

Part I

*Aspects of the European
Tradition of Historical
Writing*

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1: The Classical Tradition from Einhard to Geoffrey of Monmouth

I hope the Society will not think that I am wasting its time in taking the European tradition of historical writing as the general theme of the addresses that I am required to deliver during my term of office. Although there have been many studies of the wide range of problems that fall under the general heading of historiography, the study of the aims, methods, and limitations of the historians of the past has been somewhat neglected, in this country at least.¹ There are of course some conspicuous exceptions. The historical attitudes and aptitudes of St. Augustine, Gibbon, and Macaulay have been examined again and again. But outside the great names comparatively little has been done to examine historical works for what they can tell us about the way in which historical writing is affected by the intellectual presuppositions and environment of the writer. As historians we are generally content to use the chronicles and histories of the past quite simply as quarries of facts that require to be sifted and purified to make them usable for our purposes, but do not require any profound investigation of the principles of selection, emphasis, or composition that determined their preservation. This is how Stubbs dealt with the many chronicles that he edited so admirably. They were the raw material for his own works and those of other historians. He examined them for reliability, and he asked whether they provided new facts that could not be found elsewhere. He had little concern with the minds of the men who all unknowingly determined what materials should be available for his workshop.

In many ways one must admire this insouciance. It arose from the confidence of the historians of a hundred years ago that they had discovered new methods, new questions, and new tools for the interpretation of the past. They had got so far beyond the old writers that the minds of these writers seemed scarcely worth the trouble of investigation. "What could not such a mind have done if it had not been fettered by such a method?" This was Stubbs's blunt reaction to Thomas Aquinas; but I fear he would not have thought that the minds or methods of the historians on whom he lavished so much care were sufficiently distinct to qualify for even this lofty enquiry.

The growing interest in the minds and methods of earlier historians is doubtless a sign of some lack of confidence in ourselves. But it is also a sign of a development in historical perspective that may in time produce important results. The founders of modern historical study were (as is the way with pioneers) highly selective in the type of evidence and the type of subject-matter which they thought suitable for the purposes of the historian, and they were inclined to think that there was only one way in which history could properly be written. They were much more interested in man as a social and political animal than as a thinking and feeling being. To me at least they seem to have put the accent in the wrong place, and my reflections on our historical tradition are to some extent a reaction against the limitations of the discipline in which I was brought up and to which I owe a debt that I can never adequately express.

I have perhaps already said too much by way of introduction, but since in three or four discourses the subject I have in mind can only be dealt with from a personal point of view, I may start by making an assertion that not everyone will agree with, and then proceed to examine the historical background of an attitude that has a long and controversial history. I shall begin then by declaring that the first duty of a historian is to produce works of art. By this I do not primarily mean works that are finely written, but works that are emotionally and intellectually satisfying, that combine a clear unity of conception with a vivacity of detail, and portray people whose actions are intelligible within the framework of their circumstances and character. It is thus that one might describe the aims of a Balzac or a Tolstoy: I say therefore that a historian should aim at satisfying the same emotional and intellectual needs as a novelist or poet. How he is to do this within the limits of the available data is the great question.

Now to start with, it must be recognized that this conception of the historian's task as primarily artistic runs directly against the main stream of European historical writing. Europe has produced a vast quantity of historical writing in the last fifteen hundred years, yet the amount of this huge bulk inspired by any artistic aim is very small indeed. The strength of the European historical tradition has lain in its annalists and

antiquarians. Historical scholarship has been more important than historical writing. The most influential historians have collected information for many purposes – for legal and institutional purposes, to satisfy a thirst for knowledge about a people or a province or a city, or simply for entertainment – but for the most part they have not troubled themselves with art. In thus limiting themselves they were not simply taking an easy course. They had intellectual credentials of the highest respectability for what they did, and more especially for what they failed to do. Aristotle, to come no lower, laid it down that between history and art there is a great gulf fixed, and his view has too strong a foundation in common experience to be easily overthrown. We may therefore pause for a moment to consider it.

In Aristotle's view history lacks the two main ingredients of serious art – form and universality. It lacks form because the events of history have no dramatic unity. And since it is the historian's task to record events faithfully, as they happened, when they happened, and in the order in which they happened, artistic form – the famous beginning, middle, and end of Aristotle's definition – can have no part in the finished result. Consequently the productions of the historian must be as chaotic as life itself:

The historian has to expound not one action, but one period of time and all that happens within this period to one or more persons, however disconnected the several events may be.²

Artistic form is therefore excluded from written history. More important, since the material of history lacks universality, the works of the historian cannot have the universal truth which is the hallmark of great art:

The historian describes the thing that has been; the poet the kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is more important and philosophic than history, for its statements have universal validity, while those of the historian are valid only for one time and one place.³

These are familiar quotations but they are worth recalling for they sum up a great deal that is implicit in the European sense of history as it has developed through the centuries. The overwhelming mass of European historical enquiry between the twelfth century and the nineteenth has been inspired by an instinctive sense that Aristotle's view is right, and no historian who has wrestled long with the intractable material of his craft can fail to have experienced the force of Aristotle's argument. We live daily with the sense of the difficulty, sometimes it seems the impossibility, of penetrating below the surface of events to those depths of human instinct

and volition, the proper sphere of the novelist and poet, where men of every age and place meet in their common humanity. We must often rage inwardly at our limitations; but there they are and they are basically the limitations that Aristotle pointed out.

