

INTRODUCTION

SCOPE OF THE SUBJECT.—Commercial history is a part, and an essential part, of the history of civilization. Its aim is to trace how, in the course of time, material conditions have changed among the various peoples of the earth, and what circumstances have exercised a permanent influence upon the development of exchange. The history of a nation's commerce should embrace a description of the country's general economic condition at the time when it first became known; the surplus raw materials grown which could be exchanged for the products of other lands; the prevailing means of communication; the neighbouring countries with which trading intercourse has, from time to time, been conducted; the influence of political treaties on the economic life of the people, and the factors which have gradually led to changes in the methods of industry. In short, the study of the past should enable us to see why commercial supremacy has passed from one nation to another, so that in the future we may avoid mistakes and take such precautions that the prosperity of our own nation may be ensured.

PRE-HISTORIC TIMES.—The origin of commerce is to be sought for in the beginnings of early society. A knowledge of the evolutionary process through which organic life has developed leads us to abandon the belief that man appeared ready-made on the earth, and the view of man as a fallen angel fails to conform to the discoveries of archaeologists. Man is a being rising slowly from a lower to a higher plane, whose best is in the future and not in the past. We cannot think of our pre-historic ancestors as leading a life of perfect harmony, for there is evidence to show that their lives were hard beyond imagination. It may with good reason be asked (since historical records do not begin until man has reached a considerable development), how information can be derived as to the doings of primitive man. History does not offer us any information as to the origin of institutions. We have to rely upon pre-history and the methods of the pre-historian. His method is called the stratigraphical method, because it is based upon the study and examination of the geological layers of the