

On the Charms of History and the Future of the Past, Aldous Leonard Huxley

On the Charms of History and the Future of the Past

There are best sellers among the history books, and archaeology is actually news. From an editor's point of view, the finding of yet another of Tutankhamen's hidden art nouveau table-centres is an event at least as important as an Atlantic flight. We are all interested in history now.

But 'history,' Mr Henry Ford assures us, 'is bunk.'

Therefore, if Mr Ford is right, we are all interested in bunk. Is he right? Up to a point, I think, he is. For most of what passes for history is really perfectly insignificant and trivial. Why, then, are we interested in it? Because we like insignificances and trivialities—prefer them (bottomlessly frivolous as we are) to the significant things which demand to be taken seriously, to be judged and thought about. Moreover, historical insignificances and trivialities, besides being intrinsically delightful (a history book is often more entertaining than a novel), are also Culture. We are therefore morally justified in being amused by them, as we are not morally justified in being amused by novels. For novels, unless they happen to be by dead writers, are not Culture.

Culture, as Emmanuel Berl has pointed out in one of his brilliantly entertaining pamphlets, is like the sum of special knowledge that accumulates in any large united family and is the common property of all its members. 'Do you remember Aunt Agatha's ear trumpet? And how Willie made the parrot drunk with sops in wine? And that picnic on Loch Etive, when the boat upset and Uncle Bob was nearly drowned? Do you remember?' And we all do; and we laugh delightedly; and the unfortunate stranger, who happens to have called, feels utterly out of it. Well, that (in its social aspect) is Culture. When we of the great Culture Family meet, we exchange reminiscences about Grandfather Homer, and that awful old Dr Johnson, and Aunt Sappho, and poor Johnny Keats. 'And do you remember that absolutely priceless thing Uncle Virgil said?

You know. Timeo Danaos . . . Priceless; I shall never forget it.' No, we shall never forget it; and what's more, we shall take good care that those horrid people who have had the impertinence to call on us, those wretched outsiders who never knew dear mellow old Uncle V., shall never forget it either. We'll keep them constantly reminded of their outsidersness. So pleasurable to members of the Culture Family is this rehearsal of tribal gossip, such a glow of satisfied superiority does it give them, that the Times finds it profitable to employ some one to do nothing else but talk to us every morning about our dear old Culture-Aunties and Uncles and their delightful friends. Those fourth leading articles are really extraordinary. 'How the days draw in!' as the Swan of Lichfield used mournfully to exclaim. The sere and yellow leaf, the sanglots longs des violons de l'automne fill some hearts with a certain "sweet sorrow" and bring to some eyes the lacrimae rerum. But there are others—quot homines, tot disputandum est—who find the "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" not only cheering, but actually, unlike poor Cowper's afternoon cup, inebriating. For "give to the boys October!" as we used to sing in the Auld Lang Syne of our Harrow days. Sad recollections! Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice nella miseria. Those beautiful lines of Lactantius rise spontaneously to the lips:

'A ab absque, coram, de;

Palam clam, cum ex et e;

Sine tenus, pro et prae . . .'

I confess, I thoroughly enjoy reading this sort of thing when it is well put together. I take a real pleasure in recognizing some Culture-Uncle's quip, and am overcome with shame when I read of avuncular words or exploits, with which I ought to be familiar, but inexcusably am not. I am even very fond of writing this sort of family gossip myself.

All the more picturesque figures of history are our Culture-Uncles and Culture-Aunties. If you can talk knowingly about their sayings and doings, it is a sign that you 'belong,' that you are one of the family. Whereas if you don't know, for example, that 'Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother' was fond of watching the mating of her mares and stallions, if you don't know that Harrington was convinced that his perspiration engendered flies and actually devised a crucial experiment to prove it—well, obviously, you're a bit of an outsider.

To pass the time and to provide us with Culture-Uncles and Culture-Aunts—these, for most readers, are the two main functions of written history. Mr Ford calls it bunk—no wonder. We can only be surprised at his moderation. Working single-mindedly ad majorem Industriae gloriam (as our Culture-Uncle Loyola might have said), this ascetic missionary and saint of the new dispensation could not fail to hate history. For the reading of history distracts, is a time-killer—thanks to Culture, an accredited and legitimate time-killer; but time is a sacrifice reserved exclusively for the God of Industry. Again, history provides people with standards of culture-snobbery; but the only kind of snobbery permitted to a worshipper of the new divinity is the snobbery of possessions.

