

History Revisited

ORMONDE

VOLTAIRE, in an essay, said he preferred Richard Cromwell to his more famous father Oliver. Richard, he said, refused power that would have cost blood, lived a peaceful life to a ripe age, cultivated his country estate, and was loved by his neighbours. Oliver was fanatical and bloody, ambitious and lonely, dictatorial and arrogant.

Taking a clue from this evaluation, we ought to have another look at history. The artist Matisse once said that if he applied a spot of paint to a canvas and it did not harmonise with the rest of it, he might have to start from that spot and repaint the whole picture. Starting from Voltaire's spot, we might gain some fresh insights from our repainting of history.

When Cromwell was fighting a battle at Marston Moor, a nearby farmer was told that the forces of Parliament were fighting the forces of the King. "What!" exclaimed the farmer, "has them two fallen out then?" So little did these weighty events affect him and thousands like him. Yet the rarely broken silence of these humble people belies the fact that they have carried the world on their shoulders and have kept it going while the great ones have raged and fought, plotted and schemed, stolen and bribed, and carried things to a sorry pass.

There should be a new kind of history that dates from the events that have really influenced our lives rather than from forgotten skirmishes. In our present history books, looking up the 1890's, for instance, one finds dreary recitals of the complicated manoeuvrings of the Great Powers, all vain and dead as a door-nail, but one does not usually find mention of the thing that has affected our lives more than any other event of that time—the invention of the automobile.

It is true that one may find these things in specialised histories. But they ought to be taught as *History*. The situation is a little better today than formerly, when history was preoccupied entirely with kings and wars. Modern history books do take more note of the social background, but "History" is still basically the political events of the world, enriched by some attention to the life of the people. It should be the other way around, with the life of the people as the main show and with some attention paid to kings and wars.

I was conducting a class in history once, when a student suddenly asked me, "Who invented beds?" Hanged if I knew. The Egyptians? If so, that is certainly more important than all those infernal dynasties and is their one legacy that is a living reality.

For three hundred years, from about 1100 to about 1400, the English language was ignored by important and learned people—it remained outside "history"—and that was a blessing. This neglect permitted the