Yet it is also true that the modern movement in historical writing began when the Aristotelian tradition, with its belittlement of history, wore thin. I am not today concerned with the long struggle in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to free history from the limitations imposed upon it by the Aristotelian tradition. It must suffice for the moment to say that history could only take its place among the academic disciplines when the criticism that it lacked form and universality of application had come to be widely disbelieved. We shall perhaps consider this struggle and its result on a later occasion. Today, however, I want to go back to the early days in the formation of a European historical tradition, before the Aristotelian freeze had set in, and when history was widely regarded as an art of a peculiarly elaborate, exacting, and artificial kind.

II

The writers of whom I shall speak belong to the three centuries from about 820 to 1140, from Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. I choose them because, although there is no scholar among them of the stature of Bede and no chronicler of contemporary events so copious or entertaining as Matthew Paris, the more ambitious historians of this period have an identity of aim and inspiration that we shall not find again on a European scale until the seventeenth century. The inspiration of these writers was predominantly classical, and they attempted to produce works of art based on the practice and precepts of antiquity. The extent to which they succeeded in this purpose will have to be considered somewhat carefully in assessing their achievement, and this in turn will help to explain why classical ideals of historical art were largely replaced by more pedestrian but more serviceable models in the course of the twelfth century.

The classical ideals which these writers inherited and attempted to revive had nothing in common with the views of Aristotle which I have already described. Aristotle's views on history had been pushed aside by ancient historians, and they were known in the early Middle Ages only in the form of an epigram about history being different from tragedy. But the source and meaning of this epigram were wholly unknown. The historical ideal of the West in the Carolingian and post-Carolingian period was derived from Sallust and Suetonius, from Virgil and Lucan, from Boethius and from the writers on rhetoric whose works were studied in the

schools.⁴ It was a miscellaneous bag, and to anyone who looks for a serious study of the practice of ancient historians it will seem woefully defective. Sallust is the sole representative of the great historians of Greece and Rome, and surely he is not the greatest. Yet it is doubtful whether more or better models would have made a greater or different impression. Men learn in the end only what they wish to learn, and the hints of authors far below the best will generally suffice to convey the acceptable lessons of the past. All the writers I have mentioned were very widely read and they transmitted to their readers some basic principles of ancient history.

In the first place they enforced the lesson that history is a branch of literature, and that he who aspires to write history must aim at producing works of art that are rich in color, distinctive in diction, and perfect in shape. Although the necessity for truth was a constantly reiterated requirement, anyone familiar with Sallust and Suetonius would easily conclude that historical truth did not exclude a generous freedom to select, arrange, and fill out events to produce dramatic and intellectually satisfying confrontations. If, in the exercise of this freedom, the disciples of these writers filled their works with appropriate speeches and documents of their own composition, they would certainly not have misinterpreted the spirit of their models. Early medieval scholars, who were educated in the rhetorical tradition of the ancient world, understood instinctively the liberties that ancient historians had taken, and they followed their example with enthusiasm.

All these lessons, which chiefly concerned the literary presentation and ornamentation of historical themes, lay on the surface and could easily be learned. At a deeper level there were lessons about the structure of historical events themselves. It was here that the poverty of the western inheritance of historical works from the past might have been a serious handicap. Polybius and Thucydides could certainly have imparted more serious views of historical causation than Sallust. Yet in Sallust, besides grand rhetoric, brilliant caricatures, weighty speeches, and generalizations about human affairs, the readers of the *Catiline Conspiracy* – which then as now was the most widely studied of his works – would find a large view of the stages by which society degenerates from its primitive vigor and moral purity as a result of the growth of wealth and luxury, until men of the highest talents seek to rehabilitate their dissipated fortunes at the cost of the general overthrow of the state.⁵ Behind the rhetoric there is here the outline of a theory of social change and an account of the mechanism of its progress that is quite enough to provoke thought about the general problems of historical causation.

