
What Importance is History?

About a year ago, shortly after the Fall, 1976, issue of the *Quarterly* hit the streets, we received a letter from a reader who launched a rather vitriolic attack against us for our choice of material. We were told that although there is a place for history, social issues facing the nation or scientific strides we have made deserve as great or greater attention. The reader was disappointed to realize he had to read about the Force's past — again.

While everyone is entitled to his own opinion, I can't help but shudder at the naïve realism expressed in his view of history vis-à-vis social realities. The reader seemed to suggest that our social world exists essentially in the present and that the past therefore is less than important. In other words, rather than being a springboard towards progress and understanding, the past, by implication, shackles the future and hinders progress. Unfortunately, too many people share that belief.

When we think about it, no other foundation for any society exists save its past. Consequently, no society can ever hope to achieve maturity without reflecting on past events and applying the lessons learned to the future as it unfolds. In fact, there is little activity in our everyday world that does not reflect the past in some way. Our books, our schools and universities, our accounting systems, our religion, the arts, the very thoughts we think are all part of, or have been conditioned by the life we have led so far, tempered by the teachings of those who have lived in a different place or in a different time or under different circumstances. These persons were willing to pass on the benefit of their experiences in order that we — today — here and now — might learn and be better equipped to meet the future.

Probably the simplest example is the accumulated wisdom passed on to children by their parents. The parents know the child will be inquisitive and will explore and expand the boundaries of its real world. But should that child run into difficulty, it will harken back to past parental guidance, or will seek advice from parents and implement that guidance or advice, together with its own innovations. Only a foolish person would spurn that wealth of free and unencumbered knowledge.

But let's return to the original criticism. In a nutshell, the reader said that we should get off the "Force-History" bandwagon and get on with today's issues. Although that reader is entitled to his own preferences, we can only answer that we are **living** today's "social problems" as a result of past events. Perhaps by looking back at where we went right or wrong we might have some idea about actions to be taken to make things better tomorrow. We must, as the French statesman, philosopher and orator, Jean Jaurès, said "... take from the altars of the past, the fire — not the ashes."

And maybe it isn't such a bad idea to look at the achievements of our forefathers, at their resourcefulness and courage, and to tip our hats in respect, for it was, to a great extent, their efforts which gave us the good life we enjoy today. I'm certain they too, would tell us to use only the true, the significant and the applicable. **Ed.**