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# Introduction

BY J. H. PLUMB

## I

OVER the last fifty to a hundred years, man's belief that the historical process proved that he was acquiring a greater mastery over nature has received a brutal buffeting. In his early youth H. G. Wells, a man of vast creative energy, of rich delight in the human spirit, and of all-pervading optimism, viewed the future with confidence; science, born of reason, was to be humanity's panacea. When, in the years of his maturity, he came to write his *Outline of History*, his vision was darker, although still sustained with hope. World War I, with its senseless and stupid slaughter of millions of men, brought the sickening realisation that man was capable of provoking human catastrophes on a global scale. The loss of human liberty, the degradations and brutalities imposed by fascism and communism during the twenties and thirties, followed in 1939 by the renewed world struggle, these events finally shattered Wells's eupeptic vision, and in sad and disillusioned old-age he wrote *Mind at the End of its Tether*. His hope of mankind had almost vanished. Almost, but not quite: for Wells's lifetime witnessed what, as a young writer, he had prophesied—technical invention not only on a prodigious scale but in those realms of human activity that affected the very core of society. And this extraordinary capacity of man to probe the complexities of nature and to invent machinery capable of exploiting his knowledge remained for Wells the only basis for hope, no matter how slender that might be.

If the belief of a man of Wells's passionate and intelligent humanism could be so battered and undermined, it is not surprising that lesser men were unable to withstand the climate of despair that engulfed the Western World between the two world wars. The disillusion of these years is apparent in painting, in music, in literature—everywhere in the Western World we are brought up sharply by an expression of anguish, by the flight from social and historical reality into a frightened,

self-absorbed world of personal feeling and expression. Intellectual life, outside science, has pursued much the same course as artistic life, although it has shown greater ingenuity and a tougher-minded quality. Theology, philosophy and sociology have tended to reduce themselves to technical problems of exceptional professional complexity, but of small social importance. Their practitioners have largely ceased to instruct and enliven, let alone sustain the confidence of ordinary men and women.

In this atmosphere of cultural decay and of professional retreat, history and its philosophy have suffered. As in so many intellectual disciplines its professional workers have resolutely narrowed the focus of their interests to even more specialised fields of inquiry. The majority of historians have withdrawn from general culture in order to maintain, at a high intellectual level, an academic discipline. They have left the meaning and purpose of history to trained philosophers and spent their leisure hours tearing to shreds the scholarship of anyone foolish enough to attempt to give the story of mankind a meaning and a purpose: writers as diverse as H. G. Wells and Arnold Toynbee have been butchered with consummate skill. The blunders of scholarship and the errors of interpretation have counted everything; intention nothing. Few academic historians, secure in the cultivation of their minute gardens, have felt any humility towards those who would tame the wilderness. In consequence, an atmosphere of anarchic confusion pervades the attitude of Western man to his past.

A hundred years ago, in the first flood of archaeological discovery, scholars possessed greater confidence: the history of mankind seemed to most to point to an obvious law of human progress. The past was but a stepping-stone to the future. First adumbrated by the philosophers of the late Renaissance—Bodin in France and Bacon in England—the idea of progress became an article of common faith during the Enlightenment. And progress came to mean not only the technical progress that had preoccupied Bacon but also moral progress. By the nineteenth century the history of man demonstrated for many an improvement in the very nature of man himself as well as in his tools and weapons. Such optimism, such faith in man's capacity for rational behaviour, was shaken both by discoveries in science and in history as well as by events. By the middle of the twentieth century man's irrational drives appeared to be stronger than his intellectual capacities. Freud and Marx laid bare the hollow hypocrisy of so-called rational behaviour

either in individuals or in society. Also, the rise and fall of civilisations, laid bare by the spade, seemed to point to a cyclical pattern in human destiny which made nonsense of any idea of continuous progress; and this naturally attracted the prophets of Western doom. Yet more persuasive still, and, perhaps, more destructive of confidence in human destiny, was the utter loss of all sense of human control brought about by global wars and violent revolutions. Only those men of societies who felt life was going their way, the revolutionaries and, above all, the Marxists, believed any longer in the laws of historical progress. For the rest, retrogression seemed as tenable a thesis as progress.

