The Historian and His Tools in the Workshop of Wisdom

When Pope Gregory IX wrote to the masters and scholars of the university at Paris in 1231, he likened the young institution to a jeweler’s shop, calling it an officina sapientiae, a workshop of wisdom.¹ His phrase brings to mind an image of the liberal arts as so many fine tools—honied, oiled, neatly arranged, and ready at hand—and of craftsmen deftly using them while considering man’s nature and his end, the order of the universe, and the mysteries of God and of the divine economy. This is a most satisfying image of an institution rightly called “the glory of the middle ages.”² Even if we were to decide that St. Thomas Aquinas did not so much typify the medieval university as he did exemplify the wisdom toward which its practices were meant to be ordered, even if, that is, we were to prescind from a definitive judgment in favor of the medieval university as the ideal institution of higher learning, it would nevertheless present for us one of the most important markers in our search to understand the task of education. As we look back upon it, one of

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the aspects of the medieval university that strikes us is that it made no place in its ranks for the kind of craftsman we have come to call a historian. To one who practices the craft, this fact should be an occasion of wonder. And so it is with fear and hope intertwined that the historian inquires of the tradition what role he and his tools might fulfill in the workshop of wisdom.

In approaching the question, it would be difficult to find a better guide than the Blessed John Henry Newman. In the first place, Newman has been recommended to us by the late Pope John Paul II as a “sure and eloquent guide in our perplexity” and as one who achieved a “remarkable synthesis of faith and reason.” We can take additional confidence from Newman’s own description of what has been called the “intellectual custom” of the Church. “Catholic inquiry,” he wrote, in the final chapter of his Apologia, “has taken certain definite shapes, and has thrown itself into the form of a science, with a method and a phraseology of its own, under the intellectual handling of great minds, such as St. Athanasius, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas; and I feel no temptation at all to break in pieces the great legacy of thought thus committed to us for these latter days.”

In light of this beautiful statement of his fidelity to the mind of the Church, may we not suppose that Newman himself would wish to stand for us not so much as an authority in his own right, but as a witness to the Catholic intellectual tradition? His great value lies in his faithful and creative transmission of what he himself received, and so he is able not only to shed light on historical study, but also to exemplify the virtues that a Catholic historian ought to cultivate. As we attempt to learn from his example, let us first consider the role that historical study played in his conversion, then attend to his reflection upon the place of historical study within a liberal education, and, finally, sketch an answer to the question of the historian’s role in the workshop of wisdom today.
Deep in History

As even a casual glance at his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* reveals, Newman’s historical erudition was immense. By the time of his conversion in 1845, he had been studying the Church Fathers for the better part of two decades; indeed, he tells the story of his conversion partially in terms of the progress of his historical studies and of the changes they wrought in his mind. The contrast between Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and Augustine’s *Confessions* helps to underscore the importance of history to Newman’s conversion. Augustine had long lived an unchristian life, held the simplicity of the Christian scriptures to be a mark against them, and labored under metaphysical errors inculcated by the Manichean sect. Newman faced entirely different obstacles to right belief. He had been “brought up from a child to take great delight in reading the Bible,” and at the age of fifteen had experienced a conversion to an evangelical form of Christianity that sealed him in moral earnestness and gave to him the great gift of being able in prayer to “rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator.”6 And so, we might say that Augustine discovered Christ and his Church together, whereas Newman, born and baptized an Anglican, knew Christ from birth, but had to travel a long and often painful road to find him in his fullness in the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of all the ages, the Church of history.

When Newman first went up to Oxford in 1817, he was an awkward youth of sixteen. Serious and studious, he disapproved of his fellow students’ carousing. “If any one should ask me what qualifications were necessary for Trinity College,” he wrote to his father, “I should say there was only one, —Drink, drink, drink.”7 After three abstemious years of poring over Euclid and Sophocles, Aristotle and Cicero, he took his bachelor’s degree, and, then, after two more years of study and teaching, was elected a Fellow of Oriel College in 1822. There he came under the influence of two older dons, Ed-
ward Hawkins and Richard Whately. Newman credited these two mentors—the latter of them famously devoted to Aristotle’s logical works—with having taught him “to weigh my words” and “to think and to use my reason.” They also introduced him to the importance of tradition in Christianity by convincing him that the faith of the Church, expressed in her creeds, was prior to the Bible, or, in Newman’s words, “that the sacred text was never intended to teach doctrine, but only to prove it.” Whately also conveyed to Newman a conviction that the church was by its nature independent from the state, a particularly momentous truth to a member of the church established by the laws of King Henry VIII and his daughter Queen Elizabeth.

