

it is now constituted does fine work, but is it on the whole, in spite of all the kindness involved and the heavy and devoted work of such men as Mr. Arthur Gannon, able to effect anything **more than a slight amelioration** of the country's religious sickness? **Apart from that particular question**, there appears to be generally in this country a tendency to confuse activity by Catholics with Catholic Action. The title is given to campaigns for schools, to newspaper controversy. There is an eagerness to show material results, to build clubs, start Press campaigns, committees, national councils. In short space such things appear, and reports of speeches at banquets and conferences in big hotels. There is an 'apostolate.' Are there apostles? Is there, behind the mass movement, **the steady work of small groups with the programme of Prayer, Study, Action as a means to winning souls?**

Mr. Anson gives no judgment. *Harbour Head* states no precise thesis; but a putting together of the passages on Catholic Action gives much food for thought. And it seems, to some readers at least, that Mr. Anson, far from ceasing to be an apostle by his withdrawal to the shores of the Moray Firth, has indicated a way in which his own appeal for missionaries of the sea might begin to be met; a way too by which, with small resources, other people might devote themselves to Catholic Action and make cells of Christian living in the world.

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## IN PRAISE OF GENERALISATIONS

It is possible, in the daily intercourse of living, to be familiar with every detail of a man's behaviour and habits, and yet to understand nothing of the man himself; or in history, to wade through volumes about some figure or movement, and yet not to be any closer to the reality. Then, suddenly, one chances upon a formula, a character-equation, which explains all, which renders coherent and intelligible what had before been isolated and inexplicable problems of history or of personal acquaintance.

Let me illustrate. For years I had known a certain man of my own age and profession, conversed with him, studied with him, idled with him. Now, after all this I never became intimate with him, as it is a commonplace that knowledge may never ripen into friendship.

Here familiarity never developed even into knowledge. The springs and fountains of the man's conduct were completely hidden from me. We had exchanged a thousand views with each other, but we had never exchanged ourselves. All the time I felt dimly that there was some lack, some defect, which precluded intimacy. For four or five years our relations stood thus, our good fellowship more apparent than real, when, quite unexpectedly from nowhere, a character-formula (I cannot think of a more apt word) flashed upon me.

There had been nothing to indicate any ground for our divergence, when one day my demon or my angel whispered: not in what he did, not in what he said, but in what he left unsaid will you find an answer. For the first time in our long acquaintance it became clear that while this man (he was not a murderer, usurer or politician, but a very ordinary person) had spoken with me on occasions beyond number, he had never once said what he really thought on any matter of human importance. He was a man who through a misjudgment of the early counsels of prudence, such as we all receive from the mentors of our youth, had taken it as a guiding principle for life that the purpose of human speech is to conceal human thought. In his intercourse with his fellows he always postulated that it would be to his disadvantage to show his real mind on any issue. He lived in a perpetual mental smoke-screen. You could never join battle with him; he would never risk a decision.

This formula explained everything. And my discovery induced in me three reflections: first, how thoroughly a single such misapprehension may distort a whole life; second, how immensely difficult it was to smooth out and undo such a warping of the mind; and third, how wise we others were (*nous autres*) to neglect in so many points the wise counsels of our elders.

The point is this: the myriad details of a man's life will lack summation and intelligibility unless we seize those traits of character from which they all proceed. The amassing of details is useful and even necessary when we desire to make a just estimate of character. These details are the indispensable matter from which the contemplating mind abstracts some principle of origin and explanation, which in turn imposes unity on the previous diversity. But no amount of detail is adequate substitute for this single informing principle; it may even be a hindrance.

