

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Dostoyevsky Smith Willis
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Henry Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Vinci
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Gogol Busch
Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato Scott
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Plato Scott
Andersen Andersen Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte
London Descartes Wells Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Bunner Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Richter Chekhov da Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
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Historical Essays

James Ford Rhodes

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: James Ford Rhodes

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8472-2393-1

www.tredition.com

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HISTORICAL ESSAYS

BY
JAMES FORD RHODES, LL.D., D.Litt.

AUTHOR OF THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES FROM
THE COMPROMISE OF 1850 TO THE FINAL RESTORATION OF
HOME RULE AT THE SOUTH IN 1877

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1909

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Set up and electrotyped. Published December, 1909.

Norwood Press
J. S. Cushing Co. — Berwick & Smith Co.
Norwood, Mass., U.S.A.

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PREFACE

In offering to the public this volume of Essays, all but two of which have been read at various places on different occasions, I am aware that there is some repetition in ideas and illustrations, but, as the dates of their delivery and previous publication are indicated, I am letting them stand substantially as they were written and delivered.

I am indebted to my son, Daniel P. Rhodes, for a literary revision of these Essays; and I have to thank the editors of the *Atlantic Monthly*, of *Scribner's Magazine*, and of the *Century Magazine* for leave to reprint the articles which have already appeared in their periodicals.

Boston, November, 1909.

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HISTORY

President's Inaugural Address, American Historical Association, Boston, December 27, 1899; printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* of February, 1900.

[p 1]

HISTORICAL ESSAYS

HISTORY¹

My theme is history. It is an old subject, which has been discoursed about since Herodotus, and I should be vain indeed if I flattered myself that I could say aught new concerning the methods of writing it, when this has for so long a period engaged the minds of so many gifted men. Yet to a sympathetic audience, to people who love history, there is always the chance that a fresh treatment may present the commonplaces in some different combination, and augment for the moment an interest which is perennial.

Holding a brief for history as do I your representative, let me at once concede that it is not the highest form of intellectual endeavor; let us at once agree that it were better that all the histories ever written were burned than for the world to lose Homer and Shakespeare. Yet as it is generally true that an advocate rarely admits anything without qualification, I should not be loyal to my client did I not urge that Shakespeare was historian as well as poet. We all prefer his Antony and Cleopatra and Julius Cæsar to the Lives in North's Plutarch which furnished him his materials. The history is in substance as true as Plutarch, the dramatic force greater; the language is better than that of Sir Thomas North, who himself did a remarkable piece of work when he gave his country a [p 2] classic by Englishing a French version of the stories of the Greek. It is true as Macaulay wrote, the historical plays of Shakespeare have superseded history. When we think of Henry V, it is of Prince Hal, the boon companion of Falstaff, who spent his youth in brawl and riot, and then became a sober and duty-loving king; and our idea of Richard III. is a deceitful, dissembling, cruel wretch who knew no touch of pity, a bloody tyrant who knew no law of God or man.

The Achilles of Homer was a very living personage to Alexander. How happy he was, said the great general, when he visited Troy, "in having while he lived so faithful a friend, and when he was dead so famous a poet to proclaim his actions"! In our century, as

more in consonance with society under the régime of contract, when force has largely given, pay to craft, we feel in greater sympathy with Ulysses; "The one person I would like to have met and talked with," Froude used to say, "was Ulysses. How interesting it would be to have his opinion on universal suffrage, and on a House of Parliament where Thersites is listened to as patiently as the king of men!"

