

History, Art or Game?

A COMMENT ON 'THE PURITY OF HISTORICAL METHOD'*

FIFTY-SEVEN years ago Henry Lamb painted a portrait of Lytton Strachey. Lamb possessed a deep and, at times, exasperated understanding of his friend's capacities and limitations. He painted Strachey seated in a basket chair, a rug over one of its arms to protect him from possible draughts, a window behind him opening upon Hampstead Heath. The room in which Strachey sat was, in a sense, his cage. He was separated from the scene outside both by the glass in the window and by his predilection for a sedentary life. Like most of his literary friends, he knew little of the intellectual world of the workmen employed on the Heath or of the costers who made it their playground.

In 'The Purity of Historical Method', Peter Munz looks out upon a scene that appears to him to be not a well-ordered park but a jungle, a romantic jungle filled with poisonous flowers and fabulous beasts; and he meditates upon the significance of what he thinks he sees. From the urbanity of his background in European scholarship, he considers the activities — real or imagined — of those of us who have chosen to explore worlds that remain alien to him. Not unnaturally, his account of our purposes and our methods is suffused with unreality: he writes as a man more sensitive to conditions in the room he inhabits than to those outside.

There is, of course, much of value in Professor Munz's article. I can only applaud his lucid discussion of the nature of historical facts and of the status of 'primary sources'. I agree that the historian's most important task is 'a search for the thoughts *behind* the facts'. I do not disagree — and who could? — with his criticism of unnamed scholars who, he tells us, have torn facts from their context to produce a history of ancient India 'in European style'. I do not differ from him regarding the origins of the study known as 'modern history', though I doubt the relevance of this part of his analysis to his present purpose.

But when he turns to a direct discussion of 'the history of non-European societies', I must take issue with most of what he writes. Who are the historians to whom he refers? Their purported thoughts are described without the facts relating to their identity being disclosed — surely an erroneous application of the principle that a historian should seek 'the

*Peter Munz, "The Purity of Historical Method: Some Sceptical Reflections on the Current Enthusiasm for the History of Non-European Societies", *New Zealand Journal of History* V, 1 (April 1971) 1—17.

thoughts *behind* the facts'! Nor are we much helped by his account of their motives. Munz's historians have chosen their fields of study out of 'courtesy' towards the peoples of newly independent states and of a 'prudent' desire to show fellow-Europeans how to behave towards them. The historians therefore are Europeans; but this is all we know. University administrators — vice-chancellors and their like — have, it is true, used the current political interests of their countries as a basis for raising funds for new chairs and lectureships. Is Munz perhaps thinking of them? But the motives of students and scholars, so far as I know them, have been far different. They have been concerned with understanding the past of their own world, a world that no longer looks back (if it ever did) only to the foundation of Rome and the birth of Christ. Their writings have represented, like all creative work, an attempt to define and distil some fragment of contemporary consciousness.

Munz considers that this effort has been 'grossly arrogant and imprudent in that we are foisting upon these people [i.e. non-Europeans] an idea of their past which is assimilated to our own idea of our past'. He seems thus to ignore (or under-rate) the impact of the West upon the rest of the world during the last five hundred years, the contribution of scholars with a non-European cultural background to modern historical studies, and the preoccupation of historians of non-European societies — regardless of cultural background — with the methodological problems involved in studying the past of diverse peoples and cultures.

Perhaps Munz's most implausible statements are those concerned with the location of events in time. He contends that 'dating events in relation to the birth of Christ . . . makes sense only in regard to one particular series of events', that it provides a 'criterion of selection' and implies 'a value judgement'. Points such as these could have been seriously discussed by theologians during the Middle Ages; but today they fall into the same category as the irrational notion that a person may suffer misfortune through occupying a seat numbered '13' or from placing his feet over the cracks between adjacent paving stones. And Munz himself admits that, 'Provided one is aware of what one is doing, any frame of time-reference can be used for dating any event anywhere'. Not only historians of non-European societies but also economic historians, or historians (say) of post-revolutionary Russia, would utterly reject the contention that, by using the dating system of the Christian era, they were significantly relating their subject matter to the birth of Christ.

Some of Munz's comments cannot be so lightly dismissed. It is true, of course, that the historian is faced with special problems when he is concerned with people who were primarily interested in the seasonal cycle or in the oral transmission of genealogies, who possessed no written records or were only marginally affected, if at all, by institutions such as church or state. In these circumstances, the historian's achievement will be a limited one; but, if he is a scholar of any competence, he will bring to his service the work of archaeologists and linguists and even, with due caution, that of sociologists and anthropologists. These problems are faced, however, not only by historians of non-European societies but also

by many of Munz's colleagues in the European field — by those, for example, who are students of peasant life.