In contrast to Sallust, Virgil was not interested in the causes and effects of social change, but he provided a view of the destiny of a nation

sufficiently powerful to inspire the emulation of historians. Readers of the *Aeneid* found in it a secular parallel to the sacred history of man's Fall, Redemption, and Sanctification. Out of the flames and destruction of Troy there comes forth a remnant destined to restore the defeated people to a height beyond all previous imagining – to nothing less than world Empire. This remnant is battered and tossed hither and thither, the leader is exposed to overwhelming tests and temptations, the people suffer every kind of misfortune; but they persist, and in the end the new city is built which will bring peace and justice to all the world. All this is an example of a historical development which men may create if they collaborate with the will of God to fulfill their destiny. Nowhere, not even in the Old Testament, is it possible to find so powerful and poignant an account of the divinely assisted ascent of a people.

What effect did these various sides of the classical tradition have on the Carolingian scholars and their successors who aspired to write history?

III

We may begin with something which had no effect: there is no sign of any interest in Sallust's theory of historical causation. Nearly all our writers quote Sallust, some of them use him as their chief model, probably they had all studied him and would all have agreed that he was the most powerful historian in the ancient world.⁶ But none of them so much as noticed that he had an overall theory of the development and decline of political societies. This total indifference is all the more striking in writers who were acutely aware of moral degeneration in societies as well as individuals. They frequently found an explanation of natural and political disasters in the obliquity of priests and people and in the sins of the ruler; but the explanation was not strictly historical – it was theological. It was God's anger that caused the disasters; and it was sin that made Him angry. There was no historical machinery that intervened. The signs and portents which accompanied or preceded disasters had a similarly supernatural role. Basically they were simply celestial signs of the divine wrath. Occasionally, if there was a sufficient delay between celestial sign and terrestrial disaster, the sign could be seen as a warning mercifully delivered to those who could understand. But historians knew almost nothing, and cared almost as little, about the secondary causes of events about which Sallust had so comprehensive a doctrine.

If we were to judge the influence of classical authors simply by the extent to which they stimulated thought about the problems of historical change our judgment would be brief and negative. But the lack of interest in this area was balanced by an intensity of interest in the problems of

literary form. The doctrine that history is a branch of the art of rhetoric was accepted with eager acclaim. The presentation of great and noble events in language appropriate to the subject-matter, and the molding of this subject-matter into artistically contrived patterns, which emphasized grandeur and relegated pettiness to oblivion, became a major preoccupation of a long line of historians.

At first sight there seems a strange contradiction here. The period which produced the most highly polished works of carefully contrived history was also the greatest period for annals which were constructed without any attempt at cohesion or artistic elaboration. The modern reader will be apt to think that annals such as these, which sometimes extend over several centuries filling the empty spaces in liturgical calendars, are the most impressive historical products of the age. They are a resolute, undeviating record of human disorder in the midst of a cosmic order. This is how men seem instinctively to have looked on history; but it was not how they thought histories should be written.

The contrast between these annals and histories written in accordance with rhetorical rules is startling, but I think it is not quite beyond explanation. In the first place, although at one level of experience events seemed discontinuous and chaotic, there was another level at which they could be regarded as typical of an order that was beyond change. This ambiguity in history, which made it at once wholly irrational and wholly rational, at once wholly coherent and wholly incoherent, was one of the most carefully cultivated experiences of the early Middle Ages. The Old Testament with its various layers of historical truth was the basis of this experience of order in the midst of apparent chaos. And the point about this order was that it came from God not man; it was discoverable not by historical rules but by an inspiration beyond history. Men brought up in this tradition of interpretation had a strong sense of the confusion of events, and a weak sense of the distinction between (as we should say) facts and imagination. The facts of history, when heated in the fire of imagination, become malleable. If the chaos of Old Testament history could be resolved by a divine fire into a perfectly organized system of truth about man and God, it was not difficult to think that the chaos of contemporary history might respond to the fire of the liberal arts.

The fire came from rhetoric. This was an art that men thought important and studied with care, but could seldom use. The revival of classical learning in the ninth century had brought the art of rhetoric back to the supremacy which it had in the ancient world, and which it did not lose again until the twelfth century. But despite its importance in the educational program, most of its ancient uses had disappeared. Legal and political rhetoric, for which the ancient art chiefly existed, was dead; epistolary rhetoric, the chief subject of the medieval art, had not yet been born;

pulpit rhetoric still lay far in the future. History was the one branch of rhetoric that had lost none of its ancient opportunities.

The opportunities were especially great because there was never a time when display counted for more in public and private life than in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Great events were preeminently occasions of ceremony and pomp. Displays of pomp were a main prop of government; they were the highlights of the ecclesiastical year, and they marked the stages in the rise of churches and empires alike. It was easy to think that in writing worthily of such occasions, a writer was supremely fulfilling the duties of a historian. When the historians of the period apologized to their readers for not doing better, they never thought that their deficiencies arose from gaps in their information, which are manifest to us, nor from the problems they have left unsolved, nor from their failure to explain why things happened as they did. They deplored only their poverty of diction, their deficiency in rhetorical colors or *sententiae*, their failure to find words splendid enough for their theme.⁷ It would be stupid to blame them for thinking of their task as historians in these terms, for history itself appeared as a kind of rhetoric in action.

