

Michael Roberts

The Naive Historian:  
an underlivered inaugural

Professor Michael Roberts avled i början av år 1997. Han var en utomordentlig kännare av svensk historia, framför allt stormaktstiden och frihetstiden. Några av hans verk: *Gustavus Adolphus. A History of Sweden 1611–1632*, 1953 och 1958, *The early Vasas. A history of Sweden, 1523–1611*, 1968, *The Swedish imperial experience 1560–1718*, 1979, och *The age of liberty: Sweden 1719–1772*, 1986. I *Scandia* publicerade han uppsatserna *Oxenstierna in Germany*, 1982, och *Geijer and England*, 1994. Michael Roberts blev professor vid Rhodes University, Grahamstown, Sydafrika 1935. 1953 blev han professor vid Queen's University, Belfast. Efter sin pensionering flyttade han tillbaka till Grahamstown. Den föreläsning som här publiceras höll han 1995 i Grahamstown, då det hade gått 60 år sedan han tillträdde sin professur vid universitetet. Föreläsningen har tidigare, vintern 1995, publicerats i *Comment*, Rhodes University.

Since I am proposing to talk about history, I must first attempt to make clear what it is that I am talking about. For 'history', without further explanation, may mean several quite different things. When we talk of 'botany', no ambiguity is involved: we are alluding to one of the life sciences taught and learnt in schools and universities, and to the output of research in that particular field. There may be, no doubt there are, differences of approach among those who cultivate it, different taxonomies preferred from one generation to another; but when botanists – and nonbotanists – talk about botany they are all talking about the same thing, and no one feels any need to explain carefully what 'botany' is. Nor, perhaps, do they feel the need for any 'philosophy of botany', as distinct from philosophy of science in general. With history the case is very different. In its most extended meaning 'history' may be a loose synonyme for 'the past'. It may be a still looser synonym for 'experience', as in expressions such as 'history teaches us that...'. Its general shape may be a matter for dispute, as in the phrase 'for the Jews, history was linear rather than cyclical'. And finally it has engendered philosophies of its own, wholly concerned with it, which flourish until they are supplanted by yet other philosophies, but which never cease to attract some historians – and, it may be, more philosophers. And these debates are not simply about methodology, they are about history's very nature.

It is not whith any of these widely differing significations of history that I am now conserved: my subject is simply the writing of history, as history is defined

in our universities. This is a limitation (some would consider it a distortion, or an abdication of responsibility) which is imposed partly by my own unfitness for philosophical debate; but also by the circumstances of my university education. Consider for a moment the Honours School of Modern History in the University of Oxford, as it was sixty years ago – or at least, as I experienced it. It was wholly eurocentric; indeed, it came very close to being anglocentric, for Scottish, Welsh and imperial history received little attention. Economic history lurked on its margins, but could be avoided; intellectual history made no parts of its demands. Historiography was as absent from the Final Schools examination as it was from the topics which were offered in the lecture-list. Candidates were required to exhibit a knowledge of historical geography; the more prudent devoted some hours of practice to drawing freehand maps of France or (more difficult) Brandenburg, in order to be able to cope with one of those 'starred' questions which were obligatory. Political theory was apparently adequately represented by Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. I could count myself exceptionally fortunate to find, in the nineteenth-century English paper, a question on the importance of the novels of Charles Dickens to the social historian; for such questions were unusual; and though it was little enough that I knew about social history, I was fairly well equipped to talk at large about Dickens.

And if, having surmounted the initial obstacle of Schools, an ambitious youth conceived the idea of going on to do some research, conditions were very different from those that obtain to-day. It is not only that technological advances – photocopying, word-processors, computers, and so on – have made the labours of research a great deal less onerous than they were then; nor that the exploration of foreign archives has become financially possible to the young researcher, as it usually was not in the bleak economic climate of the 1930s; it is that at that time the aspirant historian was left very much on his own. The Faculty, having approved a topic for research – usually selected by the candidate – appointed a supervision for him (though in my case a year elapsed before they managed to find one for me); but otherwise he was left to find his way for himself. There was no instruction in methodology (at least for a modernist: the medievalist must presumably have and some in palaeography and diplomatic); and above all there was nothing like a regular seminar in which to exchange ideas with others working in related fields. The business of research was mostly a matter of self-education: one borrowed a Bernheim from someone who had a copy, and went on from there. Historiographically, it appeared to be a remarkably static and tranquil world. The only major revisionary approach appeared to come from Namier: the publication of *Annales* still lay in the distant future. It would not have occurred to us (nor, perhaps, to our tutors) that some acquaintance with statistics was desirable as a necessary precaution against loose generalisations, for quantified history had as yet made no serious impact. Oxford still had no school of sociology, and an acquaintance with its objectives and a command of its neologism was not expected of those *qui ambiunt honores*. As to anthropology, it was assumed to concern itself only with dwellers in the tropics. There seemed

