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Letters On The Study And Use Of History

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Letter I. Of the study of history.

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OF THE
STUDY of HISTORY.

LETTER I.

Chantelou in Touraine, Nov. 6, 1735.

MY LORD,

I HAVE considered formerly, with a good deal of attention, the subject on which you command me to communicate my thoughts to you: and I practised in those days, as much as business and pleasure allowed me time to do, the rules that seemed to me necessary to be observed in the study of history. They were very different from those which writers on the same subject have recommended, and which are commonly practised.

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ticed. But I confess to your lordship that this neither gave me then, nor has given me since, any distrust of them. I do not affect singularity. On the contrary I think that a due deference is to be paid to received opinions, and that a due compliance with received customs is to be held; tho both the one and the other should be, what they often are, absurd or ridiculous. But this servitude is outward only, and abridges in no sort the liberty of private judgment. The obligations of submitting to it likewise, even outwardly, extend no further, than to those opinions and customs which cannot be opposed; or from which we cannot deviate without doing hurt, or giving offence, to society. In all these cases, our speculations ought to be free: in all other cases, our practice may be so. Without any regard therefore to the opinion and practice even of the learned world, I am very willing to tell you mine. But as it is hard to recover a thread of thought long ago laid aside,
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and impossible to prove some things and explain others, without the assistance of many books which I have not here; your lordship must be content with such an imperfect sketch, as I am able to send you at present in this letter.

THE motives that carry men to the study of history are different. Some intend, if such as they may be said to study, nothing more than amusement, and read the life of ARISTIDES or PHOCION, of EPAMINONDAS or SCIPIO, ALEXANDER or CAESAR, just as they play a game at cards, or as they would read the story of the seven champions.

Others there are, whose motive to this study is nothing better, and who have the further disadvantage of becoming a nuisance very often to society, in proportion to the progress they make. The former do not improve their reading to any good purpose: the latter pervert it to a very bad one, and grow in imper-

tinence as they encrease in learning. I think I have known most of the first kind in England, and most of the last in France. The persons I mean are those who read to talk, to shine in conversation, and to impose in company: who, having few ideas to vend of their own growth, store their minds with crude un-ruminated facts and sentences; and hope to supply, by bare memory, the want of imagination and judgment.

BUT these are in the two lowest forms. The next I shall mention are in one a little higher; in the form of those who grow neither wiser nor better by study themselves, but who enable others to study with greater ease, and to purposes more useful: who make fair copies of foul manuscripts, give the signification of hard words, and take a great deal of other grammatical pains. The obligation to these men would be great indeed, if they were in general able to do any thing better, and
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submitted to this drudgery for the sake of the public; as some of them, it must be owned with gratitude, have done, but not later, I think, than about the time of the resurrection of letters. When works of importance are pressing, generals themselves may take up the pick-axe and the spade; but in the ordinary course of things, when that pressing necessity is over, such tools are left in the hands destined to use them, the hands of common soldiers and peasants. I approve therefore very much the devotion of a studious man at Christ-Church, who was over-heard in his oratory entering into a detail with God, as devout persons are apt to do, and, amongst other particular thanksgivings, acknowledging the divine goodness in furnishing the world with makers of Dictionaries! These men court fame, as well as their betters, by such means as God has given them to acquire it: and LITTLETON exerted all the genius he had, when he made a dictionary, tho STEPHENS did not. They deserve

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encouragement however, whilst they continue to compile, and neither affect wit, nor presume to reason.

THERE is a fourth class, of much less use than these, but of much greater name. Men of the first rank in learning, and to whom the whole tribe of scholars bow with reverence. A man must be as indifferent as I am to common censure or approbation, to avow a thorough contempt for the whole business of these learned lives; for all the researches into antiquity, for all the systems of chronology and history, that we owe to the immense labours of a SCALIGER, a BOCHART, a PETAVIUS, an USHER, and even a MARSHAM. The same materials are common to them all; but these materials are few, and there is a moral impossibility that they should ever have more. They have combined these into every form that can be given to them: they have supposed, they have guessed, they have joined disjointed passages of different

ferent authors, and broken traditions of uncertain originals, of various people, and of centuries remote from one another as well as from ours. In short, that they might leave no liberty untaken, even a wild fantastical similitude of sounds has served to prop up a system. As the materials they have are few, so are the very best and such as pass for authentic extremely precarious; as some of these learned persons themselves confess.

JULIUS AFRICANUS, EUSEBIUS, and GEORGE the monk, opened the principal sources of all this science; but they corrupted the waters. Their point of view was to make profane history and chronology agree with sacred; tho the latter chronology is very far from being established, with the clearness and certainty necessary to make it a rule. For this purpose, the ancient monuments, that these writers conveyed to posterity, were digested by them according to the system they were to

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maintain: and none of these monuments were delivered down, in their original form, and genuine purity. The Dynasties of MANETHO, for instance, are broken to pieces by EUSEBIUS, and such fragments of them as suited his design are stuck into his work. We have, we know, no more of them. The Codex Alexandrinus we owe to GEORGE the monk. We have no other authority for it: and one cannot see without amazement such a man as Sir JOHN MARSHAM undervaluing this authority in one page, and building his system upon it in the next. He seems even by the lightness of his expressions, if I remember well, for it is long since I looked into his canon, not to be much concerned what foundation his system had, so he shewed his skill in forming one, and in reducing the immense antiquity of the Egyptians within the limits of the Hebraic calculation. In short, my lord, all these systems are so many enchanted castles, they appear to be something, they are
nothing

nothing but appearances: like them too, dissolve the charm, and they vanish from the sight. To dissolve the charm, we must begin at the beginning of them: the expression may be odd, but it is significant. We must examine scrupulously and indifferently the foundations on which they lean: and when we find these either faintly probable, or grossly improbable, it would be foolish to expect any thing better in the super-structure. This science is one of those that are a *limine salutandae*. To do thus much may be necessary, that grave authority may not impose on our ignorance: to do more, would be to assist this very authority in imposing false science upon us. I had rather take the DARIUS whom ALEXANDER conquered for the son of HYSTASPES, and make as many anachronisms as a Jewish chronologer, than sacrifice half my life to collect all the learned lumber that fills the head of an antiquary.

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