This view of history does not now seem as silly as it once appeared. Recent studies of the place of ceremonies and symbolism in the organization of society have brought us nearer to the point of view of writers of the tenth and eleventh centuries than the great editors of their works in the last century. We see now that the display of outward splendor and the assertion of authority which it implied were central facts in social life. In depicting the glory of rulers, historians were not sycophants but interpreters of their time, and a grandiose style was the fittest garment to enclose what was thought to be the chief substance of history.

In order to obtain a harmony of style and matter it was necessary to find subjects that did not fall below the dignity of a grand effect. This necessity directed the historians of this period towards the lives of secular rulers, who were not only the most conspicuous objects on the landscape, but also attracted to themselves ceremonies of every kind – coronations, dedications of churches, feasts and funerals, councils and battles and acts of colorful treachery. These were the events that mattered; they were also the most suitable subjects for ornate prose. Besides, the prosperity of secular rulers – chosen by God, ordained by sacramental acts, resplendent in symbolic garments, the vicars of Christ, the fathers of their country, the heads of the world – provided mankind with their best hope of peace and plenty. People believed in the sacred mission of rulers as they have never believed in it before or since, and it is hard to think that the adulation which historians of these centuries heaped on their rulers came only from the thought that they had the means of paying for praise.

IV

It was Einhard who first opened this rich vein to historians and showed the way it could be worked. His *Life* of Charlemagne initiated a new phase in the development of historical studies in western Europe, characterized by a serious attempt to revive the literary and artistic standards of classical historians. No one ever again succeeded quite as well as Einhard in creating a contemporary character in a classical mold. However stilted and unconvincing some of the passages in his work may be, there emerges from the work a fresh and original portrait of a great barbarian with enormous appetites both physical and intellectual, with an instinct for government and a creative power in practical affairs which few men in European history have matched and which among Germans only Bismarck has equaled.

Einhard was fortunate in having a subject capable of filling a classical canvas. None of his successors was equally fortunate, and none of them knew their subject as well as Einhard did. Consequently they had to compensate for the flaws in their subject and the gaps in their knowledge by a growing extravagance of diction. The ornaments became more baroque as the subjects shrank in size. Sometimes the ornaments of later writers enlarged the range of historical feeling, but in the main their extravagance only confirms the impression of Einhard's superiority.

To say this is not discreditable to his successors. Einhard was a historian with an outstandingly alert and responsive mind. He not only appreciated the possibility of writing a secular biography quite unlike any that had been written for six hundred years; he also discovered the right model for such a biography. In the library at Fulda, where he was educated as a young man, there was a manuscript – so far as we know the only surviving manuscript at that time – of Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*. These tough and heartless biographies, with their interest in the private vices of the Emperors and their lucid arrangement of subject-matter, showed Einhard how to describe a man who was neither a saint, nor an institution, but a warrior and a creator of new forms of political life. The success of his work was immediate, and the testimony of over eighty manuscripts – a record number for any historical work between Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth – confirms the praises of his contemporaries.

In order to achieve his effect Einhard took liberties with his material which have earned him the dispraise of modern scholars, and since this is a phenomenon we shall often encounter it may be well to examine the matter at this point. Briefly the difficulty is that the more successful Einhard is in handling his subject the less reliable he is as a source for

modern historians. Louis Halphen, the first editor to examine his methods with care, was never tired either of pointing out his exaggerations and distortions, or of castigating his eagerness to apply to Charlemagne words and ideas that Suetonius used about Augustus.⁸ To take only one example of habits that Halphen disliked, Einhard opens his description of the defeat of Charlemagne's army at Roncevaux with words appropriate to a victorious campaign:

After crossing the Pyrenees and capturing all the towns and castles which he encountered, Charlemagne returned with his army safe and sound, except that on a ridge of the Pyrenees he happened to experience some small effects of Gascon perfidy on the way home.⁹

“Façon vraiment discrète d'avouer la défaite de Roncevaux [a truly discrete way to acknowledge the defeat at Roncevaux],” wrote Halphen. Einhard would not have considered this discretion a vice. On the contrary, it was a merit. He knew very well (if only because his contemporary source told him so) that the defeat was very much more serious than he admitted, and it is very likely that if he had been writing a series of annals instead of a work of art, he would have stuck as closely as possible to the facts. But here his purpose was to evoke an image of imperial greatness. It is a striking fact that men who wrote in the ancient rhetorical tradition seem to have been unable to admit any blemishes in the image they wished to convey. They were not romantics, and they knew nothing of the equally rhetorical but subtler use of the flaw which emphasizes a beauty; everything in their picture had to tell the same story. Acting on this principle, they thought it no more disgraceful in themselves to color and select the facts to convey the overriding image, than we should think it in a painter who rearranges the trees to bring out the character which he wishes to elicit from the landscape. In both cases the result must be judged, not by the photographic accuracy of the details, but by the impression of truth in the total effect.