to be a broad consensus on what written history should be (despite the success of G.M. Trevelyan's *English Social History*) and a general agreement that it might be narrative history. It is a view of the matter which is anything but obsolete. I reach for my dictionary, and I find 'history' defined firmly and flatly as 'a chronological record of events... usually including an explanation of their causes'. But to-day narrative history is not merely considered old-fashioned, but is in some quarters denied the name of history – or at least (as in the school of the *Annales*) is contemptuously consigned to the cellarage.

In the anglophone world, on the other hand, we are still surprisingly unregenerate in these respects, as a glance at current publications makes plain. It is not my intention to attempt to demonstrate the validity of narrative history, and still less to deny the enormous enrichment of the subject which has been the consequence of the new approaches and wider perspectives which have emerged from the historical revolutions of the last forty years. Though I have myself been guilty of considerable stretches of narrative history, I have not altogether neglected other brands; and in any case it would be invidious to appear as an advocate in my own cause. There is, in fact, no need for me to do so. In France, no doubt, the practitioners of *histoire historisante* are to-day consigned to Outer Darkness; but elsewhere the recesses of Limbo appear to be still remarkably wellpeopled: there is no lack of historians better qualified than I to justify their own existence, though I have not noticed that they are very forward to do so. Nevertheless, the situation is such that Professor Lawrence Stone can alert the alarmed readers of *Past and Present* to the menace of a *revival* of narrative history. I had not been aware that it was dead.

This conventional approach is shared, I think, by most teachers of the subject, and hence by those multitudes who are battling their way up the educational ladder in the optimistic belief that they will emerge at the top as historians. Why it is that they are so many is not quite clear. There exists a vague impression that a historical training is politically educative and socially stabilising. There is a more sophisticated notion that it provides those who complete it with a critical approach, a habit of analysis, a capacity for judgment, an alert scepticism, and a passable standard of English. I have some doubt about both these explanations. The only sound reason for 'doing history' is, of course, an interest in the past; and on the whole I doubt whether that interest is more strongly developed or more widely disseminated than it was a century ago. The new technocrats have little of it: one may become an atomic physicist or a computer engineer in comfortable ignorance of the Rise of the Gentry or the Progress of the Reformation. Still, it seems that among the factors which led to the boom in history in the second quarters of this century was an awareness that there appeared to be a steady and expanding market for graduates in the subject. The second explanation to which I have adverted seemed to be accepted; big business and the civil service were anxious to recruit historians. Nevertheless, most of them were probably absorbed into the teaching profession. There they were usefully employed in training their pupils in the elements of historical

knowledge, so that they might in due time themselves come upon the world as teachers of history. The whole process seemed to be cumulating by geometrical progression, and there came moments when one was troubled by halfremembered statistics about the reproductive achievements of green-fly, and was tempted to wish for a cold snap. It came, of course; and to-day the situation appears somewhat less alarming than it used to be. But in the meantime history had another potent attraction: the popular impression that it was an easy subject. The impression had a certain basis; for history seems less taxing to the mind than philosophy or economics, lacks the grammatical rigour of a language, or the special attributes which are demanded of the mathematician. It is, indeed, a subject in which those of small attainment or feeble genius may perhaps hope for a place in the Third Class.

'Great abilities (said Dr Johnson) are not requisite for an Historian; for in historical composition, all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent... Imagination is not required in any high degree; only as much as is used in the lower kinds of poetry'.

The general question as to why men read and study history has received a good deal less attention than the nature of history itself. And yet it is no easy question to answer. For a few, perhaps, the past has the fascination of repulsion, as it had for Henry Ryecroft, who put it on record as being his opinion that

If historic tomes had a voice, it would sound as one long moan of anguish. Think steadfastly of the past, and one sees that only by defect of imaginative powers can any man endure to dwell on it. History is a nightmare of horrors; we relish it, because... all that man has suffered is to man rich in interest. But make real to yourself the vision of every blood-stained page... and what joy have you of your historic reading? One would need to be a devil to understand it thus and to delight in it.

