

Introduction

Those who cannot remember the past," said George Santayana, "are condemned to repeat it." It was a wise remark. A knowledge of history can be a remedy for the acute anxiety that is so marked a phenomenon of our time. Anxiety, indeed, is one result of our modern success in communication; we know about disasters anywhere in the world almost as soon as they happen. But the more explosively current is our knowledge, the less likely are we to remember that similar things have happened before, many of them more than once, some of them over and over. The world has survived; should we not take comfort from that fact?

We could not take comfort in the past if we knew nothing about it. We then might suppose that nothing cataclysmic had ever happened before, that the only crises are today's, or even tomorrow's. Knowing the past reminds us that there have always been crises; life itself is a crisis; and yet we and our nation live.

"Happy is the nation without a history," said an eighteenth-century writer. He meant, of course, that history being largely the record of disasters and catastrophes, the nation that had nothing of the sort to remember was fortunate. In fact, no nation lacks a history; to pretend otherwise is folly and leads into Santayana's trap. It is better to know the past than to be ignorant. Ignorance is never bliss and it is usually dangerous.

Taken all in all, our history is no worse than that of other nations, and it probably is better than that of most. Our way of life, Allan Nevins claimed in 1953, "has proved itself historically to be freer, more flexible, and more humane than any other." Even so, there have been crises in our past. We have taken giant steps forward, but we have also stumbled. It is good to know that when we did, we regained our footing. The wise man does not expect perfection in any human undertaking; neither does he expect complete and total failure.

History is no guarantee against disaster. The past helps to shape but does not determine the future; we are still free. "If destruction be our lot," Lincoln said in 1838, "we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time, or die by suicide." Nor is knowing one's own history a guarantee against making *new* mistakes. Nevertheless, history is a great cooler of the passions. It forces us to count to ten. The world could do with more of that.

The kinds of history

There is more than one kind of historical literature. One kind takes the form of narrative history. At the best — as in Henry Adams' great *History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* — it is very good indeed. At the worst — as in a superficial and hastily written textbook — it is very bad. But all narrative histories have one thing in common. In them, the past is seen through the eyes of only one man or at most a few men. His or their vision acts as a kind of prism; and a prism, although it can dazzle, also distorts.

Another kind of written record is documentary history. Here, the actors are allowed to speak for themselves. No interpreter, no matter how objective or brilliant he may be, stands between the reader and the past.

Narrative history has immense advantages. In the hands of a master, like Adams or Carlyle (whose *The French Revolution* is more exciting than most novels), it has the truth of art. But a narrative historian who is a poor artist can make the most exciting history dull.

Documentary history has great disadvantages. It can be confused, muddled, inchoate. But it takes these qualities from life itself, which it mirrors faithfully. Documentary history, in fact, has the truth of life. It is an even greater truth than the truth of art.

THE ANNALS OF AMERICA is documentary, not narrative, history. The thousand or more authors in these pages were living and breathing men and women; some of them still are. And they wrote, or spoke, or sang in 1740, in 1850, and in 1960 about matters of deep and — this is the important point — of immediate concern to them at the time. They were not looking back; they were not writing about what had been. They were writing about what was happening at the moment. We see history unfold as they saw it.

Poetry, according to Wordsworth's famous dictum, is emotion that is recollected in tranquillity. The same could be said of narrative history; the historian marshals his facts and, in the quiet of his study, sits down to tell his story, into which he breathes as much life as he can. Not so with documentary history; not so with the ANNALS. Here there is no tranquillity — no more than in a newspaper headline. Everything is happening *now*, as you read. That is what makes documentary history exciting despite its artistic deficiencies. It is not neat and clean but rather rough and rude and real.

At the present time, America leads the world in the publication of documentary history. Why this should be so is somewhat of a puzzle, but that it is so is not contested. During the last thirty years American publishers have probably issued more collections of original materials — source books and the like — than all other countries combined. It may be that the very rawness of such materials strikes a special response in modern Americans, who like to think that some of the rough simplicity and youthful freshness of their frontier heritage persists in them to the present day. Or it may be that the attempts to write narrative histories of the United States have not been a success. What *one* story about us is true? Are not many stories equally true?

In any event, we have seen during those thirty years or so the appearance of

a vast number of collections of source materials, many of them in two volumes or more, a few of them in as many as ten volumes. None of them is as large as the ANNALS, nor is any as all-embracing.

The phrase "documentary history" is in a sense a misnomer, at least when the term is applied to the ANNALS. It calls up visions of state papers, charters, laws, judicial decisions, the dust on which has been disturbed in recent years only by eager graduate students forced to discover a "new" subject for a dissertation. The ANNALS does contain documents of this sort among its pages — all of the documents, it could be claimed, that are essential to a full understanding of the official history of the country. But these 15,000 pages contain much more than the basic documentary tradition. The reason is that history itself is much more than official documents.