It was the threat posed to the Church of England by the Reform Bill of 1832 and associated legislation that occasioned the protest against political liberalism that became the Oxford Movement. Newman had by then long been thrown into the company of John Keble, a country priest from a conservative clerical family who was also a Fellow of Oriel, and the author of *The Christian Year*, a popular volume of devotional poetry. Whereas the influence of Hawkins and Whately had threatened to make Newman—as he put it—“prefer intellectual excellence to moral,” in Keble he found “a religious teaching” that was “deep, pure, and beautiful,” and also a fervent belief in “the Sacramental system” and in the communion of saints. When Keble sounded the alarm in 1833 with his sermon “National Apostasy,” the Oxford Movement was born. Its principle was simple: Since non-Anglicans could now vote for and sit in Parliament, the Church of England had to find a more stable foundation for itself than it enjoyed in English law, and that foundation would be its antiquity, its claim to apostolic succession.

From its inception, however, the Oxford Movement was always as much a spiritual revival as it was a movement of ecclesiastical politics. Thanks to Keble’s influence, Newman’s youthful evangelical zeal had now been combined with a love for tradition. As a boy, he had stumbled across a history of the early church and had ever
since nourished an almost romantic attachment to the age of the Fathers. Now as a mature scholar and priest, he sought in the early church a source of inspiration for a renewed Anglicanism: “We were upholding that primitive Christianity which was delivered for all time by the early teachers of the Church, and which was registered and attested in the Anglican formularies and by the Anglican divines.” The signal achievement of the first half of the Oxford Movement was an enthusiastic reclaiming of the spiritual heritage of the early church. Not only were the teachings of the Fathers to be published “in fullest measure,” but, as Newman put it, “the middle age belonged to the Anglican Church” too, and “much more did the middle age of England.” So from Newman’s pen came forth a study of the *Arians of the Fourth Century* and a series of vignettes on saints, such as Anthony of the Desert and Augustine, later published under the title *The Church of the Fathers*, intended to bring “the religious sentiments, views, and customs of the first ages into the modern Church of England.”

Meanwhile, Newman’s colleague E. B. Pusey began an ambitious project to produce a “great flood of divinity” with a *Library of the Fathers*. And, spurred on by all this study, the Oxford Movement led to liturgical changes—such as the revival of public morning prayer—and a deepening of personal piety in its members, including, for some, the regular use of the Roman Breviary. It was a great experiment to see whether a Protestant church could accept the full measure of primitive Christianity, and for a time it seemed as though the experiment might succeed. All of this backwards looking, after all, was in keeping with the sensibility of a generation that had been raised on the novels of Sir Walter Scott, which, in Newman’s words, had answered the need of the day for “something deeper and more attractive” and had “silently indoctrinat[ed]” their readers “with nobler ideas.”

In the end, of course, Newman’s experiment failed. The bishops of the Church of England rejected his interpretation of its authoritative doctrinal document, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. But,
even before he suffered rebukes from authorities he revered, Newman’s own faith in the Church of England had already been called into question by his historical studies. In the summer of 1839, he had plunged into the history of the Monophysite heresy of the fifth century. What he found there was, on the one hand, a heretical movement making a claim of antiquity in favor of its position and, on the other, a pope resolutely claiming to speak on behalf of the whole Church. In the struggles of the fifth century, Newman found “Christendom of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries reflected. I saw my face in that mirror, and I was a Monophysite.” Then, two years later, after the bishops had decided against him, he made a fresh study of the Arian heresy and “saw clearly, that in the history of Arianism, the pure Arians were the Protestants, the semi-Arians were the Anglicans, and that Rome now was what it was then.”