This disillusion in the West suited academic historians. It relieved them of their most difficult problems. If they happened to be religious they were content to leave the ultimate meaning of history to God; if they were rationalists they took refuge either in the need for more historical knowledge or in the philosophic difficulties of a subject that by its very nature was devoid of the same objective treatment that gave such authority to scientific inquiry. In the main they concentrated upon their professional work. And this was an exceptionally important and necessary task. What the common reader rarely recognises is the inadequacy of the factual material that was at the command of an historian one hundred years ago or even fifty years ago. Scarcely any archives were open to him; most repositories of records were unsorted and uncatalogued; almost every generalisation about a man or an event or an historical process was three-quarters guesswork, if not more. Laboriously, millions of facts have been brought to light, ordered and rendered coherent within their own context. Specialisation has proliferated like a cancer, making detail livid, but blurring the outlines of the story of mankind, and rendering it almost impossible for a professional historian to venture with confidence beyond his immediate province. And that can be very tiny—the Arkansas and Missouri Railway Strike of 1921; the place-names of Rutland: twelfth-century Rouen; the oral history of the Barotse; the philosophy of Hincmar of Rheims. And so it becomes ever more difficult for the professional historian to reach across to ordinary intelligent men and women or make his subject a part of human culture. The historical landscape is blurred by the ceaseless activity of its millions of professional ants. Of course, attempts at synthesis have to be made. The need to train young professional historians, or the need to impart some knowledge of history to students of other disciplines, has brought about competent

digests of lengthy periods that summarise both facts and analysis. Occasionally such books have been written with such skill and wisdom that they have become a part of the West's cultural heritage. A few historians, driven by money or fame or creative need, have tried to share their knowledge and understanding of the past with the public at large.

But the gap between professional knowledge and history for the masses gets steadily wider: professional history becomes more accurate, more profound, whilst public history remains tentative and shallow.

This series is an attempt to reverse this process. Each volume will be written by a professional historian of the highest technical competence; but these books will not exist *in vacuo*, for the series is designed to have a unity and a purpose. But perhaps first it is best to say what it is not.

It is not a work of reference: there are no potted biographies of the Pharaohs, the Emperors of China or the Popes; no date lists of battles; no brief histories of painting, literature, music. Nor is this series a Universal History. All events that were critical in the history of mankind may not necessarily find a place. Some will; some will not. Works of reference, more or less factually accurate, exist in plenty and need not be repeated. It is not my intention to add yet another large compilation to what exists. Nor is this a 'philosophic' history. It does not pretend to reveal a recurring pattern in history that will unveil its purpose. Fundamentally philosophy, except in the use of language, is as irrelevant to history as it is to science. And lastly this series will not cover all human societies. There will be two volumes devoted to Russia, none to Germany. There will be histories of China and Japan but not of Indonesia. The Jews have a volume to themselves, the Parsees do not. And so on. Yet the series is called *The History of Human Society* for very good reasons. This history has a theme and a position in time.

The theme is the most obvious and the most neglected; obvious because everyone is aware of it from the solitary villages of Easter Island to the teeming cities of the Western World; neglected because it has been fashionable for professional and Western historians to concern themselves either with detailed professional history that cannot have a broad theme or with the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of man's destiny that are not his proper province. What, therefore, is the theme of *The History of Human Society*? It is this: that the condition of man now is superior to what it was. That two great revolutions—the