Einhard had many admirers, but he had no successful imitators or successors for over a hundred years. Nithard, indeed, wrote an even better, because more pungent and disillusioned, history of the Empire in his day. Asser wrote a life of a ruler with a more attractive and more lovingly observed character than Einhard's Charlemagne; but as a work of literature it is very incompetent. The first entirely competent biography of a ruler after Charlemagne is Wipo's *Life* of Conrad II.¹⁰ This is a well-organized and learned work, full of resonant phrases and with a fine smooth surface of splendor and success. It was written with the intention of provoking a comparison with Charlemagne and everything that words could do to build Conrad up to the stature of his predecessor was done.

Wipo had a wider range of authors at his command than Einhard, and equal skill in using them. But the work is pedestrian, partly because Conrad was after all much less interesting than Charlemagne, and partly because Wipo was a humble dependant. Einhard had written as a trusted friend and in some sense an equal of his hero; Wipo wrote as a schoolmaster and servant. This was the great weakness of the medieval rhetorical tradition: the writer was unequally yoked to his subject. In the ancient world rhetoric was used by statesmen and men of action speaking and writing for their equals; in the Middle Ages it fell into the hands of dependants who wished to please or instruct their superiors.

Even in these unfavorable conditions some impressive monuments of historical rhetoric were produced. The authors of these works had one great advantage over most historians; they knew exactly what they wanted to do, and their rules allowed them a wide liberty in doing it. It was in Germany that the best subjects suitable for treatment according to the rhetorical rules were to be found; and it was in Germany too that the chief schools existed where these rules were taught. But scholarship is an international asset, and the two works which most brilliantly imposed on recalcitrant material the dramatic unity and elevation of sentiment that the rhetorical ideal demanded were written by foreigners in England. The authors of these works wrote in praise of two English queens, Emma and Edith, the wives of Cnut and Edward the Confessor. They wrote as outsiders, and they wrote for benefits received or expected. Yet, even so, they managed to express a mysterious depth of national feeling quite unlike anything we find elsewhere. They were serious artists and in their own way serious historians.

The author of the earlier of these two works, which is known to modern scholars as the *Encomium Emmae*, made no secret of his primary duty of serving the honor and good name of the queen his patron. The story he had to tell was a simple one, but dramatic in its simplicity. He spoke first of the Danes – their military prowess, family disputes, and inner counsels; then of the ancient kingdom of England, torn apart by war and divided from its conquerors by bitterness and hatred; then of Cnut and his search for a wife; and finally of the divine providence which led him to choose a princess whom Englishmen could trust and who could interpret England to her alien husband. By her patience and skill in eliciting her husband's beneficence, the ruin and hatred that had ravaged the kingdom gave place to peace and splendor and religious harmony throughout his reign. Then on his death a renewal of family discord threatened further calamity and strife. But once more her prudence and foresight turned this dark and threatening scene into a new blossoming of peace and concord under the joint rule of her two surviving sons. So the story ends in a final chorus of praise and religious devotion as the

sound of battle recedes into the distance. It is the story of a woman behind the scenes who saved a kingdom from ruin.

There is no need to examine the subterfuges which made it possible for the historian to reconcile this story with the facts of history.¹¹ Naturally these are very shocking to a modern scholarly conscience, though it is doubtful whether the author took any liberties with the facts of history that Suetonius and Sallust would not have felt free to take. If we grant these liberties, which are those of a historical method rather than an individual; and if we grant, as we must, that there is not a single speech, document, description, or insinuation of motive in any of the works written in this tradition that can be accepted unreservedly by a modern historian in search of a fact, then we may judge that the *Encomium Emmae* is not only a work of great literary skill, but even of some nobility and historical insight. Although the Danes are dressed up and speak like Romans, they act like barbarians in their love of splendor, their desire for cultural respectability, their awe in the face of the miraculous, their genius for discord, and their longing for domestic harmony. These are the genuine traits of the time which may be held to justify the author's high claim to be telling the truth despite all the equivocation which a modern editor can easily detect.

These reflections apply equally to the other great example of historical rhetoric produced by a foreigner in England in the eleventh century, the *Vita Edwardi Confessoris*.¹² The author of this work differs from his predecessor chiefly in having a more complicated task and a greater literary ambition. He wished to praise Queen Edith his patron; but, since she did no great works, he could only praise her by praising her husband, King Edward, and her father Earl Godwin, and all her brothers. This was not easy since the most conspicuous events of the reign arose from the enmity of the members of this domestic group. But the author managed to praise them all, nearly all the time, by using a simple and ingenious device. He elevated the king above the ordinary affairs of government and stressed the numinous quality of his rule. This allowed him the double liberty of blaming the king's errors on evil advisers, and of transferring to the queen's family all responsibility for running the kingdom, conducting military expeditions, and preserving the peace. In this way he managed to preserve and enhance the credit of all parties, and to keep a single theme running through the whole work: the theme of family unity. It was through unity in an amicable division of labor that the kingdom enjoyed a golden age that lasted throughout most of the reign.

