

A public servant and noted orator in England at the turn of the 18th century, Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751), wrote on the study and uses of history. We use excerpts from one of his letters for our "The Past Is Prologue" item for this issue of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT.

LETTERS ON THE STUDY AND USE OF HISTORY  
By Bolingbroke

The love of history seems inseparable from human nature because it seems inseparable from self-love. The same principle in this instance carries us forward and backward, to future and past ages. We imagine that the things which affect us must affect posterity: this sentiment thus runs through mankind, from Caesar down to the parish clerk in Pope's "Miscellany"....

Nature gave us curiosity to excite the industry of our minds; but she never intended it should be made the principal, much less the sole, object of their application. The true and proper object of this application is a constant improvement in private and public virtue. An application to any study that tends neither directly nor indirectly to make us better men and better citizens is at best but a specious and ingenious sort of idleness... and the knowledge we acquire by it is a creditable kind of ignorance, nothing more. This creditable kind of ignorance is, in my opinion, the whole benefit which the generality of men, even the most learned, reap from the study of history: and yet the study of history seems to me, of all others, the most proper to train us up to private and public virtue....

"Few by prudence," says Tacitus, "distinguish good from bad, the useful from the injurious; more are taught by the fortunes of others." Such is the imperfection of human understanding, such the frail temper of our minds, that abstract or general propositions, though ever so true, appear obscure or doubtful to us very often, till they are explained by examples: and that the wisest lessons in favor of virtue go but a little way to convince the judgment, and determine the will, unless they are enforced by the same means; and we are obliged to apply to ourselves what we see happen to other men....

(After listing some examples from classical literature of famous men who worked with great figures and understudied them...) These are instances of the force of immediate example. But your lordship knows that the citizens of Rome placed the images of their ancestors in the vestibule of their houses; so that, whenever they went in or out, these venerable busts met their eyes, and recalled the glorious actions of the dead, to fire the living, to excite them to imitate, and even to emulate their great forefathers. The success answered the design. The virtue of one generation was transfused, by the magic of example, into several: and a spirit of heroism was maintained through many ages of that commonwealth. Now these are so many instances of the force of remote example: and from all these instances we may conclude that examples of both kinds are necessary.

The school of example, my lord, is the world: and the masters of this school are history and experience. I am far from contending that the former is preferable to the latter. I think upon the whole otherwise: but this I say, that the former is absolutely necessary to prepare us for the latter, and to accompany us whilst we are under the discipline of the latter, that is, through the whole course of our lives. No doubt some few men may be quoted, to whom nature gave what art and industry can give to no man. But such examples will prove nothing against me, because I admit that the study of history, without experience is insufficient, but assert that experience itself is so without genius. Genius is preferable to the other two: but I would wish to find the three together: for how great soever a genius may be, how much soever he may acquire new light and heat, as he proceeds in his rapid course, certain it is that he will never shine with the full luster, nor shed the full influence he is capable of, unless in his own experience he adds the expedience of other men and other ages. Genius, without improvement, at least of experience, is what comets were once thought to be, a blazing meteor, irregular in his course, and dangerous in his approach; of no use to any system, and able to destroy any. Mere sons of earth, if they have experience without any knowledge of the history of the world, are but half scholars in the science of mankind. And if they are conversant in history without experience, they are worse than ignorant; they are pedants, always incapable, sometimes meddling and presuming. The man who has all three is an honor to his country, and a public blessing: and such, I trust, your lordship will be in this century, as your great-grandfather was in the last....

The temper of the mind is formed, and a certain turn given to our ways of thinking; in a word, the seeds of that moral character which cannot wholly alter the natural character, but may correct the evil and improve the good that is in it, or do the very contrary, are sown betimes, and much sooner than is commonly supposed. It is equally certain that we shall gather or not gather experience, be the better or the worse for this experience, when we come into the world and mingle amongst mankind, according to the temper of mind, and the turn of thought that we have acquired

beforehand and bring along with us. They will tincture all our future acquisitions; so that the very same experience which secures the judgment of one man, or excites him to virtue, shall lead another into error, or plunge him into vice. From hence it follows that the study of history has in this respect a double advantage. If experience alone can make us perfect in our parts, experience cannot begin to teach them till we are actually on the stage: whereas, by a previous application to this study, we con them over at least, before we appear there: we are not quite unprepared, we learn our parts sooner, and we learn them better....