neolithic and the industrial—have enabled men to establish vast societies of exceptional complexity in which the material well-being of generations of mankind has made remarkable advances; that the second, and most important, revolution has been achieved by the Western World; that we are witnessing its most intensive phase now, one in which ancient patterns of living are crumbling before the demands of industrial society; that life in the suburbs of London, Lagos, Djakarta, Rio de Janeiro and Vladivostok will soon have more in common than they have in difference: that this, therefore, is a moment to take stock, to unfold how this came about, to evoke the societies of the past whilst we are still close enough to many of them to feel intuitively the compulsion and needs of their patterns of living. I, however, hope, in these introductions, which it is my intention to write for each book, to provide a sense of unity. The authors themselves will not be so concerned with the overriding theme. Their aim will be to reconstruct the societies on which they are experts. They will lay bare the structure of their societies—their economic basis, their social organisations, their aspirations, their cultures, their religions and their conflicts. At the same time they will give a sense of what it was like to have lived in them. Each book will be an authoritative statement in its own right, and independent of the rest of the series. Yet each, set alongside the rest, will give a sense of how human society has changed and grown from the time man hunted and gathered his food to this nuclear and electronic age. This could only have been achieved by the most careful selection of authors. They needed, of course, to be established scholars of distinction, possessing the ability to write attractively for the general reader. They needed also to be wise, to possess steady, unflickering compassion for the strange necessities of men; to be quick in understanding, slow in judgement and to have in them some of that relish for life, as fierce and as instinctive as an animal's, that has upheld ordinary men and women in the worst of times. The authors of these books are heart-wise historians with sensible, level heads.

The range and variety of human societies is almost as great as the range and variety of human temperaments, and the selection for this series is in some ways as personal as an anthology. A Chinaman, a Russian, an Indian or an African would select a different series; but we are Western men writing for Western men. The Westernisation of the world by industrial technology is one of the main themes of the series. Each society selected has been in the main stream of this development

or belongs to that vast primitive ocean from whence all history is derived. Some societies are neglected because they would only illustrate in a duller way societies which appear in the series; some because their history is not well enough known to a sufficient depth of scholarship to be synthesised in this way; some because they are too insignificant.

There are, of course, very important social forces—feudalism, technological change or religion, for example—which have moulded a variety of human societies at the same time. Much can be learnt from the comparative study of their influence. I have, however, rejected this approach, once recorded history is reached. My reason for rejecting this method is because human beings experience these forces in communities, and it is the experience of men in society with which this series is primarily concerned.

Lastly, it need hardly be said that society is not always synonymous with the state. At times, as with the Jews, it lacks even territorial stability; yet the Jews provide a fascinating study of symbiotic social groupings, and to have left them out would be unthinkable, for they represent, in its best known form, a wide human experience—a social group embedded in an alien society.

As well as a theme, which is the growth of man's control over his environment, this series may also fulfil a need. That is to restore a little confidence in man's capacity not only to endure the frequent catastrophes of human existence but also in his intellectual abilities. That many of his habits, both of mind and heart, are bestial, needs scarcely to be said. His continuing capacity for evil need not be stressed. His greed remains almost as strong as it was when he first shuffled on the ground. And yet the miracles created by his cunning are so much a part of our daily lives that we take their wonder for granted. Man's ingenuity—based securely on his capacity to reason—has won astonishing victories over the physical world—and in an amazingly brief span of time. Such triumphs, so frequently overlooked and even more frequently belittled, should breed a cautious optimism. Sooner or later, painfully perhaps and slowly, the same intellectual skill may be directed to the more difficult and intransigent problems of human living—man's social and personal relations—not only directed, but perhaps accepted, as the proper way of ordering human life. The story of man's progress over the centuries, studded with pitfalls and streaked with disaster as it is, ought to strengthen both hope and will.

Yet a note of warning must be sounded. The history of human

society, when viewed in detail, is far more often darkened with tragedy than it is lightened with hope. As these books will show, life for the nameless millions of mankind who have already lived and died has been wretched, short, hungry and brutal. Few societies have secured peace; none stability for more than a few centuries; prosperity, until very recent times, was the lucky chance of a small minority. Consolations of gratified desire, the soothing narcotic of ritual and the hope of future blessedness have often eased but rarely obliterated the misery which has been the lot of all but a handful of men since the beginning of history. At long last that handful is growing to a significant proportion in a few favoured societies. But throughout human history most men have derived pitifully little from their existence. A belief in human progress is not incompatible with a sharp realisation of the tragedy not only the lives of individual men but also of epochs, cultures and societies. Loss and defeat, too, are themes of this series, as well as progress and hope.

