

ter of history. The traditional role of history was inspirational and cautionary. Men studied history to be inspired by examples of noble actions, to enrich their limited experience by that of others, to draw sustenance for their lives from the lives of others. There was a negative side to this study of history, too: one could find there indications of the limits of what should be attempted, be reminded of the consequences of precipitate action, discover anew what was beyond his power to alter, be chastened by the records of the failure of others. In short, history has usually played a conservative role in society. It was a major obstacle to reform, as men customarily thought of it and utilized it.

Some reformists, who were also historians, realized this. James Harvey Robinson, writing in the early twentieth century, declared: "History has been regularly invoked, to substantiate the claims of the conservative, but has hitherto usually been neglected by the radical. . . . It is his weapon by right, and he should wrest it from the hand of the conservative."¹ In short, Robinson, as a would-be reformer, perceived that history must be reconstructed in order to make it an instrument of

reform. The older history must be deactivated; it must be replaced by a "new history."

Traditional Use of History

Before describing how this deactivation and "instrumentation" of history took place, however, some examples of the traditional use of history are in order. In an earlier America, history was conceived of as a depository of experience which might be examined for guidance in the affairs of men. Nowhere is this usage better exemplified than in the debates over the adoption of the Constitution. In some of the state conventions there were veritable outpourings of historical erudition to buttress one position or another.

Americans were fearful at this time of entrusting overmuch power to governments. They found numerous instances in history of the working out of the dangers that they feared. For example, those attending the Massachusetts convention were treated to the following discourse on the matter:

Dr. Willard entered largely into the field of ancient history, and deduced therefrom arguments to prove that where power has been trusted to men, whether in great or small bodies, they had always abused it, and that thus republics had soon degenerated into aristocracies. He instanced Sparta, Athens, and Rome. The Amphictyonic

league, he said, resembled the Confederation of the United States; while thus united, they defeated Xerxes, but were subdued by the gold of Philip. . . .²

A Mr. Nason in the same convention points out the dangers of a standing army:

A standing army! Was it not with this that Caesar passed the *Rubicon*, and laid prostrate the liberties of his country? By this have seven-eighths of the once free nations of the globe been brought into bondage! Time would fail me, were I to attempt to recapitulate the havoc made in the world by standing armies.³

A Major Kingsley cites even more specific historical references, as he argues for better control by the people over their government:

Let us look into ancient history. The Romans, after a war, thought themselves safe in a government of ten men, called the *decemviri*; these ten men were invested with all power, and were chosen for three years. By their arts and designs, they secured their second election; but, finding, from the manner in which they had exercised their power, they were not able to secure their third election, they declared themselves masters of Rome, impoverished the city, and deprived the people of their rights.⁴

² Elliot's *Debates*, Bk. I, vol. 2, p. 68.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

The Virginia convention was the scene of even more vigorous debate founded in historical allusions than was that of Massachusetts. James Madison was one of the most learned of these debaters. In the following citations, he is arguing from history that loose confederations are not adequate to the exigencies of government:

The Amphictyonic league resembled our Confederation in its nominal powers. . . . But, though its powers were more considerable in many respects than those of our present system, yet it had the same radical defect. . . .

The Achaean league, though better constructed than the Amphictyonic, . . . was continually agitated with domestic dissensions, and driven to the necessity of calling in foreign aid; this, also, eventuated in the demolition of their confederacy. . . .

The Germanic system is neither adequate to the external defence nor internal felicity of the people. . . .⁵

By historical references, Edmund Randolph argues for the desirability of union:

If you wish to know the extent of such a scene, look at the history of England and Scotland before the union; you will see their borderers continually committing depredations and cruelties of the most calamitous and deplorable nature, on one another. . . .⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 129-31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹ James H. Robinson, *The New History* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), p. 252.