We may also concede that, in the realm of intellectual endeavor, the natural and physical sciences should have the precedence of history. The present is more important than the past, and those sciences which contribute to our comfort, place within the reach of the laborer and mechanic as common necessities what would have been the highest luxury to the Roman emperor or to the king of the Middle Ages, contribute to health and the preservation of life, and by the development of railroads make possible such a gathering as this,—these sciences, we cheerfully admit, outrank our modest enterprise, which, in the words of Herodotus, is "to preserve from decay the remembrance [p 3] of what men have done." It may be true, as a geologist once said, in extolling his study at the expense of the humanities, "Rocks do not lie, although men do;" yet, on the other hand, the historic sense, which during our century has diffused itself widely, has invaded the domain of physical science. If you are unfortunate enough to be ill, and consult a doctor, he expatiates on the history of your disease. It was once my duty to attend the Commencement exercises of a technical school, when one of the graduates had a thesis on bridges. As he began by telling how they were built in Julius Cæsar's time, and tracing at some length the development of the art during the period of the material prosperity of the Roman Empire, he had little time and space left to consider their construction at the present day. One of the most brilliant surgeons I ever knew, the originator of a number of important surgical methods, who, being physician as well, was remarkable in his expedients for saving life when called to counsel in grave and apparently hopeless cases, desired to write a book embodying his discoveries and devices, but said that the feeling was strong within him that he must begin his work with an account of medicine in Egypt, and trace its development down to our own time. As he was a busy man in his profession, he lacked the leisure to make the preliminary

historical study, and his book was never written. Men of affairs, who, taking "the present time by the top," are looked upon as devoted to the physical and mechanical sciences, continually pay tribute to our art. President Garfield, on his deathbed, asked one of his most trusted Cabinet advisers, in words that become pathetic as one thinks of the opportunities destroyed by the assassin's bullet, "Shall I live in history?" A clever politician, who knew more of ward meetings, caucuses, and the machinery [p 4] of conventions than he did of history books, and who was earnest for the renomination of President Arthur in 1884, said to me, in the way of clinching his argument, "That administration will live in history." So it was, according to Amyot, in the olden time. "Whensoever," he wrote, "the right sage and virtuous Emperor of Rome, Alexander Severus, was to consult of any matter of great importance, whether it concerned war or government, he always called such to counsel as were reported to be well seen in histories." "What," demanded Cicero of Atticus, "will history say of me six hundred years hence?"

Proper concessions being made to poetry and the physical sciences, our place in the field remains secure. Moreover, we live in a fortunate age; for was there ever so propitious a time for writing history as in the last forty years? There has been a general acquisition of the historic sense. The methods of teaching history have so improved that they may be called scientific. Even as the chemist and physicist, we talk of practice in the laboratory. Most biologists will accept Haeckel's designation of "the last forty years as the age of Darwin," for the theory of evolution is firmly established. The publication of the *Origin of Species*, in 1859, converted it from a poet's dream and philosopher's speculation to a well-demonstrated scientific theory. Evolution, heredity, environment, have become household words, and their application to history has influenced every one who has had to trace the development of a people, the growth of an institution, or the establishment of a cause. Other scientific theories and methods have affected physical science as potently, but none has entered so vitally into the study of man. What hitherto the eye of genius alone could perceive may become the common property of every one who cares to read a dozen books. But with all of our advantages, [p 5] do we write better history than was written before the year 1859, which we may call the line of demarcation

between the old and the new? If the English, German, and American historical scholars should vote as to who were the two best historians, I have little doubt that Thucydides and Tacitus would have a pretty large majority. If they were asked to name a third choice, it would undoubtedly lie between Herodotus and Gibbon. At the meeting of this association in Cleveland, when methods of historical teaching were under discussion, Herodotus and Thucydides, but no others, were mentioned as proper object lessons. What are the merits of Herodotus? Accuracy in details, as we understand it, was certainly not one of them. Neither does he sift critically his facts, but intimates that he will not make a positive decision in the case of conflicting testimony. "For myself," he wrote, "my duty is to report all that is said, but I am not obliged to believe it all alike,—a remark which may be understood to apply to my whole history." He had none of the wholesome skepticism which we deem necessary in the weighing of historical evidence; on the contrary, he is frequently accused of credulity. Nevertheless, Percy Gardner calls his narrative nobler than that of Thucydides, and Mahaffy terms it an "incomparable history." "The truth is," wrote Macaulay in his diary, when he was forty-nine years old, "I admire no historians much except Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus." Sir M. E. Grant Duff devoted his presidential address of 1895, before the Royal Historical Society, wholly to Herodotus, ending with the conclusion, "The fame of Herodotus, which has a little waned, will surely wax again." Whereupon the London Times devoted a leader to the subject. "We are concerned," it said, "to hear, on authority so eminent, that one of the most delightful writers of antiquity has a little waned of late in favor with the [p 6] world. If this indeed be the case, so much the worse for the world.... When Homer and Dante and Shakespeare are neglected, then will Herodotus cease to be read."

