

THE
DEATH
OF THE
PAST

J. H. PLUMB

THE DEATH OF THE PAST

By the same author

ENGLAND IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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(with C. Howard)

CHATHAM

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FOR
JOHN BURROW

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PREFACE

This book is based on the Saposnekow Lectures which I gave at the City College, New York, in March 1968, an honour which I greatly appreciated. I have decided to publish them very much as I gave them. They could easily have been extended into a large volume, perhaps several, by the addition of illustrative material drawn from many centuries and many civilizations, but I do not think that such additions would add much to the basic ideas that I wish to put forward. Also, other tasks, in other fields, demand attention. One day, perhaps, when they are discharged, I may return to the questions raised in this short book. I shall always be grateful to the City College and to the Saposnekow endowment, for without this invitation I am sure the book would never have been written. I would like to record my gratitude to Dean Samuel Middlebrook and his colleagues, who made my visit to the City College such a pleasant one.

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INTRODUCTION

In this book I have tried to draw a sharp distinction between the past and history. Man, from the earliest days of recorded time, has used the past in a variety of ways: to explain the origins and purpose of human life, to sanctify institutions of government, to give validity to class structure, to provide moral example, to vivify his cultural and educational processes, to interpret the future, to invest both the individual human life or a nation's with a sense of destiny. For all societies the past has been a living past, something which has been used day after day, life after life, never-endingly. The more literate and sophisticated the society becomes, the more complex and powerful become the uses to which the past is put.

The sense of the past has usually been linked in human consciousness with a sense of the future. This is as true of Eastern societies as of Western; yet there was a great difference between them. The Chinese certainly saw the future in terms of the past. The fall of dynasties, due to the withdrawal of Heaven's Mandate through misrule, also predicted the rise of others; also, the rise of a dynasty meant Heaven's approval – the prospect, therefore, of power, prosperity, justice and general well-being. But in the Western Christian world the past was linked to the future in a much more dynamic fashion, for the

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Christian cosmology stretched over time future as well as time past in an intricate narrative that predicted particular and precise events. The movement of the past in the West was linear, in the East cyclical, though not without a concept of betterment.

Man is full of curiosity and often a very exact observer. So the past which he used either to sustain himself or his societies was never a mere invention. It contained a great deal of what had actually happened to the tribe or nation to which he belonged or even, if he were royal or belonged to a priestly or warrior class, of what had happened to his own ancestors.

And the fascination of the past as well as its usefulness led him to presume facts about it, to discover others, and to establish their veracity – so long as one remembers that truth may be a moral, a theological, or even an aesthetic truth and not merely a factual one. The majority of men and historians for most of recorded time were concerned with far more than what had merely happened.

But the past, used in the way it was, is never history, although parts of it may be historical. History, like science, is an intellectual process. Like science, too, it requires imagination, creativity and empathy as well as observation as accurate as a scholar can make it. History, like science, has grown intellectually out of all recognition with its ancient self in the last three hundred years in Western societies. And probably the growth of both is subtly linked. But from the

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Renaissance onwards there has been a growing determination for historians to try and understand what happened, purely in its own terms and not in the service of religion or national destiny, or morality, or the sanctity of institutions; indeed, to try and bring to the human story both the detachment and insight and intellectual comprehension that natural philosophers have brought to their study of the external world. The historian's growing purpose has been to see things as they really were, and from this study to attempt to formulate processes of social change which are acceptable on historical grounds and none other. This to my mind is a Western development. Some scholars whom I admire will disagree, for they feel that I exaggerate the difference between Chinese and Western historiography. I am aware, as far as reading of translations of secondary authorities permits, of the subtlety of Chinese historiography, of its pre-occupation with documentation and its development of concepts of institutional change which, to some extent, broke through the basic historical generalizations of the Mandate of Heaven concept. Obviously, Chinese historians of the T'ang dynasty were infinitely superior to Einhard or Otto of Freising or any other early medieval chronicler, as superior as Chinese sages were in technology or in administration. Be that as it may, their development never broke the final barriers that lead to true history – the attempt to see things as they were, irrespective of

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what conflict this might create with what the wise ones of one's own society make of the past. The Chinese pursued erudition, but they never developed the critical historiography which is the signal achievement of Western historians over the last two hundred years. They never attempted, let alone succeeded, in treating history as objective understanding.

The critical historical process has helped to weaken the past, for by its very nature it dissolves those simple, structural generalizations by which our forefathers interpreted the purpose of life in historical terms. Doubtless this is why totalitarian societies keep such a firm hand on their historians and permit them no freedom, except in the accumulation of erudition. In such societies history is still a social process, a sanctification, and not a quest for truth. Basically history is destructive, although it would be wrong to think that it is entirely responsible for destroying the sanction that the past has in religion, politics, education and morals nowadays. The present weakness of the past springs from deeper causes, causes that penetrate deep into the nature of industrial society. Industrial society, unlike the commercial, craft and agrarian societies which it replaces, does not need the past. Its intellectual and emotional orientation is towards change rather than conservation, towards exploitation and consumption. The new methods, new processes, new forms of living of scientific and industrial society have no sanction in the past and no roots in it. The past

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becomes, therefore, a matter of curiosity, of nostalgia, a sentimentality. Of course, vestiges of its strength remain, particularly in religion and politics, which are still in conflict and in crisis within the new advanced industrial societies. On the other hand, in some aspects of life the domination of the past has disappeared almost completely. Until the late nineteenth century art and architecture were dominated by the past, not only in technique but also in themes. Historical painting was considered to be the highest form of art. Public buildings were either Roman, Greek or Gothic, or variations on those basic themes. But here the past has vanished. Occasionally an artist, even Picasso, will turn to an ancient myth, but rarely to the events of history. And one cannot imagine a skyscraper with flying buttresses or Doric columns. The strength of the past in all aspects of life is far, far weaker than it was a generation ago; indeed, few societies have ever had a past in such a galloping dissolution as this. It could be argued, and perhaps should be, that the dissolution is not fast enough, that the weight of the past on many social, educational and political concepts and institutions is itself helping to create crisis, and that the past, even in its death throes, is taking too long to die. Whatever the truth, some of the responsibility for the past's weakness must be the historians', who have so resolutely attacked mythical, religious and political interpretations of the past.