History certainly includes the laws we passed, the speeches we wrote and listened to, the formal expressions of our ends and of the means by which we hoped to bring them about. But it is also our reactions to those laws, including our not infrequent refusal to obey them; our comments on those speeches, ranging all the way from admiration to contempt; and our disputes about both ends and means. Nor have we always had such solemn things to think about. History is also what we ate and wore and how we built our houses, what we sang and how we loved, what games we played and how we spent our money. It is also the books we wrote, the paintings we painted, and the music we composed and performed. In this respect, the past is no more circumscribed than the present we all know. And the ANNALS reflects all, not just a part.

The lessons of history

The reader of the ANNALS can learn much, or rather many things, but there is perhaps nothing more important to learn from these volumes, and indeed there is nothing more important that history can teach, than what is implied in the foregoing pages. The past, in short, is more like the present than unlike it, or, to put it another way, man, despite the changes in his institutions and artifacts, remains the same complex animal he always was. With his feet in the mud and his head in the clouds, the American, like his fellow creatures all around the earth, has tried to make a good life for himself. He has struggled and fought, he has suffered and enjoyed, he has wept and laughed and never stopped complaining of his lot. It is a very human story, and it is not over yet.

There are other lessons, more specific ones. The circumstances of America were fortunate from the beginning. Never again, at least on this planet, will human beings discover a continent that is rich and beautiful and empty; but that happened here and to us. The experience touched us so deeply, indeed, that the beliefs generated by it are ineradicable. The other name for America is opportunity, and not just the opportunity to make a fortune. Opportunities to strive spiritually and artistically have also abounded among us, and still abound. In a word, we are free. That is the most precious gift that the wilderness bestowed.

This history, then, the history that is reflected in the ANNALS, is that of a free

people, going its own way in the world, making its own mistakes. Over and over the voices of men and women are heard crying out in these pages against oppression and injustice. That is just the point — the voices are heard; and most times the voices have been heeded. Even the voice of the Negro, raised first in the eighteenth century, has at last been heard, if not yet heeded. If any lesson can be learned from the ANNALS, it is that we have gained in freedom, and justice, and opportunity in 350 years.

Have we lost anything along the way? Perhaps some innocence; but perhaps, at the same time, we have gained wisdom. The empty continent is filled, now, and 200 million people live where a few thousand Indians once roamed. The frontier, as such, had ended by 1890; now we have to find frontiers in our own hearts and minds. We have somehow lost touch, too, with the very size of the country; one flies from coast to coast in a few hours, shuffling papers all through the trip and hardly noticing the changing terrain below. Once the journey took six months, and those changes meant the difference between life and death.

The air is not so fresh as it once was, the waters of the lakes and rivers are not so clear and cool and clean. Few of the magnificent animals that made the forests and mountains and plains a hunter's paradise survive, except in parks and reservations, and the Indian himself, once the most romantic of noble savages, has retired to, or rather been confined in, reservations where he lives a life that few would envy. Even the sky has been invaded, by the roar of jets and by the silent stab of radio and television waves; and there are those who fear that the great ocean itself cannot survive except as a sinkhole for the detritus of our civilization. Indeed, 200 million people produce a lot of garbage; where to put it or, better, what good use to make of it, is one of the compelling problems of our future.

Thus the land and thus the people, who, like it, may be more developed but less pure. What of our institutions? Are they also less pure and good? Have they lost some of their original freshness — albeit, doubtless, with an accompanying gain in efficiency? The reader of the ANNALS will have to answer that question for himself — the materials for an answer lie before him — but in our opinion there is cause here for both pride and hope. A glance around the horizon shows no statesman equal to Washington, for example, but who ever was? And the institutions that he and Jefferson and Lincoln helped to create have survived them. That, indeed, was how they hoped to be remembered; an institution, as Emerson once said, "is the lengthened shadow of one man."

In the broad sense, the greatest of our institutions is the U.S. Constitution, and that has not only endured but also flourished. It is a remarkable document, not the least of its virtues being its brevity. The first of its kind, it gives promise of outlasting all of the modern "improvements" on it.

Finally, THE ANNALS OF AMERICA is the richest of soils for the growth of the historical imagination. The spatial horizons of modern man have expanded unprecedentedly far, and we even begin to dream of expanding them outward from this earth. But time is a dimension, too. It is a poor world that exists only in the present. The past and, by a peculiar but inevitable inversion, the

future are as powerful dreamstuff as the mountains and craters of the moon. For many people, they are as little explored.

That need not be so, and the ANNALS can help it not to be so. There are few human beings who are not deeply touched to come upon the record of a family ancestor. THE ANNALS OF AMERICA is the record of all our family ancestors or, to be more precise, the ancestors of all our families. These men and women were us, inescapably. We learn more about ourselves as we learn about them.