There we have the secret of his hold upon the minds of men. He knows how to tell a story, said Professor Hart, in the discussion previously referred to, in Cleveland. He has "an epic unity of plan," writes Professor Jebb. Herodotus has furnished delight to all generations, while Polybius, more accurate and painstaking, a learned historian and a practical statesman, gathers dust on the shelf or is read as a penance. Nevertheless, it may be demonstrated from the historical literature of England of our century that literary style and

great power of narration alone will not give a man a niche in the temple of history. Herodotus showed diligence and honesty, without which his other qualities would have failed to secure him the place he holds in the estimation of historical scholars.

From Herodotus we naturally turn to Thucydides, who in the beginning charms historical students by his impression of the seriousness and dignity of his business. History, he writes, will be "found profitable by those who desire an exact knowledge of the past as a key to the future, which in all human probability will repeat or resemble the past. My history is an everlasting possession, not a prize composition which is heard and forgotten." Diligence, accuracy, love of truth, and impartiality are merits commonly ascribed to Thucydides, and the internal evidence of the history bears out fully the general opinion. But, in my judgment, there is a tendency to rate, in the comparative estimates, the Athenian too high, for the possession of these qualities; for certainly some modern writers have possessed all of these merits in an eminent degree. When Jowett wrote in the preface to his translation, Thucydides "stands absolutely alone [p 7] among the historians, not only of Hellas, but of the world, in his impartiality and love of truth," he was unaware that a son of his own university was writing the history of a momentous period of his own country, in a manner to impugn the correctness of that statement. When the Jowett Thucydides appeared, Samuel R. Gardiner had published eight volumes of his history, though he had not reached the great Civil War, and his reputation, which has since grown with a cumulative force, was not fully established; but I have now no hesitation in saying that the internal evidence demonstrates that in impartiality and love of truth Gardiner is the peer of Thucydides. From the point of view of external evidence, the case is even stronger for Gardiner; he submits to a harder test. That he has been able to treat so stormy, so controverted, and so well known a period as the seventeenth century in England, with hardly a question of his impartiality, is a wonderful tribute. In fact, in an excellent review of his work I have seen him criticised for being too impartial. On the other hand, Grote thinks that he has found Thucydides in error,—in the long dialogue between the Athenian representatives and the Melians. "This dialogue," Grote writes, "can hardly represent what actually passed, except as

to a few general points which the historian has followed out into deductions and illustrations, thus dramatizing the given situation in a powerful and characteristic manner." Those very words might characterize Shakespeare's account of the assassination of Julius Cæsar, and his reproduction of the speeches of Brutus and Mark Antony. Compare the relation in Plutarch with the third act of the tragedy, and see how, in his amplification of the story, Shakespeare has remained true to the essential facts of the time. Plutarch gives no account of the speeches of Brutus and Mark Antony, confining himself, to an allusion to the one, [p 8] and a reference to the other; but Appian of Alexandria, in his history, has reported them. The speeches in Appian lack the force which they have in Shakespeare, nor do they seemingly fit into the situation as well. I have adverted to this criticism of Grote, not that I love Thucydides less, but that I love Shakespeare more. For my part, the historian's candid acknowledgment in the beginning has convinced me of the essential—not the literal—truth of his accounts of speeches and dialogues. "As to the speeches," wrote the Athenian, "which were made either before or during the war, it was hard for me, and for others who reported them to me, to recollect the exact words. I have therefore put into the mouth of each speaker the sentiments proper to the occasion, expressed as I thought he would be likely to express them; while at the same time I endeavored, as nearly as I could, to give the general purport of what was actually said." That is the very essence of candor. But be the historian as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, he shall not escape calumny. Mahaffy declares that, "although all modern historians quote Thucydides with more confidence than they would quote the Gospels," the Athenian has exaggerated; he is one-sided, partial, misleading, dry, and surly. Other critics agree with Mahaffy that he has been unjust to Cleon, and has screened Nicias from blame that was his due for defective generalship.