Up to this point the author had a theme very similar to that of the *Encomium Emmae*, but in the end he had to face a final breakdown of the family unity on which everything depended. The two brothers, Harold and Tostig, quarreled, and this time there was no happy ending – only a

succession of disasters to which the author could see no end. I know of no piece of medieval historical writing that ends with so little hope: history and tragedy are for once completely equated. Yet in facing the tragedy the author managed somehow to save everyone's credit and to raise his theme to a new height. For the nation the tragedy was complete, but in the king's sanctity there was a hope beyond temporal events. The intensity of the author's dramatic vision overcame every obstacle. He had set out to praise the family, and its greatest praise lay in the consequences of its disunity. It was a family on which everything depended, and the tragedy of its final break-up lay in a fatality beyond human control. The work is both a lament and a glorification of a family. The author had no eyes for other causes of ruin: to this one cause he attributed all the disasters of 1066 – he never mentioned the Norman Conquest.

A historian who could write about the disasters of 1066 without mentioning the Norman Conquest is evidently not a historian in any very pedestrian sense of the word. Like all the historians of this period he knew that the first duty of the historian was to tell the truth, and he was careful not to tell a lie; but within this limit he was a creator on a grand scale. The amount of poetry and Greek mythology in the work is a sufficient indication of the plane on which he moved as a historian. It is the plane of spiritual essences and eternal beings. At this level he would have claimed that his story is true, and we can only take his word for it. But if it is true, it is the truth that Aristotle allowed to the poet, not to the historian. But in Aristotle's sense all these writers were poets for they manipulated their materials to give form and universality to their productions.

V

The first great lesson that the historians of our period learnt from the classics was how to turn history into rhetoric. But there was another lesson which had a still greater future in its influence on western historical writing – the lesson that the destiny of nations is the noblest of all historical themes. Ancient historians had been deeply impressed – how could they fail to be? – by the spectacle of the rise of Rome to world-power. The appearance of inevitability in this movement, despite the follies and errors which hindered its progress, inspired the greatest writers of Rome with a sense of destiny that gave a purpose and direction to their history. This was the theme that the writers of our period found in Virgil. It was a theme that they were ready to absorb and turn to new uses.

In the tenth century several new peoples – Saxons and Normans in the first place, but also Poles and Hungarians – were beginning to achieve political importance and respectability. With this there came the

conviction, or perhaps only the hope, that they were no longer barbarians but belonged to the civilized peoples of Europe. This in its turn bred a desire for a past, and a sense of awe at the providential steps which had brought them out of barbarism. In these circumstances the obvious source for a national history lies in the legends and myths of the people. But the new peoples of Europe were largely cut off from their mythological origins by their conversion to Christianity and by the Latin learning which stood between the literate part of society and its native past. Hence it was in Roman history that they found the broken pieces which they could build into a picture of their own origins and destiny.

There were two aspects of Roman history which they found especially useful for this purpose: it showed them how people in a distant and heroic past might be expected to speak and behave, and it provided a fixed point for the beginnings of the civilized peoples of Europe. The examples of speech and behavior were of course highly artificial, and when historians of the tenth and eleventh centuries made their national heroes speak and act like characters in Roman history they may have been fully aware of the artificiality, but the alternative was that they should not speak or act at all. As for the origins of the new races of Europe, everyone knew that they had come as conquerors to take over the Roman Empire and carry on the Roman tradition. But where had they come from and whence had they drawn strength for so great an enterprise? What was more likely than that they had come from the same root as the Romans themselves – from Troy? We smile; but very early – in the sixth or seventh century – a Frankish learned tradition had alleged that the Franks were the descendants of Trojans who fled from Troy to the Danube valley when Aeneas went in the opposite direction to the Tiber.¹³ The Franks themselves do not seem to have attached much importance to this legend; but it became important for other races who had to struggle harder than the Franks for a place in the sun. In their claim to Trojan ancestry, first the Saxon and Norman, then the French and British peoples, began to build themselves up to a stature appropriate to their destiny.

The first writer to do this was Widukind the historian of the Saxons. Widukind was writing about 970, in the last years of the reign of Otto I, and the theme of his history was the rise of his people from obscure beginnings to universal power. As he surveyed the achievements of Otto I in extending Saxon rule to the furthest limits of Germany and Italy, in defeating the Greeks, subduing the heathen barbarians, assuming the crown of universal empire, he began to see the history of the Saxons as a reenactment of the history of Rome. How could this be explained?