The God of Industry supplies his worshippers with objects and can only exist on condition that his gifts are gratefully accepted. In the eyes of an Industrious the first duty of man is to collect as many objects as he can. Family pride in the possession of Culture-Uncles, and in general all culture-snobbery, interferes with pride in objects, or possession-snobbery. Culture-snobbery is an insult and even a menace to the God of Industry.

The saint of the new dispensation has no choice but to hate history. And not history only. If he is logical he must hate literature, philosophy, pure science, the arts—all the mental activities that distract mankind from an acquisitive interest in objects.

'Bunk' was the term of abuse selected by Mr Ford for disparaging history. Bunk: for how can even serious and philosophical history be enlightening? History is the account of people who lived before such things as machine tools and joint-stock banks had been invented. How can it say anything of significance to us, in whose lives machine tools and joint-stock banks play, directly or indirectly, such an enormous part? No, no. History is bunk.

There are arguments, good arguments, I think, against the presumed bunkiness of history. But I cannot go into them here. Here, I am concerned simply with the fact that, bunk or no bunk, we all find history

interesting. Interesting because it delightfully kills time, justifies time-killing by being Culture, and, finally, because it deals precisely with those pre-machine-tool men whose actions must seem to any convinced industriolater so ridiculously irrelevant and beside the point. We read about the past, because the past is refreshingly different from the present. A great deal of history is written, whether deliberately or unconsciously, as wish-fulfilment.

The past and the future are functions of the present. Each generation has its private history, its own peculiar brand of prophecy. What it shall think about past and future is determined by its own immediate problems. It will go to the past for instruction, for sympathy, for justification, for flattery. It will look into the future for compensation for the present—into the past, too. For even the past can become a compensatory Utopia, indistinguishable from the earthly paradises of the future, except by the fact that the heroes have historical names and flourished between known dates. From age to age the past is recreated. A new set of Waverley Novels is founded on a new selection of the facts. The Waverley Novels of one age are about the Romans, of another about the Greeks, of a third about the Crusaders or the Ancient Chinese.

The future is as various as the past. The coming world is inhabited at one moment by politicians, at another by craftsmen and artists; now by perfectly rational utilitarians, now by supermen, now by proletarian submen. Each generation pays its money and takes its choice.

Anywhere, anywhere out of the world. We make our exit, forward or backward, by time-machine. (Some people, it is true, still prefer the old-fashioned eternity-machines on which Dante and Milton made their record-breaking trans-cosmic flights; but they are relatively few. For most moderns, the time-machine seems unquestionably more efficient.) Shall we always make the same sort of exits on our time-machines? In other words, what is likely to be the future of the past? And the future of the future? Only a study of the past's and future's past and present will permit us to guess with any show of plausibility.

For the five or six hundred years before 1800 the past was almost exclusively Rome, Greece (known indirectly through Rome and then by direct contact), and Palestine.

The Hebrew past remained, throughout all this long period, relatively stable. Associated as it was with the sacred books of the established religion, how could it change?

The Graeco-Roman past was less stable. During the later Middle Ages the Greeks and Romans were, above all, men of science. With the Renaissance appeared that passionate and exclusive admiration for classical art and literature which persisted until well on into the nineteenth century. For more than three hundred years, the Greeks and Romans were the only sculptors and architects, the only poets, dramatists, philosophers, and historians.

During the same period the Romans were the only statesmen.

For the sceptics of the eighteenth century, Greece and Rome were empires of Reason, gloriously unlike the actual world, where prejudice and superstition so manifestly had the upper hand. They used classical examples as sticks with which to beat the priests and kings, as levers with which to overturn the current morality. And they did not confine themselves exclusively to Greece and Rome. It was at this time that China

was first held up as an example of sweet reasonableness to shame the benighted folly of the West. In beating the West with an extreme-oriental stick, contemporary writers like Lowes Dickinson and Bertrand Russell have only revived a most respectable literary tradition. The primitive and prehistoric Utopias of D. H. Lawrence and Elliot Smith have as good a pedigree. Our ancestors knew all about the State of Nature and the Noble Savage.

The last years of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth were a period of rapid and violent change. The past changed with the present; Greece and Rome took on a succession of new meanings. For the men of the French Revolution they were important in so far as they connoted republicanism and tyrannicide. For Napoleon, Greece was Alexander, and Rome, Augustus and Justinian. In Germany, meanwhile, attention was mainly concentrated on Greece.

Greece, for the contemporaries of Schiller and Goethe, was a world of art, above all a world where men lived a rich individual life. It is difficult, as Rousseau pointed out, to be at once a citizen and a man. He who would become a good citizen of a modern society must sacrifice some of his most precious and fundamental human impulses. Where there is too much specialization, too much of the organized division of labour, a man is easily degraded to the level of a mere embodied function. It was the realization of this that sent Schiller and Goethe back to the Greeks. Among the Greeks they thought they could discover the fully and harmoniously developed individual man.