A further illustration may help. There was a certain young fellow of my acquaintance who, in spite of many attractive qualities and an evident eagerness to please, failed to win the deeper regard of those with whom he mixed. Young, handsome, educated, virtuous, accomplished, and of a generally impeccable correctness, he would honour-

ably deserve the esteem and affection of the people of his world. Indeed he succeeded in so doing in the case of strangers and casual friends. But nearer home, among his familiars, he generated a sense of restraint and irritation which was only heightened by the fact that his exterior correctness made it an impossibly delicate task to cross him. All access, for good or ill, to his inner fortress was denied you by a bristling, but concealed, outwork of righteousness, of a righteousness not openly proclaimed but everywhere suggested. He seemed to cut a finer figure in society than the rest of us; yet in sober fact he was more alone than any of us, more isolated from his world, having with none that easy access and saving intimacy which redeems our life from stellar loneliness and halves our human sorrows and doubles our human joys. How came it that one who most desired a place for himself in the thoughts and affections of others should find himself doomed to an increasing isolation of soul? How reconcile the gracious exterior with the anguished heart?

It would seem that, by an error of judgement, this man had come to value excessively the external conventions of courtesy and urbane living; to regard them as absolute, as having worth in themselves, as conferring worth on their possessors. He had got a whole moral position upside down. He was moulding his life and conduct on the assumption that good manners make a good man; whereas, of course, a good man makes good manners. He had mistaken the accidents of virtue for its substance, etiquette for charity.

As before, an adequate generalisation explained all else. In its light it was interesting to note how doctrinal error issued in practical failure. An ill-concealed aversion on his part, quite naturally arising from his own fastidious manners, to the obvious but often superficial indelicacies of his fellows blinded him to much true heroism and inner splendour in these ordinary folk. The worthy thus often escaped him, the less worthy had his ear. His relations with people suffered much distortion. He who valued suavity and courtesy tended to grow bitter and harsh. I am sure he was often unhappy. But all his great losses, I would insist, proceeded from a single source: he esteemed the shadow of goodness above the substance.

This business of getting at the radical character of men and of movements has always seemed to me of prime importance in the study of history. To understand history a man should have that same familiar knowledge of its chief figures that he has of the members of his own household. The present over-vaunted concept of history as scientific may attain factual thoroughness and due objectivity, yet miss the one thing which makes it interesting and real. I once had to read a history of Rome, the objectivity of which showed

itself in a laconic, indifferent and callous presentation of facts which suggested that the author was a complete outsider to the common culture of Europe. The whole effect was chilling, as of a child remaining cold and aloof in the presence of some awful agony of his family. Such history worships the measurable statistics of external detail whether political, religious, constitutional or economic; it neglects human motive. The reason is obvious: any hack of sufficient industry can collect and assemble statistics; only the artist, only the poet can seize the spirit of a former age and present the past alive.

In our day the great example of this humanistic presentation of history is surely Hilaire Belloc. In reading his historical studies we see human motive and human character everywhere at work. Two results follow; such history is consistently intelligible and consistently interesting. It is informed by a soul.

Consider the historical problem presented by such a character as James the Second, the last English king; and consider the puerile solutions advanced in our school texts. To those who hate the things for which he strove—traditional kingship and the Catholic faith—James was a tyrant; to those who esteem his cause he is stupid and cowardly. Yet neither of these verdicts is reconcilable with the known facts of his life; nor are they consistent with our own experience of men. After our text-books how refreshing and how illuminating it is to come upon Belloc's analysis of the man: a man (he tells us) distinguished by two qualities: the one of strength, manifesting itself in James's well-known courage, his industry, his tenacity, his open adhesion to the Faith when such adhesion meant political failure, his generosity, his indifference to money, his noble endurance of poverty in youth and again in old age, his fine death; the other of weakness, manifesting itself in his complete failure to understand men different from himself, his friendlessness and isolation of soul, his lack of humour and of wit, his unquestioning assumption of the superiority of Englishmen and of the honour of his friends, his incapacity for intrigue. Two suggestive phrases of Belloc's have stuck in my memory and to me they make James the Second living and intelligible: *he could handle things but not men; he thought in straight lines*. We meet such men in real life: excellent but limited. But in real life we never have met any one at all resembling the James the Second of our usual histories.