We approach Tacitus with respect. We rise from reading his *Annals*, his *History*, and his *Germany* with reverence. We know that we have been in the society of a gentleman who had a high standard of morality and honor. We feel that our guide was a serious student, a solid thinker, and a man of the world; that he expressed his opinions and delivered his judgments with a remarkable freedom from prejudice. He draws us to him with sympathy. He [p 9]

sounds the same mournful note which we detect in Thucydides. Tacitus deplores the folly and dissoluteness of the rulers of his nation; he bewails the misfortunes of his country. The merits we ascribe to Thucydides, diligence, accuracy, love of truth, impartiality, are his. The desire to quote from Tacitus is irresistible. "The more I meditate," he writes, "on the events of ancient and modern times, the more I am struck with the capricious uncertainty which mocks the calculations of men in all their transactions." Again: "Possibly there is in all things a kind of cycle, and there may be moral revolutions just as there are changes of seasons." "Commonplaces!" sneer the scientific historians. True enough, but they might not have been commonplaces if Tacitus had not uttered them, and his works had not been read and re-read until they have become a common possession of historical students. From a thinker who deemed the time "out of joint," as Tacitus obviously did, and who, had he not possessed great strength of mind and character, might have lapsed into a gloomy pessimism, what noble words are these: "This I regard as history's highest function: to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds." The modesty of the Roman is fascinating. "Much of what I have related," he says, "and shall have to relate, may perhaps, I am aware, seem petty trifles to record.... My labors are circumscribed and unproductive of renown to the author." How agreeable to place in contrast with this the prophecy of his friend, the younger Pliny, in a letter to the historian: "I augur—nor does my augury deceive me—that your histories will be immortal: hence all the more do I desire to find a place in them."

To my mind, one of the most charming things in historical literature is the praise which one great historian bestows [p 10] upon another. Gibbon speaks of "the discerning eye" and "masterly pencil of Tacitus,—the first of historians who applied the science of philosophy to the study of facts," "whose writings will instruct the last generations of mankind." He has produced an immortal work, "every sentence of which is pregnant with the deepest observations and most lively images." I mention Gibbon, for it is more than a strong probability that in diligence, accuracy, and love of truth he is the equal of Tacitus. A common edition of the *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is that with notes by Dean Milman,

Guizot, and Dr. Smith. Niebuhr, Villemain, and Sir James Mackintosh are each drawn upon for criticism. Did ever such a fierce light beat upon a history? With what keen relish do the annotators pounce upon mistakes or inaccuracies, and in that portion of the work which ends with the fall of the Western Empire how few do they find! Would Tacitus stand the supreme test better? There is, so far as I know, only one case in which we may compare his Annals with an original record. On bronze tablets found at Lyons in the sixteenth century is engraved the same speech made by the Emperor Claudius to the Senate that Tacitus reports. "Tacitus and the tablets," writes Professor Jebb, "disagree hopelessly in language and in nearly all the detail, but agree in the general line of argument." Gibbon's work has richly deserved its life of more than one hundred years, a period which I believe no other modern history has endured. Niebuhr, in a course of lectures at Bonn, in 1829, said that Gibbon's "work will never be excelled." At the Gibbon Centenary Commemoration in London, in 1894, many distinguished men, among whom the Church had a distinct representation, gathered together to pay honor to him who, in the words of Frederic Harrison, had written "the most perfect book that [p 11] English prose (outside its fiction) possesses." Mommsen, prevented by age and work from being present, sent his tribute. No one, he said, would in the future be able to read the history of the Roman Empire unless he read Edward Gibbon. The Times, in a leader devoted to the subject, apparently expressed the general voice: "'Back to Gibbon' is already, both here and among the scholars of Germany and France, the watchword of the younger historians."