I have said that the historians of this age had no interest in the mechanisms of historical change, and this is true if we think only of natural causation. But they saw that there were two requirements for political

success: nobility of blood and heavenly aid. Noble blood meant primarily noble ancestry, and here Widukind took a hint from the Franks. According to the ancient Frankish legend, the Trojans had split into two groups of fugitives when their city fell: the followers of Aeneas who went west to Rome and the followers of Priam. This second group later split into two: one part went up the Danube to occupy the territory between the Rhine and the Danube. It was from this group that the Franks were descended. The second group went south into Macedonia and formed the conquering armies of Philip and Alexander the Great.¹⁴ Widukind tells us that when he was a youth he had been told that the Saxons were descended from the remnants of the army of Alexander the Great, and he believed this to be probable.¹⁵ The tone in which he speaks of this descent makes it fairly clear that it was a recent discovery, no doubt prompted by the rise of the Saxons to a world role and their desire to rival the Franks, whom they were supplanting, in nobility of blood. Widukind did not press the point very strongly, for he believed he could find in Josephus and Lucan ample evidence for the ancient nobility of the Saxon people. On any view the Saxons belonged to the noble races of the ancient world.

With regard to supernatural aid, he could be more precise. The commonest channels of divine favor were relics, and it was the transfer of the relics of St. Vitus from the Frankish Corbie to Saxon Korvei in 836 that signaled the transfer of Empire from the Franks to the Saxons. This transfer was confirmed by the translation of the hand of St. Denys from Paris to Korvei in 923.¹⁶ This was the signal for Saxony to prepare itself for the great leap forward, which went on without a break till 973 when the Empire of the world seemed assured. It would of course be difficult to imagine a cruder mechanism of historical change than this physical transport of relics from place to place, but it sufficed. The relic was both an instrument of power and a symbol of power – the greatest force that was known.

Widukind thought he was writing of a new world-power. In fact it scarcely survived his own lifetime. The next hundred and fifty years brought forward new claimants to power and respectability, and the historians of these new peoples all told a similar story. The first in the field, some twenty-five years after Widukind, was Dudo the Norman historian.¹⁷ He was an ambitious writer, and modern scholars have scarcely been able to contemplate his work without a shudder. To historians he has appeared as a historian who neglected a unique opportunity for recording the facts about tenth-century Norman society in order to indulge in the wildest fantasies about its origin and development. To students of literature he has appeared as a learned man who neglected no opportunity for loading his writing with false jewels of every possible kind. So, both for the opportunities he neglected and for those which he seized with avidity,

he has won universal opprobrium. This is surely undeserved. What he set out to do, and – according to the standards and opinions of the best judges of his own and the following century – succeeded in doing, was to tell in the noblest style the story of a noble destiny. Without claiming that he produced a masterpiece of historical literature, he must certainly be given the credit of having successfully exploited the historical techniques that he shared with his contemporaries.

In the first place Dudo's elaborate prose, his reminiscences of classical and Christian literature, his frequent flights into poetry, were all designed to give his history the dignity of a theme which was basically the same as Widukind's: the rise of a people from the noble stock of Troy, through heroic wanderings strikingly similar to those of Aeneas and his companions, to their destined place among the Christian nations of Europe. These wanderings were punctuated, as were those of Aeneas, by divinely inspired visions and premonitions, and their end was baptism and holiness. To us every stage in this story is filled with historical absurdities: the myth of Trojan descent is based on false etymology and no doubt inspired by a desire to show that the Normans were equal to the Franks and Saxons in their nobility of blood; the visions, and the interpretations placed upon them, are no more than figments of the author's imagination; the concluding section of the work which portrays the dukes of Normandy as Christian heroes and martyrs, mainly concerned with the purity of their own lives and the endowment of the Church, contradicts almost every known fact in the lives of these men. And yet, behind all these absurdities, there lies the truth that by the early eleventh century the Normans were on the point of becoming the most influential Christian nation in Europe. Richer, the historian of the Franks, writing at almost the same moment as Dudo, still referred to Richard I of Normandy as "the leader of the pirates": Dudo wrote to show that this was out-of-date. In order to make his point he indulged in the wildest exaggerations, but his point was right, and even prophetic. No doubt his history was partly propaganda, partly admonition, but it was also an attempt to understand in the only terms available to a historian a mysterious phenomenon – the phenomenon of the conversion of a bloodthirsty crew into a Christian state, and a crowd of pirates into an ordered society.

