Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell
Dordt College

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Put simply, historiography is the writing of history. Accordingly, the history of historiography is the history of the writing of history. And the history of historiography is a fascinating subject, addressing as it does the changing character of our historical awareness as well as the depth and extent of our historical understanding. Writing the history of historiography is a formidable task. Donald R. Kelley’s _Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga_ is a continuation of his earlier _Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder_ (same publisher, 1998). It is, perhaps inevitably, a book about books. Kelley’s work stands in the line of George Peabody Gooch’s _History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century_ (1913, second edition, 1952), Herbert Butterfield’s _Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship_ (1955), Eric Cochrane’s _Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance_ (1981), and Norman Cantor’s _Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century_ (1991).

This present volume is a remarkable achievement. The many references Kelley provides to authors and books are not a defect but a fount of instruction. The easy flow of the prose rests on foundations of very considerable learning and scholarship. In commencing his discussion of the modern period of western historiography in the late eighteenth century with Herder (where else?), Kelley adopts an organizational strategy towards his subject matter that reflects a dominant feature of the period itself—the rising power and dominance of nationalism. Accordingly, for a substantial part of this volume, Kelley focuses on the development of national historiographical traditions—the German (112-140, 173-197, 265-272), British (81-111, 225-253), French (141-172, 198-224), and Italian (259-264). Understandably enough, American historiography emerges as an intertwaving of indigenous and diverse European (and not least German) influences (280-303). All this is a mighty story, and the author handles the complexities with deftness and subtlety. He addresses for us the misconception that “historical-mindedness” arose preeminently out of a conservative reaction to the French Revolution. The roots of this awareness lie in the
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METHODENSTREIT, these developments bringing us to the work of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch and the Annales in France and the work of Johan Huizinga in the Netherlands. At an early stage this “new history” had a marked impact also on American historiography (310-317). Still, the main action was in old Europe. The crucial point is reached when, in the wake of German defeat in 1918, historicism (Historismus) comes to be seen as a problem, a veritable Krisis des Historismus. As a methodology Historismus had yielded valuable insight. It challenged the abstract rationalism of the enlightenment, and it took very seriously how successive generations use their cultural-for- mative power to shape and change human thought, life, relationships, and institutions. It was the means whereby generations of historians and other scholars had come to view the human past in a more genuinely historical way.

However, as and when Historismus had been erected into an all-encompassing world view, it led to a rootless relativism that eroded the very Kultur that it purported to champion. Here Kelley’s discussion of figures such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Ernst Troeltsch, Otto Hinz, and Friedrich Meinecke repays careful reflection (328-333). Kelley is right in pointing out that Karl Popper’s use of the term “historicism” diverged significantly from the original Historismus (332). The “historicism” that was the object of Popper’s critique (The Poverty of Historicism, 1944, 45, republished 1957) implied a determinism that purported to validate prediction and legitimize a planned society (cf. his The Open Society and its Enemies, 1945).

As his title leads us to expect, Kelley’s discussion rarely takes us very far beyond the 1920s. “New Histories” notwithstanding, we learn nothing here of his estimation of figures such as Louis Namier, whose big impact came from 1929 onwards. Authors such as Robin G. Collingwood and Arnold Toynbee are mentioned only in passing. Having given us volumes on the Faces of History and the Fortunes of History, I wonder if Kelley will eventually give us a third to make up a trilogy—possibly the Fate of History down into the era of our new-style historicist relativism—contem- porary postmodernism.

Kelley comes to this conclusion:

The effect of the First World War was mainly to enhance . . . the inclination of historians to national ideologies, and to eschatological philosophies of history, to replace the discredited myth of unending Progress, if not to restore it in more complex terms. These were the foundations on which the modern discipline of history would continue to be built and rebuilt into the present millennium. (345)

This conclusion is surely a thesis that itself calls for further elaboration. No discipline is an island unto itself. The exquisitely diverse and complex reality, which confronts us all and of which we all are part, can never be successfully reduced to a single explanatory standpoint, as if everything were only mathematical or only physical or only historical. Accordingly, the history of historiography should never be viewed as an island unto itself either. When it is, it always is in danger of becoming little more than a listing of one book after another, one historian after another.

Kelley comes somewhat upon this problem in his refer- ence to the work of Hayden V. White (341). White (Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, 1973) may have rested too much at the level of “emplotment”—at the structure-determining strategies used by historical authors in the crafting of their literary artifacts. Nevertheless, he was pointing in the right sort of direction. And we might now well ask, “So why did they elect such and such a starting-point?” For White, the answer was likely to be a moral or aesthetic one. Some of us, how- ever, would argue that the answers to such questions point to the ultimately religious stance that we all ineluctably adopt in all that we say and do. However difficult the task, what is needed is a history of historiography that has found how to take into account the all-important pre-theoretical first assumptions that historians make before they embark upon their researches and fashion their narratives. And, of course, to say this is to acknowledge that the history of historiography itself can never dispense with a starting-point, be it pagan, humanist, Christian, whatever. It seems that we are still some way from articulating and utilizing such an insight—we might say, from a new critique of histori- graphical thought—but that is not to say that such a task should not be contemplated. Meanwhile, this volume will be indispensable for all serious students of modern historiogra- phy and is strongly recommended. And perhaps we may hope for a third volume from Professor Kelley—one that takes us to the end of the twentieth century.