The fall of Napoleon was followed by religious and political reaction. Inevitably, the Middle Ages made their appearance upon the mental scene. During the first half of the century the Middle Ages fulfilled the wishes of three distinct classes of people—of the temperamental romantics, who found the new industrialism squalid and pined for passion and picturesqueness; of the missionary Christians who pined for universal faith; of the aristocrats who pined for political and economic privileges.

Later on, when industrialism and the policy of laissez-faire had had time to produce their most dreadful results, the Middle Ages began to connote something rather different. The wish-fulfilling world to which William Morris and his friends looked back was picturesque, indeed, but not particularly catholic or feudal; it was a world, above all, of sound economic organization, a pre-mechanical world, peopled by not too highly specialized artist-craftsmen.

Of all the various pasts the medieval is still one of the most lively. It has inspired several contemporary politico-economic ideals, of which one, the Fascist version of Guild Socialism, has actually been converted into a practical policy and applied. It is looked back to yearningly by enemies of capitalism, such as Tawney, by enemies of democracy, such as Maurras, by enemies of the overgrown industrial state, such as Belloc and Chesterton, by all the artistic enemies of mass production, by Catholics, Socialists, Monarchists alike. Only in a confused and complicated present could a piece of the past simultaneously mean so many different things.

But the medieval is by no means the only past in which we take a wish-fulfilling interest. Thus, a fabulously spiritual Indian past has been invented by the theosophists to compensate ideally for the far from spiritual Western present. Again, Greece is the retrospective Utopia of those who, like Schiller, find that the citizenship of a modern state is dehumanizing. (Ever since Nietzsche's denunciation of Socrates, the Greek

Utopia has been pre-Platonic. Platonic and post-Platonic Greece is too modern to be a really satisfactory world of wish-fulfilments. The Hellenistic age was, in many respects, quite horrifyingly like our own.) The archaeological discoveries of the last twenty years have opened up a very glorious receding vista of new Utopias. Crete and Mycenae and Etruria, Ur and the Indus valley have become what I may call Popular Historical Resorts—Holiday Haunts for Tired Business Men. Almost no weapons have been found at Harappa. For that alone our war-wounded world must love and cherish it.

And finally there are the savages—not even noble ones now; we almost prefer them ignoble. Physically our contemporaries, but mentally belonging to a culture much more ancient, much less advanced than that of Ur or Harappa, the few remaining primitive peoples of the earth have achieved a prodigious popularity among those who have wishes to fulfil—a popularity about which Mr Wyndham Lewis, in his *Paleface*, probably does well to be angry.

So much for the past of the past and the present of the past; what about the future of the past? It seems fairly obvious that the major problems of our generation will continue to be the major problems of the two or three generations succeeding our own. Our industrial, political, and social difficulties are nowhere near solution, and can hardly, in the nature of things, be solved in a short time. The immediate future of the past will therefore, in all probability, resemble its present. In the many mansions of the Middle Ages political and social reformers will continue, no doubt, to discover each one his own snug little Utopia, feudal, Socialist, or Catholic. With every increase in proletarian irreligion the spirituality of the ancient East will be heightened. An India of navel-gazers and squinters at nose-tips is likely to become as popular as, among the noises and imbecile hustlings of future cities, an ancient China full of beautifully leisured mandarins and rational Confucians.

If society continues to develop on its present lines, specialization is bound to increase. Men will come to be valued more and more, not as individuals, but as personified social functions. The result of this will be a heightened interest in the Greeks and in any other historical personages who may be supposed to have led a full, harmonious life as individuals, not as cogs in an industrial machine. But Greeks and even Cretans and Harappans will not be enough in this coming age of intensive specialization and more and more meaningless routine. There is likely, in spite of Mr Lewis, to be a growing admiration of primitives. (As actual primitives disappear under the influence of drink and syphilis on the one hand and of education on the other, this admiration for them will tend to increase; the most satisfactory ideals are those that have no actual fancy-cramping embodiments.) With every advance of industrial civilization the savage past will be more and more appreciated, and the cult of D. H. Lawrence's *Dark God* may be expected to spread through an ever-widening circle of worshippers.