At the beginning of the Oxford Movement, Newman had taken “Antiquity, not the existing Church, as the oracle of truth.” But his initial approach to antiquity had been faulty. He and his friends had aimed to give the Church of England “a second Reformation: —a better reformation,” by returning “not to the sixteenth century, but to the seventeenth.” They would purify Anglicanism not by a more stern application of the doctrines of Luther and Calvin—which they rejected—but by the careful study of the great English theologians of the seventeenth century, men such as the Anglican bishops William Laud, George Bull, and Lancelot Andrewes. It was that very faithfulness to his English Protestant heritage that had been the source of Newman’s confusion: “I had read the Fathers with their eyes; I had sometimes trusted their quotations or their reasonings; and from reliance on them, I had used words or made statements, which by right I ought rigidly to have examined myself.” Newman taxed himself with not having “read the Fathers cautiously enough.” Now that he had lost faith in the Church of England’s claim to be the custodian of the doctrine of the early church, he had to turn to the Fathers again, this time to see whether their teaching had been faithfully preserved by the Church of Rome. At stake was
his very belief, for he had come “to the conclusion that there was no medium, in true philosophy, between Atheism and Catholicity.” The result of that unprejudiced rereading of the Fathers was his celebrated Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, his last work as a Protestant. This time the careful study of antiquity removed all of his doubts: “Before I got to the end, I resolved to be received.” John Henry Newman had discovered—as he put it—that “to be deep in history” was “to cease to be a Protestant.”

**History and Liberal Education**

Seeing the vital contribution to Newman’s conversion made by his historical studies, one might well suppose that he would hold such studies to be the backbone of a liberal education. Plausible support for such a view can be found in his writings, as in this suggestive passage: “I saw that the principle of development not only accounted for certain facts, but was in itself a remarkable philosophical phenomenon, giving a character to the whole course of Christian thought.” And if one were to add to a regard for Newman a sense of the very real cultural poverty of modernity, one might very well conclude that a course of study in Christian culture is not only a necessary part of a Catholic liberal education, but its most important part.

Newman’s own theoretical writings on education, however, do not confirm such a view. Even though he continued to study and write about the past after his conversion, he accorded the art of history a strictly subordinate role—not a ruling one—in the workshop of wisdom.

The abundance of Newman’s creativity, the suppleness of his composition, and the harmoniousness of his language can hide from us the fact that the contours of his mind were essentially Aristotelian. In addition to containing his own affirmation that “in many subject matters, to think correctly, is to think like Aristotle,” the fifth discourse of his Idea of a University testifies to his essentially Aristotelian conception of liberal education. The kind of knowl-
edge that a liberal education provides, he explained there, is not “Knowledge in a vague and ordinary sense,” but the knowledge that is “especially called Philosophy.” He developed the point by meditating on the distinction between what he called “mechanical knowledge,” which is “exhausted upon what is particular and external” and ushers in the “useful or mechanical arts” on the one hand, and “philosophical” knowledge on the other, which “rises towards general ideas.” What is generally called knowledge “in proportion as it tends more and more to be particular, ceases to be Knowledge” in this latter and true sense. By philosophical knowledge, Newman meant “something intellectual, something which grasps what is perceived through the senses; something which takes a view of things; which sees more than the senses convey; which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees; which invests it with an idea. It expresses itself, not in a mere enunciation, but by an enthymeme: it is of the nature of science from the first, and in this consists its dignity.” As a summary of the doctrine of the Posterior Analytics, this is perhaps a bit loose. Yet, it is a faithful sketch of it for a popular audience.

And consider, further, this echo of the doctrine of the sixth book of the Nicomachean Ethics: “Such knowledge is not a mere extrinsic or accidental advantage, which is ours today and another’s tomorrow, which may be got up from a book, and easily forgotten again”; no, real philosophical knowledge “is a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment.” And although, in the second discourse on “Theology a Branch of Knowledge,” Newman did not explicitly refer to Aquinas or Aristotle, he nevertheless affirmed their conviction that the true terminus and resting place of human inquiry is the consideration of the eternal God as first cause and final end of all that exists when he defended what he called “the old Catholic notion” that “Faith was an intellectual act, its object truth, and its result knowledge.”