George Gissing was considered in his day to be a pessimistic writer; and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* is certainly not cheerful reading. Yet the passage I have quoted bespeaks at least an unquestioning belief that the age he lived in was better than the past: for the sensitive and the discerning, he felt, history must be akin to horror-comic. To our own generation, alas, there is but one horror-comic, and that is the one in which we all personally feature: to us, history is at least recommendable as anodyne bedtime reading, alike to the timid and the insomniac. History has become part of the literature of escape; and it would not surprise me to learn that the historical activity is esteemed to have valuable psychotherapeutic applications.

However that may be, the history industry continues to produce an article which few of those who discuss the philosophy of history would be anxious to own, and purveys it by methods which very many of them would repudiate. What relation has the history taught in schools, and even in universities, to the rarefied abstract activity of the 'pure' historian? Or to the sublime, Promethean,

determination to write 'total history'? Historical writings and teaching must always, it seems, be loaded and slanted by what the purist or the totalist would alike dismiss as non-historical considerations. For if it is to make any impact at all, it must be approached with some appreciation of its possible contemporary references and relevances, an awareness (even though not expressed) of 'the result of it all' and from this the step to a 'Whig interpretation of history' is so short that there are few of us who do not sometimes take it. Even at the university level we deal hardily with causes' and 'results', without (I fancy) having consciously decided our attitude to the problem of historical causation. How, indeed, can it be otherwise? How else convey to our readers or our auditors not merely the interest of the past, but also its importance? There will not be many who stay to listen if we tell them that 'importance' is not important. If, instead of anatomizing the 'causes' of (say) the Thirty Years War, we take painful care that the war appears only as 'events linked to other events by intermediate happenings', our audience will probably be neither enlightened nor amused. On purely practical grounds history must be shaped and ordered; we must resign ourselves to periodisation, as a matter of convenience; we must not run away from causes or results; we cannot treat the past as simply a myriad of processes or a congeries of patternless interlocking webs.

All historical enquiry starts with the question 'what happened?'; goes on to the question 'how?'; and ends up with the far from simple question 'why?'; but if we were to suspend our activities until the philosophers reached agreement on the meaning of 'why', the chances are that we should never embark upon them at all. A determination to establish first principles is notoriously inhibiting to constructive activity. It seems to me that there is a certain morbidity in the preoccupation of some modern historians with the justification of their own existence and the rigorous scrutiny of their intellectual intestines. Self-consciousness may at last stifle creation. The average working historian is of course aware that there are philosophies of history; but he knows also how tedious an unreliable theorydominated history can be, for he has dutifully struggled through not a few Marxist historians. It is even probable that if challenged he might be able to produce a general view of history from the darker cupboard of his mind, and present it for inspection. But scarcely any but the Marxists and the heirs of Braudel regulate their writing or their teaching in conscious conformity to a *credo*. About such persons there is a taint of excess – of rigour or phrenzy, as the case may be, – which sits uncomfortably with the historical activity, as I understand it. For that activity is always an attempt to know what in the last analysis is unknowable, to tell the untellable, to enter into the hearts and minds of many men long dead (which it is now fashionable to term the study of *mentalités*); and it is an activity which can never wholly succeed. The wise (and modest) historian will therefore recognize from the beginning that history is at best a matter of asymptotic approaches, that compromise is as inseparable from his proceeding as grime from the circumambient air, that a prudent pragmatism is his best policy in a situation which is always partly

obscured. It is the pragmatist, not the dogmatist, who assorts best with the historians's profession.