In making this prophecy I have deliberately neglected to consider the possible effects upon the readers and writers of future history books of eventual progress in the science of history itself. Our knowledge of the past tends steadily to increase. Some of these increases of knowledge confirm our traditional conceptions of the past; others, on the contrary, impose upon us new ways of thinking. From time to time the scholar and the retrospective Utopist come into conflict. Those who enjoy gladiatorial shows will remember with pleasure the recent fight between Mr G. K. Chesterton and Mr Coulton on the subject of mediaeval

puritanism. Being a good Catholic and a romantic believer in the actual existence of a mediaeval Merry England, even a Merry Europe, for ever ruined by a gang of revolting Calvinists and Independents, Mr Chesterton was naturally distressed when Mr Coulton began piling up evidence to prove the intense puritanism of official Catholic Christianity during the Middle Ages.

Armed with his usual eloquence and a cautious statement by St Thomas to the effect that all dancers are not necessarily damned, he rushed into the arena. Mr Coulton, who has had the bad taste to read all the documents, repulsed the attack with another shower of puritanical quotations. The impartial spectator was forced to conclude that if England was ever merry it was not because of official Catholicism, but in spite of the Church's constant denunciation of merriment. Mr Chesterton's particular brand of retrospective Utopism is henceforth untenable. Conscientious Merry-Englanders will have to put Mr Coulton on the index. Many other comforting visions of the past will certainly vanish, as knowledge spreads. My own impression is that the earthly paradise will steadily be pushed back and back into the unknown and unknowable ages of pre-history. Knowledge will turn out so regularly to be a knowledge of mainly unpleasant facts that the Utopists will be compelled in mere self-defence to take refuge either in deliberate ignorance of what is known, or else in the comfortable darkness beyond the fringes of recorded history.

Prophecy is more closely dependent on the present than history. A man living in the petrol age can quite easily reconstruct for himself the life of a man living in the horse age. But a man of the horse age could not be expected to foresee the petrol-man's mode of life. It would be easy but quite uninteresting to catalogue the errors of past prophets. The only significant parts of their prognostications, the only parts of them which we can usefully compare with contemporary prophesyings, are the forecasts of political and social organization. Coaches may give place to aeroplanes, but man remains very much what he was—a mainly gregarious animal endowed with a certain number of anti-social instincts. Whatever tools he uses, however slowly or quickly he may travel he must always be governed and regimented.

I lack the time and the learning to describe the entire historical past of the future. It will be enough for my purpose in this essay to give a summary description of the sort of future thought possible and desirable by the men of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and to compare it with the future thought possible and desirable today. (For travellers on time-machines desirable futures are limited to the category of possibility. Travellers on eternity-machines are free, of course, to choose the impossibly desirable).

For our ancestors, as for ourselves, the future was compensatory. They called in new worlds to redress the balance of the old. They corrected present evils prophetically. The future Utopias of Helvétius, Lemer cier, and Babeuf, of Godwin and Shelley, have a certain family resemblance among themselves. Democracy in those days was not the bedraggled and rather whorish old slut she now is, but young and attractive. Her words persuaded. When she spoke of the native equality and potential perfection of human beings, men believed her. For Shelley and his philosophical masters, vice and stupidity were the fruits of ignorance and despotic government. Get rid of priests and kings, make Aeschylus and the differential calculus accessible to all, and the world will become a paradise and every human being a saint and a genius, or at the very least a stoic philosopher.

We have had experience of the working of democracy, we have seen the fruits of universal education, and we have come to doubt the premises from which our ancestors started out on their prophetic argument. Psychology and genetics have yielded results which confirm the doubts inspired by practical experience. Nature, we have found, does rather more, nurture rather less, to make us what we are than the earlier humanitarians had supposed. We believe in Mendelian predestination; and in a society not practising eugenics, Mendelian predestination leads as inevitably to pessimism about the temporal future as Augustinian or Calvinistic predestination leads to pessimism about the eternal future.

Contemporary prophets have visions of future societies founded on the idea of natural inequality, not of natural equality; they look forward to the re-establishment, on a new and much more realistic foundation, of the old hierarchies; they have visions of a ruling aristocracy and of a race slowly improved, not by any improvement in the educational, legal, or physical environment (incapable, however effective for promoting present happiness, of altering the quality of the stock), but by deliberate eugenic breeding.

Such is our present future. It is reasonable to suppose that the future future of our immediate descendants will be of the same kind as our own, but modified in its details. Thus we can imagine our children having visions of a new caste system based on differences in native ability and accompanied by a Machiavellian system of education, designed to give the members of the lower castes only such instruction as it is profitable for society at large and the upper castes in particular that they should have. Their children's children will perhaps be in a position clearly to foresee a future, in which eugenic breeding will have falsified these prophecies by abolishing the lower castes altogether. What will happen then? But the distant future of the future is really too remote to be profitably discussed.

The end