Beside the advantage of beginning our acquaintance with mankind sooner, and of bringing with us into the world and the business of it such a cast of thought and such a temper of mind as will enable us to make a better use of our experience, there is this further advantage in the study of history, that the improvement we make by it extends to more objects, and is made at the expense of other men: whereas that improvement which is the effect of our own experience is confined to fewer objects, and is made at our own expense. To state the account fairly between these two improvements: though the latter be more valuable, yet allowance being made on one side for the greater number of examples that history presents to us, and deduction being made on the other of the price we often pay for our experience, the value of the former will rise in proportion. "I have recorded these things," says Polybius, after giving an account of the defeat of Regulus, "that they who read these commentaries may be rendered better by them; for all men have two ways of improvement, one arising from their own experience, and one from the experience of others." "That [experience] is indeed plainer which arises through our own misfortunes, but that is safer which arise through those of others." Polybius goes on and concludes, "that since the first of these ways exposes us to great labor and peril, whilst the second works the same good effect, and is attended by no evil circumstances, every one ought to take for granted that the study of history is the best school where he can learn how to conduct himself in all the situations of life."...

There is another advantage, worthy our observation, that belongs to the study of history; and that I will mention here, not only because of the importance of it, but because it leads me immediately to speak of the nature of the improvement we ought to have in our view, and of the method in which it seems to me that this improvement ought to be pursued: two particulars from which your lordship may think perhaps that I digress too long. The advantage I mean consists in this, that the examples which history presents to us, both of men and of events, are generally complete: the whole example is before us, and consequently the whole lesson, or sometimes the various lessons, which philosophy proposes to teach us by this example. For first, as to men, we see them at their whole length in history, and we see them generally there through a medium less partial at least than that of experience: for I imagine that a Whig or a Tory, whilst those parties subsisted, would have condemned in Saturninus the spirit of faction which he applauded in his own tribunes, and would have applauded in Drusus the spirit of moderation which he despised in those of contrary party, and which he suspected and hatred in those of his own party. The villain who has imposed on mankind by his power or cunning, and whom experience could not unmask for a time, is unmasked at length: and the honest man, who has been misunderstood or defamed, is justified before his story ends. Or if this does not happen, if the villain dies with his mask on, in the midst of applause, and honor, and wealth, and power, and if the honest man dies under the same load of calumny and disgrace under which he lived, driven perhaps into exile, and exposed to want, yet we see historical justice executed, the name of one branded with infamy, and that of the other celebrated with panegyric to succeeding ages....

Thus again, as to events that stand recorded in history, we see them all, we see them as they followed one another, or as they produced one another, causes or effects, immediate or remote. We are cast back, as it were, into former ages: we live with the men who lived before us, and we inhabit countries that we never saw. Place is enlarged, and time prolonged, in this manner; so that the man who applies himself early to the study of history may acquire in a few years, and before he sets his foot abroad in the world, not only a more extended knowledge of mankind, but the experience of more centuries than any of the patriarchs saw....

These two examples explain sufficiently what they are intended to explain. It only remains therefore upon this head, to observe the difference between two manners in which history supplies the defects of our own experience. It shows us causes as in fact they were laid, with their immediate effects: and it enables us to guess at future events. It can do no more, in the nature of things. My lord Bacon, in his second book of the "Advancement of Learning," having in his mind, I suppose, what Philo and Josephus asserted of Moses, affirms divine history to have this prerogative, that the narration may be before the fact as well as after. But since the ages of prophecy, as well as miracles, are past, we must content ourselves to guess at what will be by what has been: we have no other means in our power, and history furnishes us with these. How are we to improve and apply these means, as well as how are we to acquire them, shall be deduced in more particular in another letter.