It is difficult to base a broad and meaningful discussion of non-European history upon Munz's article: many of his statements suggest that he has little acquaintance with our work; many of his concepts are — to use one of his favoured words — so unsophisticated. He writes, for example, that, 'in almost all known societies, people are in the habit of reciting genealogies' and correctly points out that it is often impossible to translate genealogical material into a time-scheme. In fact, the recitation of genealogies is a less common practice than he suggests. The genealogical knowledge of working-class people in Western cities is extremely limited and that of members of non-chiefly societies in areas such as Melanesia only a little more extensive. And, even where evidence relating to descent is most highly valued, the forms in which it is preserved often differ markedly from that of the formal genealogy, as the term is understood in the Western world. The Samoan *gafa*, for example, is both more and less than a formal genealogy. As P. J. Epling has written:

The *gafa* is a reinterpretation of the facts of life which may in turn serve as a basis for a social charter. Generations are collapsed, individuals are added and deleted, pedigrees are manipulated and sometimes falsified, and, in general, relationships are adjusted and readjusted to fit the circumstances of the time.¹

Yet a Samoan *gafa* — or material derived from it, since only rarely is it made available to scholars in its traditional form — constitutes a most valuable historical source. In itself, it contains a family's present interpretation of its past; in conjunction with other sources, it assists a historian to analyse earlier periods.

The phrase 'in conjunction with other sources' is, I think, central to my argument with Professor Munz. My use of it may, indeed, suggest that our positions are not so far apart as they appear to be. The history that I, and most of those with whom I work, are involved in writing is not primarily dependent on oral evidence. We limit ourselves to the period during which non-European societies have been in contact with the West.

This remains, of course, a difficult undertaking — at times, a perilous one. For the Pacific, as for some other areas, the earliest written records were made by Europeans. Those who produced them possessed an imperfect understanding of indigenous societies; they were often concerned with recording matters of primary interest only to themselves; and they wrote in languages ill-suited to the description of exotic cultures. But, as Munz rightly emphasizes, there is a more fundamental difficulty than that deriving from the deficiencies of documentary sources. The foreign historian, be he New Zealander, American or Frenchman, never escapes entirely from the boundaries of his own culture. He tends to place the past of other societies in a framework similar to that in which he has learnt to place his own.

¹ P. J. Epling, 'O Le Gafa o Talo'olema'agao o Satalo: A Traditional Samoan Family History', *The Journal of Pacific History*, V (1970), 164.

These difficulties confront the historian of non-European societies in an extreme form; but many of them are not his alone — Munz, for example, has not lived in the Middle Ages. It may be argued, however, that the student of non-European societies enjoys a compensatory advantage, in that he is always acutely conscious that he is examining a body of experience very different from his own. He is constantly seeking ways of refining his understanding and of re-examining his conclusions.

For the Pacific historian — as for others — difficulties become less as he approaches the present. Polynesians, for example, have now been writing, in their vernacular languages, for well over a hundred years. Moreover, understanding of present-day society can be brought to bear, with increasing confidence, upon the study of the more recent past. Even among Pacific historians, it remains a controversial question as to how far this can safely be done, since Pacific Islands societies have never been static and have been profoundly changed through contact with the West. For my own part, I am in little doubt as to the broad outlines of the situation. In some respects, island cultures can change fairly quickly. For example, the importance of particular chiefly titles can greatly increase or diminish during the lifetime of a single holder; the role of chiefs — and the principles governing succession to chiefly titles — can be significantly affected by the policies of governments; and attitudes towards the transfer of land can undergo a transformation with the development of a money economy. Since custom is constantly redefined to fit new circumstances, as Epling explained in respect of Samoan *gafa*, the historian often has difficulty in reconstructing an earlier orthodoxy. But, in other respects, island cultures are far more resistant to change. They retain a characteristic style in personal relationships, including the acceptance by kin of their mutual rights and obligations, and in the conduct of public affairs. A historian who knows an island society sufficiently well is able — at least in respect of that society — both to dismiss some of the explanations that might be deduced from the documents and to bring an informed imagination to bear upon the creative side of his task. He is able to say: 'Samoans (or Bauans, or Abemamans) could not possibly have thought like that; they *might* have thought like this'. He is more sensitively alert to the clues that his sources may contain than a mere armchair historian can ever hope to be.

