

flesh and sinew were laid on entirely from contemporary authorities. From the time that I began to investigate I read little of what had been written on the subject by modern historians, and I have read little since. I did not wish to be confused with other people's conjectures—I went to the sources and to the sources only. I do not wish to boast of my own labours. I have never said much about them, and except on this one occasion, when there is a reason for it, I never shall. But I say for myself now that during the twenty years for which I was at work on my *History of England* I must have read, made extracts from, or copied with my own hand tens of thousands of manuscripts, private letters, secret State documents, minutes of secret councils, often in cipher for which a key was not always at hand. I worked long in our own Record Office. I worked in the Archives at Paris, Brussels, Vienna, and Simancas. The letters which were of most importance were in half a dozen languages and in the desperate handwriting of the period. Eminent men in that age thought it—like Hamlet—a baseness to write fair. Often at the end of a page I have felt as after descending a precipice and have wondered how I got down. I had to cut my way through a jungle, for no one had opened the road for me. I have been turned into rooms piled to the window-sill with bundles of dust-covered despatches, and told to make the best of it. Often I have found the sand glittering on the ink where it had been sprinkled when a page was turned. There the letter had lain, never looked at again since it was read and put away.

"I have been taunted sometimes with having mistaken a word. It is likely enough—with such materials an occasional mistake is not to be avoided. But I think I made fewer

than a great many people would have done. Philip II. wrote a worse hand than any other man in his vast dominions. I found at Simancas a sheet which he had scrawled over, and I knew it to contain secret matter of consequence. I called in the clerks in the Archives. Their best hands were turned on. We gave in our various conjectural versions, and I believe the most nearly correct was found to be my own. Be that as it may, I can say with confidence that I added many material facts to the history of the period, though they have been totally unrecognised by most of my critics. Being omniscient already, I conclude that they did not feel that they had more to learn.

"Like St. Paul, I may say I laboured more abundantly than they all. Like St. Paul, I say also I speak as a fool. Enough of this. Others hereafter may go over the same ground and gather off it a richer harvest than mine, but I am sure that of the sixteenth century no accurate knowledge is to be obtained in any other way. It was an age of collision between mighty forces, now encountering on the surface, now coiling in subterranean conspiracies; where the best men were uncertain of their duties, where foresight was impossible, and princes consulting their wisest advisers received answers the most opposite; worst of all, where none knew whom to trust.

"Printed contemporary documents are precious, but the actual handwriting of remarkable statesmen has an instructiveness of its own. You see the bold strokes and unblotted lines where thought flows free and purpose is fixed. You see in erasures or corrections the hesitation or intentional deceit. There are the open instructions to the secretaries to be transcribed with the intention of misleading. There is the private draft of the ciphered sheets attached which