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MAY 13, 1955

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.I.

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Telegraphic Address: "Listener." Wellington.

Telephone 70-999.

In Search of History

"THE man who knows no history," said J. J. Saunders, in the first of an interesting series of talks now being heard from 2YC (see page 25), "thinks—in times of relative peace and prosperity—that the millennium is just round the corner; and—in times of war and revolution and economic collapse—that the human race is finished. . ." It is also true, as Mr. Saunders would admit, that a man may know a great deal of history and have some curious notions about the past and future. One of our difficulties today is that we have access to historical "climates" outside our own, and since few men can undertake the comparative studies so necessary to the scholar, we tend to accept ideas that are congenial. This means, very often, that people are influenced by writers whose literary gifts are more impressive than their treatment of facts.

To encounter Gibbon when young, and to move with him across a vast landscape strewn with the ruins of cities, temples and citadels, is to acquire feelings about the Roman Empire which are hard to lose or replace. Even when later reading has shown how unfair he is to Christianity and to the Middle Ages, the earlier impressions remain powerful. It is much the same with Carlyle. Events and persons in the French Revolution are presented with a running commentary, coloured by a vivid imagination. Other historians have come closer to the truth; but for many of us the revolution which Carlyle experienced with a poet's intensity is the one that survives when more precise investigations have been studied and approved. The popular historians—Gibbon, Carlyle, Macaulay—are products of their times, so that in a critical sense their work is weakened by changes in our ideas about human institutions. But in literature the individual can overstep his generation; and when criticism has left him

with few defences the power of his mind may still win him adherents.

The great historians have this in common: they write confidently, comprehensively—as if they know the whole truth, and are not to be put down by arguments of detail. A persuasive suggestion that the full range of knowledge is being covered is reassuring to the general reader. He likes the wide and full view; he likes the writer who knows his own mind; and even if he can see that he is getting only one man's share of the truth he allows himself to be carried smoothly along. The times are now against the grand manner in history. There is too much evidence to be sifted, too much correlation of results in other fields—in archaeology, for instance—to leave time and scope for the monumental. History is not an exact science; but scientific methods have imposed restraints on the imagination. Research is specialised, and the dominant mood is one of dispersed and tentative inquiry.

True, the grand manner is still attempted. Yet the best example of it in these times, Toynbee's *Study of History*, is most of all an elaboration of theories about the rise and fall of civilisations: the history in his work is used for illustration rather than for narrative. Few books of recent times have been so severely criticised: there does not seem to be much of Toynbee left when the scholars have finished with him. And yet the huge work has become established. Although it may be no more than one man's view of world and time, it has the firm and rounded statement which gives men a ledge to stand upon. The nature of history is a subject much in dispute among scholars. As for the rest of us: if we cannot have all the truth, we can reach a little of it here and there; and it is better to gain a sense of history from clouded panoramas than to be silent and blind among our shifting perplexities.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 13, 1955.

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