## 2

In 1492 the American Dream was born. Columbus, proud of his success and eager to triumph, wrote his account of the New World. Although the importance of his discoveries and the vast nature of the continents that he had brought within the reach of European enterprise were not fully appreciated for many decades, his account quickly spread in humanist and intellectual circles and fired the imagination of many complex and sensitive men who were disturbed by the violence and corruption of their world. Naked savages, sharing what they possessed: needs simple, lives harmonious: natural goodness, a golden world which had escaped the Fall, that had never known original sin: these hallucinatory phantoms bewildered minds weary with tribulations of their time. Soon the Americas were peopled with Utopias. Transmogrified by time, and modified by knowledge, this theme, given its first great prominence by Sir Thomas More, became a part of the European consciousness. The belief that life was simpler, more devout, less corrupt, more human in the great open plains and savannahs of the Americas; that there is a purity about the pioneer life grappling with the vast forces of nature; that freedom and liberty and true democracy were to be found there, such concepts have haunted the European imagination

since the first great discoveries were made, and become a part of the political rhetoric of America which strives to impress an idealistic identity upon its peoples.

This was not the only dream that Columbus's discoveries unleashed. After all, he too had been captive of his fantasy—gold, silver, gems, riches that would slake the greed of the world. These tumbled and gleamed across the great waste of waters: drawing hard-faced, desperate men, willing to kill and be killed; willing to torture and enslave; willing to grind men into utter poverty so that they might fulfil their lust for power and riches: and this, too, began with the first Spanish colony in Hispaniola, the endless killings, lootings, brutalisations of primitive, peasant people: that exploitation that has gone on for centuries and still has not ceased. And in the wake of both dreams came two ugly realities—slavery and war.

The rapid obliteration of the Caribs by the Spaniards made a new labour force essential. Slave trading was, of course, more than half a century old by the time Columbus discovered the West Indies, for the Portuguese had begun the trade between Africa and Europe in 1441 and slaving had an older history than that, reaching far back: but the Atlantic trade which was well under way by 1510 was larger, crueller, more systematic than anything Europe had known before. In many ways it is the most inhuman aspect of European history—for the middle passage remained for centuries one of the most brutal experiences inflicted by man upon men. And the results of this trade still lie heavily on the conscience of America, and more particularly on the United States, for it has given rise to a massive problem—the attempt to create a multi-racial society in which all men have equal rights: a form of human society that, as yet, has never been achieved in the history of mankind. The moral problems involved both in forced labour of primitive Indians and in Negro slavery were clear to many Spaniards as soon as the practices started, and they gave rise to one of the greatest debates on the nature of Christian obligation to primitive, non-Christian peoples, between Las Casas and Sepúlveda at Valladolid in 1550 before the Emperor Charles V. By that time not only had the Caribs been largely wiped out but the populous barbaric empires of Mexico and Peru had been captured, subjugated and exploited ruthlessly, so ruthlessly that, it has been calculated, the population of Mexico fell from eleven to six and a half millions between 1519 and 1540, the years of the conquest and settlement. Las Casas had witnessed the



wholesale killings, the burning, the torture, the rapine, the senseless destruction of human life, and Christian human life at that, for the Mexicans had proved easy converts. Sensitive, single-minded, obsessed by the need for justice yet verbose in writing and garrulous in speech, Las Casas had fought his crusade for a humane and Christian treatment of the Indians until he had reached the Emperor himself. His opponent, Sepúlveda, possessed a better mind and a cooler temperament. His arguments have a familiar ring: natural authority of Europeans, natural servitude of Indians, the necessity to place pagans and barbarians under the tutelage of civilised Christians, if need be by force, for their own good: the habitual crimes of barbarians against the natural law: furthermore subjection to Spain had led to commercial prosperity, or would do so: *ergo* the natives could only gain from a long period of subjection. At the heart of this great debate was, of course, the problem that was to rack the European conscience for centuries, that was, indeed, to haunt the empires of France, Britain and the Netherlands as well as Spain, and one that still bites deep into the heart of the world's problems. Sepúlveda was the highly intelligent advocate of pragmatism and expediency in conflict with Las Casas's warm-hearted humanism which as the centuries revolve is seen to be not only more just but so much more sensible, so much more likely to give rise to social stability as well as fulfilling the needs of a human justice than the seemingly sensible views of Sepúlveda.