There are certain qualities which are common to all historians, of whatever colour: an unflagging desire to know and understand the past; an imaginative sympathy which overleaps the centuries; a personal engagement which is strong enough to bear up under the labours of the enterprise. However we may rationalise it, however 'scientific' the methods we may employ, historiography at bottom is not a rational activity, any more than writing an opera is. Historiography is generated by a species of emotion; and a main problem of the historian is to keep emotion under control. For it can hardly be dispensed with. The historian's personal engagement with the past means that there is no question as to whether he will take sides, or not: inevitably he does so. The historian who is really impartial about the Civil War or the French Revolution is none the better for it. Nature, heredity and environment makes us Whigs or Tories, Roundheads or Cavaliers, long before we become historians; and if we deliberately react against the label which circumstances have tied to us, we shall probably put a more untruthful label in its place. All we can do – and as historians we are bound to do it – is to pray very hard that we may be given grace to measure our dead foes with the measure we mete out to our dead friends, and the honesty to own up when our side was in the wrong. It is vain to wish for impartiality: class-feeling, patriotism, religion, so far from being weaknesses to be deplored, or stifled, or disguised, are necessary trace-elements without which history grows feeble and chlorotic. What matters is not an unattainable impartiality, but honesty and fair-mindedness.

It is a commonplace that history involves a continual act of selection: this is, indeed, crucial to the whole business of writing history. It is an agonizing operation. Anybody who has ever engaged in an extended piece of historical writing will vividly remember how much of his material never got into the book at all. Was he right to leave it out? right to prefer this example to that, the one testimony to the other? ought not his decisions as between them to have been justified in a fairly-argued footnote? After all, it is with history as with icebergs: it is the submerged part which is the larger, and also the more dangerous to passing mariners. For my part, I confess to a conviction that very few historians select their materials in accordance with clear, logical and philosophical principles. Most of us (I think) select it according to the issue of innumerable conflicts within ourselves, conscious, half-conscious or unconscious: conflicts between mind and heart, prejudice and fair-mindedness, austerity and abandon utility and ornament, rigour and style. The historian who is honest with himself will hardly claim that all these conflicts were properly decided. He will often be uneasy as to whether he may not have sacrificed exactness to convenience of composition, preferred perspicuity to accuracy, or too readily succumbed to the lure of the clangorous period or the flashing phrase. Which of us would swear to all our adjectives?

It needs little penetration to deduce, from what I have said already, the view

of the nature of history to which I incline. The Recorded Past, it seems to me, is the materials out of which historians are made. When we study history, or attempt to write it, the object of our attention is, quite simply, the materials from which history can conceivably be written, together with the histories which have in fact been based upon them. In the sense in which I use the word, 'history' is the effective communication, in speech or writing, of some information retrived from the Recorded Past: without the historian, there is no history. In itself history does not exist: it is *made*: made by the historian, or by tradition, or by the folkmemory, or even by the bard. Extraneous circumstances – material prosperity, social misery, foreign conquest, messianic notions, or whatever it may be – have from time to time led historians to write in ways which reflected those circumstances, and hence have appealed to a majority of their contemporaries; others, less sensitive to the prevailing climate, have written histories that failed and were (for a time) forgotten. But no history exists until it has been written, or otherwise narrated.

This view of history, as essentially a creative act, entails certain limiting consequences. It disqualified, for consideration as history, the great sourcepublications: the Calendars of State Papers, the Register of the Sound Tolls, the Historical MSS Comm. Reports to take only a few conspicuous examples. All such publications provide *materials* out of which history – or histories – can be made, and their potential is still only imperfectly exploited. But if their sub-historical status is obvious, what are we to say of the dissertations, or the research articles? Research can be, and very often it is, the manifestation in a very pure and concentrated form of that passion which is history's essential ingredient. But it can also be a kind of alibi: a placebo, an anodyne pseudo-activity pursued in an attempt to evade or defer the creative act. Some research is so seminal, so radical, that its findings are incorporated into history immediately, and may profoundly modify it. But much may wait for years to make its marginal impact; and in the meantime it occupies a position not differing greatly from that of the port-books or the census returns, since it provides material which awaits the moment of its relevance, the moment when it is absorbed into history, and has been integrated into a broader context. This is indeed often implicit in such titles as 'Breast-freeding and infant mortality in Wigan from 1920 to 1939', or 'Bastard feudalism in the Soke of Peterborough in the reign of Edward IV'. The authors of such pieces have performed a service which may one day be seen to be valuable; in the meantime, they await their hours.