I have referred at some length to the relevance of understanding contemporary island societies for two reasons. First, it seems necessary to refine Munz's reference to historians who 'compose a history of Africa or the Pacific Islands'. Secondly, it seems desirable to emphasize that writing the history of non-European societies is an art that cannot be successfully pursued by those who give unquestioning obedience to traditional academic dogmas.

The term 'the Pacific Islands' is, of course, a European geographical abstraction. The area thus defined can, it is true, now be made the subject of a general history. But the reasons why this is so derive largely from developments during the contact period: the subjection of disparate societies to similar external influences; the growth of new links between the

peoples of the region; and the completion of many detailed studies of particular societies and particular topics. Only rarely — for example, in studies of the policy of an external Power — can the boundaries of a research topic be coterminous with those of the geographical region. Similarly, political entities such as the Cook Islands exist in their present form only because a number of scattered islands were brought by Europeans within the ambit of a single administrative system; they therefore provide a logical focus for the formulation of research projects only in respect of the colonial and post-colonial periods. And I referred earlier to 'Bauans' and 'Abemamans', rather than to 'Fijians' and 'Gilbertese', because of the existence of significant cultural differences within both Fiji and the Gilbert Islands. Historical research is concerned with the study of particular societies, of ideas and institutions common to a number of societies, and of contact between societies. Its organization, in respect of any part of the extra-European world, cannot be defined in exclusively Eurocentric terms.

My second point — regarding the limited relevance of traditional academic dogmas — raises a major issue: that of the essential character of an intellectual discipline. I agree with many of Munz's statements about the concept of history; but I cannot accept others as being valid for all time.² He writes: 'From these conceptions of divine missions and of providence there resulted the idea that events relating to empires and churches, rulers and laws, formed the back-bone of history; and that events relating exclusively to crops and furniture, to hygiene and food, did not.' And later he refers to 'history as we have come to understand it as the record of changing forms of empire and government, of power struggles and authority transformations, of class struggles and political organisations'. I do not wholly reject these statements, though I would suggest that a comparison of the two shows how the European concept of history has evolved in response to the changing circumstances of European life: 'divine missions' and 'class struggles' belong to different intellectual worlds. But I am forced to reject the implication that the concept should now be frozen and Munz's interpretation of it be accepted as the dictate of sound scholarship.

J. M. Keynes is said once to have remarked that 'economics is not a subject but a way of life'; and original thinkers in other disciplines could be quoted to similar effect. More cautiously I am content to assert that a discipline provides a methodology. In the case of history, it is a method-

² To avoid possible misunderstanding, I should perhaps emphasize that I have been primarily concerned in this article with writing and research, not with teaching. I am convinced that non-European history should be taught at the undergraduate level (and in schools), because it is relevant to the world we live in and can therefore stimulate the intellect and imagination of students. Like Munz, however, I should be appalled if it replaced the teaching of European history. The latter will always remain of central importance in the education of students with a European cultural background. For some time, at any rate, it must also be taught to other students, since historians of non-European societies are not yet able to provide bodies of material for study comparable with those available on, for example, seventeenth-century England or the history of European political thought.

ology for the study of society through the analysis of change over time. That methodology, in its present state, is the end product of the work of many generations of historians; and, as Munz writes, its past development has derived from the study of particular classes of problems relating to societies possessing a particular type of cultural heritage. The principles and the guide-lines that have been evolved cannot be disregarded; but they should not be used to make a prison for the human mind. Let me illustrate my point by reference to another field of human endeavour: Picasso, in his paintings, revealed perhaps more sensitively than anyone else — whether graphic artist or writer — the tensions of the French intelligentsia during the Second World War and the years immediately preceding and following it; he could not have done so had he felt himself bound by the precepts that guided the rulers of the British Royal Academy.

The methodology of history must continue to be developed — as it has been in the past to enable scholars to move from the study of 'divine missions' to that of 'class struggles' — so that men may still examine the problems that possess a preponderant interest for them. Only thus can history retain its parity with the arts, to which it is in so many ways akin, as a way of exploring creatively the subtleties of human consciousness. If a different course is followed — as Peter Munz would apparently wish — it will become largely a game, nearly as remote from the intellectual preoccupations of the age as is a game of chess from the facts of modern war.

J. W. DAVIDSON

Australian National University