

fect another, onward and onward, until the greatest of all was reached. History may be said to include a narration of all facts in connection with a given subject—the subsidiary, as well as the most important ones; and it may also embrace comments, explanations, or parallels by the author; for if these were excluded, it would be annals only, and not history. Tradition, poetry, tales, biography, old letters and accounts, state papers and other such documents, are undoubtedly all parts of national history, although not precisely known by that name; for every one of them supplies valuable materials for its compilation.

True, indeed, many an historian in the past has not taken advantage of all such materials, but has fallen far short of our ideal of true history. There are histories of every variety between Herodotus' most interesting work, and Froude's delightful volumes. Some of these historians have gone to the one extreme of relating everything they knew, however improbable, and whether they believed it themselves or not; and others again have given us only a dry matter-of-fact recital of the great occurrences in the world's progress. Many have thought they have done all that could be required of them when they have narrated this battle, or that great national victory, how such a hero emerged from obscurity and astonished the world, or when such a king, nobleman or prelate was born and died; while nothing was said about the common people, and information as to the manner in which these classes lived and died will be sought for in vain. Some people may think it beneath the dignity of history to descend to such particulars as these, yet there cannot be a perfect history without them. A writer who gives us only a dry description of the great events of the period, is like an artist who would paint a fine landscape, filling in the mountains, rivers, and dells, the houses, roads and trees, but without filling in the grass and the rustling foliage, the blossoms on the hedges, or the weeds by the water's edge. Such a picture would manifestly be a failure; and so is such a history.

This voluminousness of historic details brings with it one or two drawbacks. One of these is that it is impossible to overtake all history, and it is therefore needful to confine one's attention to a comparatively limited portion of it. No doubt a man might, in the course of years, make a rush through universal history, and read something about all nations, and during all their periods. But what the better would he be? He would have a confused notion of many things, and a thorough knowledge of nothing. It is true he must know something of the other parts of it, as well as his own special study; for it would be discreditable to him if he did not know whether Julius Cæsar was a Roman or a Greek, whether Socrates was a philosopher or a warrior; though he might well be excused, if he did not know that the former had twice landed in Britain and conquered its inhabitants, and that the latter had a very ill-tempered wife. A student must know something of general history, but his strength should be given to some particular part of it, and his attention confined to it till he has mastered its minutest details. Each one should select an epoch or country best suited to his own taste, and make that his study and the focus of his reading, everything being greatly subordinated, and in connection with it. British history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may be quoted as an illustration, which is one of the most interesting periods, and for which abundant materials can easily be had. This begins in Scottish history about 50 years before the Reformation, and until the union of the Kingdoms, and in England during the reigns of Henry VIII and his family, the Jameses, the Charleses, and William and Mary. The introduction of printing into Scotland, the battle of Flodden, Knox, and the Reformation, Henry VIII, and his many wives, the martyrdom of Ridley, Latimer and Cramer, the Armada, the Gunpowder Plot, the Cavaliers and Roundheads, the execution of Charles I. and Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, are some of the great subjects included in it. More, Latimer, and Fox; Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher; Spenser, Cowley and Milton; Hooker, Bacon and Baxter; Butler and Dryden; Tiltonson and Bunyan; Clarendon and Burnet, are some of the great stars of our literature, whose lives and writings at once adorn and illustrate the period.

This abundance of historic materials is the cause of another disadvantage. As it is impossible for an historian to mention everything, a selection is necessary, and room is thereby opened up for partiality and unfairness. An historian's great object should be to give a clear idea of the period about which he writes; and as he cannot give all the details, he should present his readers with those that furnish a true idea of the whole. But this expectation is often sadly disappointed. Some have written under party bias, or with strong feelings in favour of certain personages; and some have written with the express purpose of creating certain opinions, and to accomplish a definite object. And this may be done to a very large extent without falsifying, or even exaggerating facts, by simply leaving out those that would interfere with the intended impressions, or explaining them away, and giving full prominence to those on the other side of the question. This makes it necessary to read as much as possible on the subject, so as to learn all the versions of the story, and the different opinions concerning it. The history of Queen Mary may be referred to as an illustration. Dr. Robertson wrote of her in a somewhat condemnatory strain, believing her guilty, and William Tytler wrote in refutation of his views. More recently Glassford Bell has written a history in her defence, but he is so partial that his work may be said to be more like an advocate's special pleading than anything else; and P. F. Tytler, in his History of Scotland, (the best we have,) after careful enquiry, takes an opposite view to that of his grandfather, and gives probably the most correct view of her character that can be had. Knox's history also is a very good one, and his account of her may be accepted as true, in spite of his dislike of her, and his intense hatred of her religion. Thus by reading all the different histories—one supplying what the other has omitted—weighing conflicting evidences, and considering opposite opinions, a true conception of the subject may be secured, and the most reliable information obtained.

"An historian, we conceive, should transport himself in spirit to the age and country about which he writes. His whole being should be as much suffused and influenced by them as if he lived amongst them, having actually seen the deeds he relates, and heard the tales he recounts. He should stand on the battle-field, and give us not merely an outline, but a photograph of the scene, telling us not only where the commander stood and directed its movements, where the fighting was fiercest, and the carnage greatest, but also how the soldiers were clothed and armed, what kind of armour they wore, with what weapons they fought. All these should be told; for they contribute not less to the interest of the picture than do the quarrels and sulterfuges, the mistakes and crimes which provoked the contest. But this vivid imagination should be tempered by a clear judgment and sound discretion. While desiring a striking and attractive picture, he ought never to create incidents for the sake of embellishing his story. He should possess the faculty of rightly analyzing character, giving his readers an insight into the feelings and dispositions of those about whom he writes, and showing how they thought in private, as well as how they acted in public. Then we would have histories truly worthy of the name, and combining the good qualities of all with the accuracy of Tytler, the impartiality of Hallam, and the eloquent brilliancy of Macaulay."

As already hinted, many of our historians confine themselves to the great movements in the world's progress, and tell us little or nothing of the more personal and domestic life of the times about which they write. But these are to be found elsewhere; and it is well worth while going a little out of our way in search of them. Let us suppose that some information is desired regarding English life and manners about five hundred years ago, and although we may obtain some details in histories, we will get them far more fully and vividly from Chaucer in the Introduction to his Canterbury Tales. The plan of the work is, that a company of people from all ranks are assembled at the Tabard Inn, in Southwark, before proceeding on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas-à-Becket, at Canterbury. It is suggested that each in turn should tell a story, to beguile the long journey over the rough roads; and before relating these, Chaucer, in his prologue, describes the narrators themselves. Thus, the country