

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION.

HISTORY has very properly been considered as that particular branch of philosophy, which teaches, by examples, how men ought to conduct themselves in all situations of life, both public and private. Such is the infirmity and incapacity of the human mind, that abstract or general ideas make no lasting impression on it; and often appear to us doubtful or obscure,—at least if they be not illustrated and confirmed by experience and observation.

It is from history alone, which superadds to our own experience that of other men and of other times, that we learn to conquer the prejudices which we have imbibed from education, and which our own experience, often as contracted as our education, tends in general rather to strengthen than to subdue or destroy. "Not to know," says Cicero, "what happened before we were born, is to remain always a child; for what were the life of man, did we not combine present events with the recollections of past ages?"

There are certain principles or rules of conduct that hold true in all cases; because they accord and consist with the invariable nature of things. To collect and digest these, belongs to the student of history, who may, in this way, easily form to himself a system, both of morals and politics, founded on the combined judgment of all ages, and confirmed by universal experience. Moreover, the advantages that we reap from the study of history are preferable to those we acquire by our own experience; for not only does the knowledge we derive from this kind of study embrace a greater number of objects, but it is purchased at the expense of others, while the attainments we make from personal experience often cost us extremely dear.

"We may learn wisdom," says Polybius, "either from our own misfortunes, or the misfortunes of others. The knowledge," adds that celebrated historian, "which we acquire at our own expense, is undoubtedly the most efficacious; but that which we learn from the misfortunes of others is the safest, in as much as we receive instruction without pain, or danger to ourselves." This knowledge has also the advantage of being in general more accurate, and more complete than that which we derive from individual experience. To history alone it belongs to judge with impartiality of public characters and political measures.