Generalisations of this sort are of great value to the student, not only for the interpretation of individual lives, but also for that of whole movements and periods. The temper of an historical epoch,

while manifesting itself in any number of apparently unrelated events, will often be found on analysis to issue from a single idea. To catch this idea and to watch it work itself out in different spheres is one of the keenest pleasures of history. Much sifting of evidence is needed to reach and test the generalisation. But the mere amassing of amorphous quantities of fact, for its own sake, of detail issuing in no conclusion, is a labour unworthy of the human mind, whose characteristic function it is to impose a rational unity on all experience.

Thus we may note the increasing bewilderment of the student confronted with the jungle-like profusion of event and personage which we term the Renaissance. Within the compass of that great explosion of human energy and enthusiasm he sees men aflame with a passion for the recently revived study of Greek and Latin letters, and highly contemptuous of all the preceding medieval synthesis of philosophical and theological speculation, generally regarded as one of the richest flowerings of western civilization : he detects the decay of the large local autonomy and corporative activity of the middle ages before the rising omniscience of the New Monarchies ; the abandonment of the reeling height of the Gothic before the more earthly proportions of the Neo-Classical ; the decline of the old imperial Roman concept of an ideal world-state, of a Europe or Christendom essentially one, before the lusty self-assertiveness of the new nations ; he meets such odd juxtapositions of men as Luther and Loyola, Machiavelli and Isabella the Catholic ; Ronsard and Calvin ; Erasmus and More. In the tropical luxuriance of such a historical tangle how directive, unifying and simplifying, how significant of the whole current of the Renaissance mind is Michelet's famous formula that the Renaissance is the *Discovery of Man and of the World, La découverte de l'homme et du monde*. It is that point of departure wherein Europeans begin the adventurous experiment of making man and this world, rather than God and the future life, the centre of human hope and human effort. Natural man and his natural happiness are made the standard of reference by which all conduct must be tested and measured. This shifting of the centre of things seemed to hold unlimited, unexplored possibilities of improving man's mortal lot by making this life the goal of all human endeavour. The despair of to-day is the final term of the long process of the humanism of the Renaissance. He understands it all who understands Michelet's definition : *the Discovery of Man and the World* ; the substitution of an anthropocentric for a theocentric world. Understanding that makes the process interesting to contemplate and the *dénouement* not illogical ; for man is not self-sufficient.

We must, of course, be critical in reaching, in accepting and in applying such generalisations; we must remember that in the long run history has to do with events which are unique and men who are free; and we must bear in mind that historians have been known who would tell a lie to round a period. But when all such due and prudent allowances have been made, a fairly adequate notion, for example, of the profound significance of the Roman Empire, may be found in the noble words of Seneca, which writers are fond of quoting as a text for that high time, *immensa pacis Romanae majestas*, the immeasurable greatness of the Roman peace. And is not O'Connell's due place in history epitomized in Seán O'Faoláin's description: *the King of the Beggars?* for his achievement was to give heart, leadership, pride, and the beginnings of new nationhood to a people then degraded to slavery. And is not an important and neglected aspect of English history immortalized in the grim humour of Cobbett's affirmation that the *Reformation was a rising of the rich against the poor?* And who, after witnessing the successive collapse of such academic myths as Constitutionalism, Progress, the Nordic Man, Democracy, all issuing in the confusion of to-day, can help believing that the real identity of our Europe has been crystallized in Belloc's daring formula: Europe is the Faith, the Faith is Europe?

To resume: generalisations about men and movements are of more value than any mere accumulation of details, since for want of such generalisations the essential nature of men and movements, both contemporary and historical, may well escape us completely: it is natural to man so to generalise, it being the high office of the human intellect to abstract general truths from particular instances: while such generalisations must not be lightly made, neither may they be omitted, for it has been well said that the loveliness and order of all creation consists in the apprehension of unity in variety and of variety in unity: *in unitate varietas, in varietate unitas*.

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