I have now set forth certain general propositions which, with time for adducing the evidence in detail, might, I think, be established: that, in the consensus of learned people, Thucydides and Tacitus stand at the head of historians; and that it is not alone their accuracy, love of truth, and impartiality which entitle them to this preëminence since Gibbon and Gardiner among the moderns possess equally the same qualities. What is it, then, that makes these men supreme? In venturing a solution of this question, I confine myself necessarily to the English translations of the Greek and Latin authors. We have thus a common denominator of language, and need not take into account the unrivaled precision and terseness of the

Greek and the force and clearness of the Latin. It seems to me that one special merit of Thucydides and Tacitus is their compressed narrative,—that they have related so many events and put so much meaning in so few words. Our manner of writing history is really curious. The histories which cover long periods of time are brief; those which have to do with but a few years are long. The works of Thucydides and Tacitus are not like our compendiums of history, which merely touch on great affairs, since want of space precludes any elaboration. Tacitus treats of a comparatively short epoch, Thucydides of a much shorter one: both histories are brief. Thucydides and Macaulay are examples of extremes. The Athenian [p 12] tells the story of twenty-four years in one volume; the Englishman takes nearly five volumes of equal size for his account of seventeen years. But it is safe to say that Thucydides tells us as much that is worth knowing as Macaulay. One is concise, the other is not. It is impossible to paraphrase the fine parts of Thucydides, but Macaulay lends himself readily to such an exercise. The thought of the Athenian is so close that he has got rid of all redundancies of expression: hence the effort to reproduce his ideas in other words fails. The account of the plague in Athens has been studied and imitated, and every imitation falls short of the original not only in vividness but in brevity. It is the triumph of art that in this and in other splendid portions we wish more had been told. As the French say, “the secret of wearying is to say all,” and this the Athenian thoroughly understood. Between our compendiums, which tell too little, and our long general histories, which tell too much, are Thucydides and Tacitus.

Again, it is a common opinion that our condensed histories lack life and movement. This is due in part to their being written generally from a study of second-hand — not original — materials. Those of the Athenian and the Roman are mainly the original.

I do not think, however, that we may infer that we have a much greater mass of materials, and thereby excuse our modern prolixity. In written documents, of course, we exceed the ancients, for we have been flooded with these by the art of printing. Yet any one who has investigated any period knows how the same facts are told over and over again, in different ways, by various writers; and if one can get beyond the mass of verbiage and down to the really significant original material, what a simplification of ideas there is,

what a lightening of the load! I own that this [p 13] process of reduction is painful, and thereby our work is made more difficult than that of the ancients. A historian will adapt himself naturally to the age in which he lives, and Thucydides made use of the matter that was at his hand. "Of the events of the war," he wrote, "I have not ventured to speak from any chance information, nor according to any notion of my own; I have described nothing but what I either saw myself, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular inquiry. The task was a laborious one, because eye-witnesses of the same occurrences gave different accounts of them, as they remembered or were interested in the actions of one side or the other." His materials, then, were what he saw and heard. His books and his manuscripts were living men. Our distinguished military historian, John C. Ropes, whose untimely death we deplore, might have written his history from the same sort of materials; for he was contemporary with our Civil War, and followed the daily events with intense interest. A brother of his was killed at Gettysburg, and he had many friends in the army. He paid at least one memorable visit to Meade's headquarters in the field, and at the end of the war had a mass of memories and impressions of the great conflict. He never ceased his inquiries; he never lost a chance to get a particular account from those who took part in battles or campaigns; and before he began his *Story of the Civil War*, he too could have said, "I made the most careful and particular inquiry" of generals and officers on both sides, and of men in civil office privy to the great transactions. His knowledge drawn from living lips was marvelous, and his conversation, when he poured this knowledge forth, often took the form of a flowing narrative in an animated style. While there are not, so far as I remember, any direct references in his two volumes to these memories, [p 14] or to memoranda of conversations which he had with living actors after the close of the war drama, and while his main authority is the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*,—which, no one appreciated better than he, were unique historical materials,—nevertheless this personal knowledge trained his judgment and gave color to his narrative.

