to truth should remind themselves that it is impossible to attain to historical reality, or rather that the pursuit of truth is asymptotic: The closer we get to reality, the more it eludes us. The best to which we can aspire is to scratch up some sense of what the various players might have thought they were doing. In taking, alternately, the point of view of Godfrey of Bouillon and Alexios Komnenos in the First Crusade, we begin to appreciate how they viewed themselves and each other.

The sort of multivoiced history I am recommending has rarely been undertaken, though Herodotus and Shelby Foote have both made a good stab at it. No Whig or American liberal historian, however, has ever thought of picking up the knife. Most of us do not even have the time to read the opposing sides—Niketas Choniates and Geoffrey of Villehardouin, for example, on the Fourth Crusade. It is not impossible, however, to read opposing points of view with sympathy. Someone who has read Edward Gibbon, Sir Steven Runciman, and Jonathan Riley-Smith on the Crusades will not slip so easily into the usual clichés and anticlichés. It is better not to pretend to study history, when the most we are capable of is to study historians.

One of the best examples of this sort of historical writing is George Garrett's meticulously researched novels on the Elizabethan era. We hear the voices of the players, each speaking in his own right, and where judgment must be passed, it is the reader who must pass it.

If, as Frost observed, a liberal is someone who would not take his own side in an argument, we can conclude that illiberals—which is to say, real human beings—are those who know that they have to take their side in every historical argument. This should not be interpreted as an invitation to lie. In fact, the more honest we are with ourselves about our wholesome prejudices the more we can be on guard against the lies those prejudices give rise to. There is a Muslim perspective, too, on the Crusades, and an honest man would do well to study it with an open mind, though an old boss of mine once forbade me to review a collection of Islamic historians on the grounds that the book was published by the PLO. Ignorance, I mean to say, is bliss.

That is where the cult of objectivity leads in the end, to the adoration of the three Chinese monkeys, who would see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. As everyone should know by now, evil—both for historians and for journalists—is any inconvenient truth that cannot be fit under the copybook headings drawn up by the revolutionaries who hate the truth almost as much as they hate God. ☞

Words and Power

Most American presidents, unless they leave office in disgrace, are honored by having airports, schools, libraries, streets, and even whole cities named after them. The city of San Francisco has saluted President George W. Bush in a singular way—by naming a sewage-treatment plant after him.

Of course, this reminds us that the city on the Bay has long since made itself a synonym for disgusting vice. It can hardly insult Bush as much as it has already insulted the great saint for whom it is named. Few of us pause to reflect on that, and on why it was first called as it still is.

The same might be said of many other American cities that in more pious times were given names of religious significance: Providence, Corpus Christi, San Diego, St. Paul, St. Louis, San Jose (and St. Joseph), Santa Monica, Salem, San Antonio, Santa Fe, St. Augustine, San Pablo, St. Petersburg, San Clemente, San Gabriel, San Juan Capistrano, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Sacramento, and many others, right down to Hell (Michigan).

Catholics used to name their children after saints; Protestants, after such Old Testament figures as Aaron and Abraham. It was also common to name a child in honor of parents, ancestors, relatives, and patriotic heroes. Today Americans attach little meaning to words and names; hence the amazing profusion of girls named Kimberly, Britney, and Chelsea. (I don't know of a St. Kimberly, or of an Old Testament matriarch called Britney. On the other hand, the ancient names David, Ruth, Saul, Naomi, Judith, and Solomon are still common among Jews.)

Among the little mysteries of our time is the phrase we now find on so many questionnaires: "religious preference." Preference? Well, I'm a Catholic, but sometimes, in certain moods, I might prefer to be something else—a Unitarian or a Muslim, perhaps. I like Mormons, but I've never been in the

mood to be one, even briefly. In Saudi Arabia, I understand, you are seldom asked which religion you "prefer"—the options are severely limited, and you'd better prefer Islam, if you know what's good for you. Religion is seen in those parts not as a matter of taste, but of truth.

One of the curious results of Bush's presidency is that a few months from now the United States may have, for the first time, a president with a Muslim name, something few of us would have predicted right after September 11, 2001. For all the wild fervor he has inspired, Obama is a routine liberal whose credo may be summed up in the view that genocide is "right-wing," whereas unlimited feticide is "enlightened." The notion that he represents a substantial departure from traditional politics is grimly risible. He enjoys the highest ratings from liberal and pro-abortion groups, differing from others of his sorry breed only in camouflage; insofar as it is up to him, the decimation of the American population, especially the black population, will continue undeflected by this putatively "black" president.

Needless to say, nothing I say against Obama should be construed as implying a preference for John McCain. As the old maxim has it, if God had intended us to vote, he would have given us candidates. As Scott McConnell has noted, "Virtually the entire bipartisan Washington establishment [including both Obama and McCain] now considers it normal that the United States spends as much militarily as the rest of the world combined." Yes, roughly half a trillion dollars per year—on "defense," which now means preparations for mass murder. The state's lexicon is full of words that serve to justify its power: *defense, security, safety, protection, health, service*.—Has your internal revenue servant come to your door lately?

The American Conservative recent-



ly published a thoughtful symposium on World War II, which all its contributors agreed was a needless and disastrous conflict—anything but the "good war" of our official propaganda. Yet none of them raised what I thought was the most obvious objection of all: that it brought us into the age of nuclear weapons.

What does it say about us that we have got used to so dreadful a fact? I am merely asking, not accusing or beating my own breast. What has modern man become? The question invites meditation. Why don't these apocalyptic weapons give us nightmares?

A really radical politician could outrage left and right by saying what Jesus Himself might say: that abortion and nuclear arms represent the two poles of what Pope John Paul II termed the modern world's "culture of death." Political parties are now defined by which categories of human life they regard as expendable. Killing may not exactly be the purpose of politics, but it seems to be the most natural result.

I am always amazed at how many people never stop to ponder the simple truth that government by the state must mean coercion. As Lenin said, the big question is *who is going to do what to whom*. Just as the art of a stage magician is to make you watch one hand while the other does the sleight, so a skilled politician makes you forget that any promises he makes will have to be kept by force; that is, making A do something for B that he does not willingly choose to do. Obama is the latest master of this dismal game. May he be honored by a hundred sewage-treatment plants. ©