I defined history, a moment ago, as 'the *effective* communication' of information; and the adjective is important. Even the most learned dissertation demands, as history too demands, an acceptable standard of legibility. If it be confused in arrangement, or impenetrably dense in style, it runs the risk of relegation to the category of sub-historical material from which history may, or possibly may not, one day be written. Sub-historical matter of this kind seems to be becoming more frequent than it used to be: the declining standard of English, the universal ignorance of Latin, the corrupting jargong of other

diciplines, transatlantic infections, all play their part in the process; and the results are disturbing. Even among those to whom it would be invidious to deny the name of historian there is a perceptible deterioration: slovenly illiteracies, faulty orthography, which a generation ago would have been removed or queried by the printer, if they had occurred at all, are now tolerated by copy-editors who have been battered into acquiescence, or educated in a contempt for standards; and this even in the works of quite eminent historians. We are all, of course, supposed to be magnificently equipped with the techniques of historical research. But technique is not enough: if it were, many a dissertation would supplant Macaulay on the dressing-table. No one teaches us the craft without which we are not fitted to be good historians: the craft of letters. Many of us do not care to apply ourselves to it, and few expect instruction in that matter from their supervisors; with the consequence that (in the unkind words of Mr Philip Guedalla) 'Historians' English is not a style: it is an industrial disease'. Yet in history, as in so much else, 'le style c'est l'homme'; just as Lord Dunsany once warned us never to trust a man with elastic-sided boots, so I take leave to look askance at the historian with elastic syntax and grammar. If a man will not take pains with his sentences, he cannot expect me to put unlimited faith in the accuracy of his footnotes.

That there should be wide discrepancies between historians in his matter of style is not surprising. On the one hand such discrepancies reflect the general style of the generation in which they were writing; hence the marked contrast between Clarendon and Burnet. But on the other hand, style is coloured by the personality of the historian, since history is a piece of the recorded past seen through the distorting lens of the writer's mind and character; and the distortion extends to his style. Historians with a marked individuality will have a squint or shift of their own, which will mark their work so plainly and unmistakably that they have no need to sign it – for instance, Carlyle – and when we read the passage

The Turks sawed the Archbishop and the Commandant asunder; and committed other grave violations of international law.

we recognize and salute the judicial prose and well-regulated intellect of the Venerable Archdeacon Coxe. Indeed, history may on occasion be said to approximate to self-revelation, as (to take two recent examples) readers of the works of Dr. E.P. Thompson or Mr A.J.P. Taylor will readily understand. The dust of dead humanity can be revived only after it has been aspersed with the historian's blood; and the resulting product is likely to betray the blood-group of the donor.

History, then, is something essentially personal; impersonal history is almost a contradiction in terms. We have already seen how personal is that recurrent act of selection which lies behind all historical writing. And when the selection has been made, the materials ordered, the major judgments and decisions have imposed themselves (with many of the snags still unappreciated), there comes



the intimately personal moment when we can say, not without a sobering sense of responsibility, "Tomorrow morning, I shall start writing Chapter I. Though research must be slow and methodical, writing ideally must be done at a heat: there must be a sort of *impetus ingenii*; though thereafter, to be sure, we must all go to school to Mr Turveydrop, and 'polish, polish, polish' until the thing is a shining as our feeble elbowgrease can make it. It is true, of course, that the excitement of creation can be blunted by habit and dampened by the passing of the years. The stage will come when the flame sags and the fires go black; and then experience and skill must do their best to simulate lost *elan*. The young man aspires to write like genius; the old is well content if he can write like a gentleman.

We may be prepared to swallow the essentially personal nature of that basic act of selection to which I have already adverted; but are we on that account ready to accept a historian's moral judgements, which are likely to be no less personally influenced? It seems to be that the historian who is faced with moral issues may legitimately make moral judgments, *provided* that he feels that his historical conscience is clear as to the evidence on which he bases them and that the evidence itself is comprehensive enough to support his conclusions; just as the historian who is concerned with political or strategic questions may legitimately pronounce political or strategic verdicts: to say of a politician that he was a villain entails no more difficulty than to say that he was a fool, both being presumed to be grounded on an honest assessment of all the available evidence. We should be grateful for the moral judgment of historians: they are useful signals which the alert reader will take note of, and feel that he has been fairly warned. The truth, we are told, is rarely pure and never simple. But a man must judge by the standards which he acknowledges, after all; and if he pretends to a dispassionateness which he does not feel, the hypocrisy of his behaviour is not removed by calling it historical objectivity.