It is pretty clear that Thucydides spent a large part of a life of about threescore years and ten in gathering materials and writing

his history. The mass of facts which he set down or stored away in his memory must have been enormous. He was a man of business, and had a home in Thrace as well as in Athens, traveling probably at fairly frequent intervals between the two places; but the main portion of the first forty years of his life was undoubtedly spent in Athens, where, during those glorious years of peace and the process of beautifying the city, he received the best education a man could get. To walk about the city and view the buildings and statues was both directly and insensibly a refining influence. As Thucydides himself, in the funeral oration of Pericles, said of the works which the Athenian saw around him, "the daily delight of them banishes gloom." There was the opportunity to talk with as good conversers as the world has ever known; and he undoubtedly saw much of the men who were making history. There was the great theater and the sublime poetry. In a word, the life of Thucydides was adapted to the gathering of a mass of historical materials of the best sort; and his daily walk, his reading, his intense thought, gave him an intellectual grasp of the facts he has so ably handled. Of course he was a genius, and he wrote in an effective literary style; but seemingly his natural parts and acquired talents are directed to this: a digestion of his materials, and a [p 15] compression of his narrative without taking the vigor out of his story in a manner I believe to be without parallel. He devoted a life to writing a volume. His years after the peace was broken, his career as a general, his banishment and enforced residence in Thrace, his visit to the countries of the Peloponnesian allies with whom Athens was at war,—all these gave him a signal opportunity to gather materials, and to assimilate them in the gathering. We may fancy him looking at an alleged fact on all sides, and turning it over and over in his mind; we know that he must have meditated long on ideas, opinions, and events; and the result is a brief, pithy narrative. Tradition hath it that Demosthenes copied out this history eight times, or even learned it by heart. Chatham, urging the removal of the forces from Boston, had reason to refer to the history of Greece, and, that he might impress it upon the lords that he knew whereof he spoke, declared, "I have read Thucydides."

Of Tacitus likewise is conciseness a well-known merit. Living in an age of books and libraries, he drew more from the written word

than did Thucydides; and his method of working, therefore, resembled more our own. These are common expressions of his: "It is related by most of the writers of those times;" I adopt the account "in which the authors are agreed;" this account "agrees with those of the other writers." Relating a case of recklessness of vice in Messalina, he acknowledges that it will appear fabulous, and asserts his truthfulness thus: "But I would not dress up my narrative with fictions, to give it an air of marvel, rather than relate what has been stated to me or written by my seniors." He also speaks of the authority of tradition, and tells what he remembers "to have heard from aged men." He will not paraphrase the eloquence of Seneca after he had his veins opened, because the very words of the philosopher had been [p 16] published; but when, a little later, Flavius the tribune came to die, the historian gives this report of his defiance of Nero. "I hated you," the tribune said to the emperor; "nor had you a soldier more true to you while you deserved to be loved. I began to hate you from the time you showed yourself the impious murderer of your mother and your wife, a charioteer, a stage-player, an incendiary." "I have given the very words," Tacitus adds, "because they were not, like those of Seneca, published, though the rough and vigorous sentiments of a soldier ought to be no less known." Everywhere we see in Tacitus, as in Thucydides, a dislike of superfluous detail, a closeness of thought, a compression of language. He was likewise a man of affairs, but his life work was his historical writings, which, had we all of them, would fill probably four moderate-sized octavo volumes.

To sum up, then: Thucydides and Tacitus are superior to the historians who have written in our century, because, by long reflection and studious method, they have better digested their materials and compressed their narrative. Unity in narration has been adhered to more rigidly. They stick closer to their subject. They are not allured into the fascinating bypaths of narration, which are so tempting to men who have accumulated a mass of facts, incidents, and opinions. One reason why Macaulay is so prolix is because he could not resist the temptation to treat events which had a picturesque side and which were suited to his literary style; so that, as John Morley says, "in many portions of his too elaborated history of William III. he describes a large number of events about which, I think, no sensible