Within a few decades of Columbus's discoveries Spain had been forced to face all the major problems of empire, some of which did not confront other European colonial powers—such as the Dutch—for centuries. With considerable foresight the Spanish monarchy kept a very firm hold over the government of New Spain and rapidly developed what was for the sixteenth century a complex bureaucratic system: but, of course, its effectiveness was partially vitiated by distance. To be effective, administrative decision needs to be prompt. Decisions, even on minor matters, often took six to twelve months, so that opportunities for prevarication and delay were almost endless; yet once a decision was taken, it was usually obeyed. And one of the most amazing facets of the Spanish Empire in America is the continuing, absolute authority of the Crown. The same was true, even, of royal policy towards the Indians. The Crown leaned somewhat towards the views of Las Casas, largely because the powerful ecclesiastical lobby at the Escorial was more concerned with conversion than with exploitation. Naturally

the Spaniards in America were very lukewarm towards the royal policy: it was often evaded: its decrees misinterpreted and frequently neglected. In the last resort the King was obeyed, and the Spanish Crown was far more effective than any other European power except, perhaps, France in the late seventeenth century, but Louis XIV's problem was, in comparison, small—the control of a few garrisons, settlers and Indians—whereas the Spanish court ruled the greatest empire since antiquity.

How a relatively backward, poor and isolated country of Europe achieved such a mastery and such security is a problem as yet unsolved by historians. And it must be remembered that Spain in the sixteenth century did more than this. There were Spanish dominions in Italy and the Netherlands: war with the Turks, war with the Dutch and war with the English. The dynamic and explosive force of Western European societies was demonstrated for the first time, and in the most dramatic fashion, by Spain between 1500–50. And Professor Parry has explored the dynamics of that explosion with a matchless scholarship and sharp historical insight that takes us nearer to a solution than anyone has yet achieved. And perhaps equally important he evokes the quality of Spanish as well as Amerindian life, and so helps us to understand one of the most remarkable transformations of society in the history of man, for within less than a century not only had the great Aztec, Maya and Inca civilisations vanished but they had been replaced by a culture that was irremediably Catholic and Spanish no matter how strong its pagan undertones and so gave the possibility of unity to more than half a continent—at least at a cultural and social level, for the last hundred years of revolution and war have destroyed, for the foreseeable future, all hope of political unity for South and Central America.

The strength of the Spanish Empire lay in its institutions and its comparatively sophisticated bureaucracy in marked contrast to the subsequent empires of Britain and the Netherlands in the seventeenth century whose sinews were almost entirely commercial. At first there was little commercial conflict between Spain and the other maritime powers in Europe, and German banking firms were active in the exploitation of Spanish American silver-mines: in the middle decades of the sixteenth century Dutch and English slaving ships were welcome in the ports of the Caribbean. This did not last.

Hostility towards the British and war with the Dutch led to an attempted closure of the Spanish ports in America to other European

trading nations; a situation which was influenced by the activities of Francis Drake, who managed to cloak his piracy not only with patriotic fervour but also religious zeal. The enormous hauls of bullion that Drake seized from the Spaniards cast a golden haze of optimism in the British mind about the wealth of the Indies. And Protestant pirates were soon lurking like sharks about the Spanish Main. English appetites were not the only ones to be whetted by the prospects of a vigorous, if illicit, trade with the Spanish Empire. As Spanish power decayed in Europe, its possessions overseas became an object of European cupidity and were one of the reasons for the involvement of Britain and the Netherlands in the War of the Spanish Succession. By then the Spanish Empire was clamped in an iron mould of bureaucratic tradition, and as irrevocably lost amidst medieval dreams and illusions as Spain itself. In 1700 the great powers of Europe stood poised like great vultures, ready to swoop, once the childless Charles II, a pathetic Hapsburg, inbred idiot, was dead. In October he was dying: dying in spite of the presence of San Isidro's mummified body or of San Diego of Alcalá's corpse sitting in its urn: in spite of bits of saints, vestiges of Christ's Agony and shrouds or garments of the holy: in spite of the freshly killed pigeons on his head and the catharides on his feet: in spite, even, of the steaming entrails of freshly killed animals on his stomach. Nothing availed. And yet this was the world of Newton, of Leibniz, of Boyle, of Leeuwenhoek; of the early, sophisticated days of the European enlightenment: barbarous though the habits of Western courts might seem, they were centuries removed from the obscurantism and medievalism of Spain, where the solemn ritual burning of Jews and heretics still provoked a cathartic sense of holiness to Court, Church and people alike. And here lies the heart of the matter. The dynamic explosion of Spain's energies in the sixteenth century had taken place within the firm structure of medieval thought and belief and had not altered them one iota. True, for a time it seemed as if the transformation of Spain might take place: Erasmus was more widely read there than anywhere in Europe: for a time, Spanish doors were open to the entrepreneurs of the rest of Europe. But by the reign of Philip II that moment had gone and the world of Don Quixote had taken its place, a tragi-comic world of down-at-heel knights, improbable chivalry and nostalgia for that heroic Christian past which had driven the Moors from Spain and acquired the New World in the name of Christ. As Professor Parry so clearly shows, even the great debate