After Widukind and Dudo, several nations produced writers who wrote similar histories for their own people and their rulers. Ekkehard [of Aura] wrote at the request of the Emperor Henry V a history which traced the descent of the German emperors from Troy to the Franconian dynasty.¹⁸ In France, Suger and the monks of St. Denis began to collect materials to establish the claim of the Capetians to be the effective heirs of Charlemagne and, of course, Trojans also by origin.¹⁹ Then in the fullness of time came Geoffrey of Monmouth to stake out the claims of the Celts to a historical destiny greater than any other.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* is generally looked on as a new beginning in literature which helped to launch Europe in a wave of romanticism and fantasy. But as with all really influential works there is another side to the story.²⁰ If we look not at its influence but at its form and inspiration, we see that Geoffrey's *History* conforms to the same general pattern as those of Widukind and Dudo. Here, too, we have the history of an ancient and noble people, descended in blood from Troy the source of all worldly nobility, buffeted by fortune, guided by visions and heavenly visitations, and led to settle in a distant land. In the account of these wanderings the parallel between Aeneas and his descendant Brutus, the leader of the Britons, is never far from the surface. Then there follows a history of conversion, war, and a final period of peace and splendor under a great and religious king. In all this we see a pattern to which we have become accustomed. But at this point we begin to recognize two great differences between Geoffrey of Monmouth and all his medieval predecessors. In the first place his account of the distant past is far fuller than those of any previous author. Dudo is copious enough, but he has to inflate every incident with speeches and rhetoric to fill his pages. Geoffrey by contrast is overflowing with detail; he makes us conscious all the time of the confusion and unpredictability of real events. He gives his distant characters an independent, almost a plausible, life of their own. This was especially important for a writer to whom all history was ancient. Unlike Widukind and Dudo he had no story of success coming down to his own day. Instead, he told a tragic history of decline and destruction, the result of treachery within and barbarism without. Slowly the Britons withdrew before the onslaughts of the Saxons until they almost disappeared from the stage of history. But over this retreat there hovered the promise of renewal; Geoffrey's history here joined hands with prophecy and opened up the promise of a still greater future for this people predestined by God for universal rule.

It is these features of vivid detail and tragedy, together with the mysterious hope for the future, that put Geoffrey's history into a different class from those we have so far discussed. It must be left to the Celtic experts to discuss the sources of his strength. Personally I am convinced that the source which he claimed to have received from Walter, archdeacon of Oxford, really existed. But when we observe the freedom with which other historians in the same tradition treated their sources,²¹ we shall not expect any exact correspondence between Geoffrey's source and the "translation" which he made of it. It is highly likely that in his treatment of his sources, whether literary or traditional, he used the freedom of invention that the literary tradition of historical writing allowed. But we may also think that like other writers in this tradition he used his freedom in the interests of some larger truth. He had seen in his own lifetime the

Bretons return to England as Conquerors. As he looked back he saw some divinely ordained design behind the chaos of events – a destiny once before fulfilled in Arthur and once again to be fulfilled in the future.

VI

We have traced two streams of classical influence in historical writing for about three hundred years from the rediscovery or rehabilitation of ancient models and ancient rhetorical teaching in the ninth century. During this period, alongside a great mass of annalistic compilation, there was a succession of writers who devoted their energies to the task of writing histories which were also works of art. The best results of their efforts can be seen in the biographies of rulers and the histories of the new peoples of Europe. These subjects were in various ways amenable to rhetorical treatment, and they could probably only have been given literary form under the influence of classical models. This combination of subject and method inspired a succession of writers who believed that the writing of history was an exacting literary art which demanded a wide range of secular learning and a full exercise of imaginative power. Consequently the histories which they produced were heavily loaded to produce an effect. They have very little assured fact that a modern historian can rely on; but they illuminate some of the main developments of their day – the sanctification of the secular ruler and the providential (as it seemed) emergence of new political powers in Europe. To these themes our writers have given a forceful and brilliant expression. Whether they went further than their ancient models in distorting the facts of history for their special ends is a difficult question and perhaps an irrelevant one. For the modern historian, who may be regarded as a share-holder in the facts of history, it makes a great difference whether the dividend of facts produced by these works is 2 percent or 20 percent; but if we look at the methods and aims of the writers the difference is accidental. Nevertheless we may all agree that in Geoffrey of Monmouth the dividend had shrunk to vanishing-point and it was time for history to come under a new management.

By this time too, the combination of learned interests and appropriate subjects which inspired these works was ceasing to exist. New forms of rhetoric were coming into fashion; new intellectual interests were replacing the literary and allegorical interests of the Carolingian period; secular rulers were losing their spiritual glamour; the peoples of Europe were nearly all provided with a historical background that sufficed till the nineteenth century. The *Life* of Henry IV of Germany was the last ruler-biography in the old rhetorical tradition; and, except for a few late-comers, of whom much the most important was Saxo Grammaticus,

“research” into the distant past of European peoples came to an end. Historians began to take a more prosaic view of historical facts and to distinguish more rigorously between fact and fancy. When this happened the end was in sight for history as an art conceived in terms borrowed from the ancient world: Romance became separated from History. Art and science went their different ways to separate heavens, and history fell between the two with results that we shall perhaps be able to examine at a later date.