Thus the common quality which links all practitioners of history, however widely and acrimoniously they may differ, is a kind of emotion: an emotion which in the best cases issues in creation, and which in all cases produces the urge to create. And what they create, or wish to create, is history. It must, of course, be an orderly process. It is governed by those rules of good sense and good taste which apply to all creative activity, and in addition by many rules of its own. There can be no free improvisation. We cannot make history out of our own heads. The evidence, as far as we can collect it, sets limits to our activity, and we can no more make history outside those limits than we can write a fugue without a subject, or variations without a theme. Generations of painful scholars have laid down those rules, and the historian who ignores them is soon revealed as a bungle: we must go to Bernheim and his successors for our methodology, as musicians once learnt strict counterpoint from Fux.

These limitations in part explain why it is that historical writing can reveal perceptible trends, why 'the consensus of historical opinion' upon any topic may change from one age to another, why history itself seems to alter. As research

brings to light what had been lost, forgotten, or ignored, as the approximation to certainty about a particular event in the past grows closer and closer, it becomes in the end impossible for any historian, no matter how idiosyncratic, to commit himself to statement which an overwhelming majority of his colleagues now believe to be untrue. To take one example: a century ago it was generally supposed that Diaz reached the Cape in the year 1487: today we know as certainly as we know anything, that he reached it in 1488. Or again, at a higher level of sophistication, Professor Ian Christie has demonstrated that the influence of the Crown and the Treasury, measured in pensions, secret service expenditure, control of seats, contract, loans, and so forth, experienced a decline in the year between 1760 and 1780. No responsible historian hereafter will maintain the contrary. But it had for decades been a firm tenet of British historiography that exactly the opposite was true; and historians' judgment of George III and Lord North was coloured by that supposition. The events of the first twenty years of George III will certainly continue to engage the attention of historians, and the history of these years is being created all the time by this writer or that. But this particular argument is no longer available to them. Thus 'history' itself may change under the impact of research. And it may appear to change also under other influences. The historian, like everybody else, is affected by the fashions and follies of mankind, though their appeal may turn out to be transient. His interests are liable to shift in conformity to the shifting interests of those around him; they can be diverted by the exhilaration of national success (as in nineteenth-century Germany), or perhaps be shaken into new lines by the impact of a natural calamity (such as the Lisbon earthquake). But these shifts by their very nature lack the permanent validity of the changes imposed by the results of research: they may result in a intense concentration of light and though upon this or that feature of the past; they may engender new and fruitful lines of enquire which will themselves in time impose permanent changes upon historians; but in a generation or two the historical dark-lantern will have executed as many unexpected evolutions as Mr Pickwick's did, and by then will be playing upon quite other problems. The historian who makes Diaz reach the Cape in 1488 is *right*, while he who gives the date 1487 is *wrong*; but we can make no such distinction between the modern historian who devotes himself to the *sansculottes*, and his predecessors who wrote about Vergennes or Mirabeau. Historical fashions come and go – perhaps (who knows?) upon some cyclical pattern – and all of them leave buoys and markers in the channel they explored, to the general benefit of navigation; but the historian is still free to sail his boat in what channel he pleases, to move with or against the tide, and even if he chooses to make fast in some congenial backwater. The historian's knowledge of the past ought really to safeguard him from the error of supposing that history which is unfashionable, history which is alien to current ways of looking at the subject, is necessarily inferior or bad. We are too prone to reproach historians who choose to answer questions which we are not interested in raising, or are silent upon matters which occupy the forefront of our minds; too

ready to dismiss traditional methods and conventional enquires; too contemptuous of those who contrive to write without availing themselves of the prevailing jargon. The immense enrichment of the subject as a result of following the new paths which have been struck out by the pioneers of the last few decades may well have been accompanied by some losses in other directions.

I add a final reflection. The historian, like everybody else, is most likely to succeed if he does the kind of work which he is fitted by character and temperament to do. The historical product is related to the nature and quality of the input: a smallminded man will hardly write well of Fox or Cromwell. Self-knowledge, therefor, as well as self-distrust and self-control, is a precondition for successful historical writing; and we all stand in need of a candid friend, ready if the case seems to require it to distract our attention from the summits and direct it to the foothills. But however modest our historical objective, we should resolve not to embark upon anything until we feel within us a smouldering incandescence which it is not unreasonable to hope may at last kindle to a flame; nor should we commit a line to print, unless we are sure that we can write it no better. To what profit do we labour in the archives, if we come out into sunlight with our mouths all stopped with dust?