between Las Casas and Sepúlveda was essentially a medieval dispute, one which in thought and language would have seemed natural enough to the great medieval doctors of the Church. And perhaps the enduring success of Spain in America lay in the static, medieval, Catholic ethos which it imposed on the peoples of Mexico and Peru. After all, their lives, too, had been bound to a cyclical universe of birth and renewal, a world in which change and growth and empirical novelty played no part; hence it was so easy to replace their savage gods by gods more benign perhaps, but still gods of a cyclical ritual of birth, death and renewal.

As the maritime nations of the North-West, aggressive, piratical and Protestant, threatened Spain in Europe as well as in America, it was natural that Catholicism in Spain and in America should become more intransigent, more suspicious of empiricism and rationalism and the new sciences of Europe. Spain, to preserve its identity, anchored itself both to the Church and to the past. There were, of course, other causes, economic and social, at work in Spain that ossified its energies, inhibited industrial growth, weakened commercial development and rendered rigid a social structure that belonged essentially to the late Middle Ages—a society of knights, priests and peasants, factors which are too complex for discussion here. Although almost incapable of change, the strength of seventeenth-century Spain must not be underestimated, for it possessed a vast inertia that brought with it, at least for a century or more, a capacity to survive the disasters of war and the buffets of fortune. And nothing illustrates this better than Spain's fate after the death of Charles II. Once he was dead, Louis XIV claimed Spain in Italy, Spain in the Netherlands, Spain in the New World, Spain in Asia and Spain itself: Austria, Britain, the Dutch, a miscellany of German princelings, set to, and the greatest and bloodiest war Europe had ever known was unleashed. Spain won. True, territories were lost in Italy and the Netherlands, and Louis XIV's grandson occupied the Escorial, but Spain triumphed. Philip V was quietly absorbed into the Spanish system, hierarchical, bigoted, resistant to change: and his court was the court of Philip II not Louis XIV. And the few trading rights that the powers wrested from the reluctant Spanish proved almost meaningless. The great Spanish Empire remained closed, and so became one of the prizes for which France and Britain fought for the next hundred years, with little success.

In the end the liberal ideas of France and the military success of

Britain in the Napoleonic Wars led to the break-up, to the fragmentation and Balkanisation of Spanish America, and yet the essential nature of its society did not change and it required the great social revolutions of the twentieth century to begin the painful transformation to the modern world.

The story of Spain and its empire is one of the most fascinating in the history of human society. The Spaniards alone discovered fabulous new worlds: as Bernal Díaz, the *conquistador*, wrote when he saw Mexico City: 'It all appeared to us like the enchanted things we read in the book of Amadis'. And yet within a few decades the strangeness was obliterated and all rendered commonplace and static. It was left to the enemies of Spain to feed their imagination and their greed on the wonders of the New World. Discovery is not necessarily a social catalyst, nor the possession of empire the harbinger of change. What worked like yeast in the societies of Britain and the Netherlands crystallised in the joints of Spain and rendered it arthritic. And yet their achievements will always amaze: the last, the most heroic, exploits of the medieval world, that reached back through the chronicles of the Crusades to the sagas of Viking and Norman, such were the conquests of Cortés and Pizarro, who toppled empires in the name of Christ and in the quest of gold.