Holding, then, as he did, with Aristotle, that true knowledge consists in the understanding of principles and causes, and not merely in an extensive familiarity with phenomena or effects, Newman pre-
scribed a form of education that would be conducive to philosophical knowledge, an education he called a “discipline in accuracy of mind.”\textsuperscript{30} In the bracing sixth discourse of \textit{The Idea of a University} on “Knowledge viewed in Relation to Learning,” as also in his separate treatments of “Elementary Studies” and “Discipline of Mind,” Newman made an uncompromising defense of the old classical disciplines of the liberal arts that had shaped him during his undergraduate years and that he himself had tested as a tutor at Oriel in the 1820s.\textsuperscript{31} The first step in such an “intellectual training” was for the student’s mind to be impressed with “the idea of science, method, order, principle, and system; of rule and exception, of richness and harmony.”\textsuperscript{32} Grammar, especially in a classical or foreign language, and mathematics were the best instruments to achieve these ends. “Consider,” he urged, “what an exercise in logical precision it is to understand and enunciate the proof of any of the more difficult propositions of Euclid.”\textsuperscript{33} Such a discipline can be nothing but painstaking: “Our rule is to recommend to youths to do a little well, instead of throwing themselves upon a large field of study.”\textsuperscript{34} And the reason for this slowness was the very character of authentic learning: “If we would improve the intellect, first of all, we must ascend; we cannot gain real knowledge on a level; we must generalize, we must reduce to method, we must have a grasp of principles, and group and shape our acquisitions by means of them.”\textsuperscript{35}

Well did Newman appreciate the fact that this kind of arduous, careful study was no longer considered necessary. He was alarmed by the trend he saw toward “an unmeaning profusion of subjects,” which he labeled “the error of distracting and enfeebling the mind.”\textsuperscript{36} He railed against the common misconception of the day “to fancy that the gratification of a love of reading is real study.”\textsuperscript{37} And, in the context of a public lecture, he observed that “a man may hear a thousand lectures, and read a thousand volumes, and be at the end of the process very much where he was, as regards knowledge.” Knowledge, he explained, to be real, “must not be passively received, but actually and actively entered into, embraced,
mastered.” Authentic, effective teaching, accordingly, is not mere lecturing, but is a “catechetical instruction, which consists in a sort of conversation between your lecturer and you.”

It might well be asked at this point what possible role a historian could play in the kind of education Newman was defending. And we have not yet heard the last of his admonitions. For the “memory can tyrannize,” he warned, in a sort of prophecy of the contemporary culture of curiosity. But is not the historian’s office one of remembering and of telling stories about the past? “I am not disparaging a well-stored mind,” he continued, “nor am I banishing, far from it, the possessors of deep and multifarious learning from my ideal University; they adorn it in the eyes of men; I do but say that they constitute no type of the results at which it aims; that it is no great gain to the intellect to have enlarged the memory at the expense of faculties which are indisputably higher.”

It seems a shame, and even something of an injustice, that a student should be trained up into becoming a historian, as he often is by the modern university. For while the achievements of specialists in this or that area of historical study are at times very impressive, they all too often betray in one way or another the deficiencies of their own education. Newman foresaw that the shrinking of the mind would be the consequence of the modern university’s trend toward specialization: “Although the art itself is advanced by this concentration of mind in its service, the individual who is confined to it goes back. The advantage of the community is nearly in an inverse ratio with his own.”

There is, however, some countervailing evidence in Newman’s own writing and practice by which the defense of a certain kind of historian might be mounted. In his address on “Discipline of Mind,” for instance, he asked his audience to “consider what a lesson in memory and discrimination it is to get up, as it is called, any one chapter of history.” And in the same discourse of the *Idea of a University* in which he warned against the tyranny of overloading the memory, he gave as one of the characteristics of the “perfection of the Intellect” that it was “almost prophetic from its knowledge
of history.” And, again, just a few pages earlier, he credited “the study of history” with a certain ability to enlarge and enlighten the mind, “because, as I conceive, it gives it a power of judging of past events.” The words “discrimination” and “judgment” suggest a habit of mind, an intellectual virtue, and not simply a well-stocked memory. In his tenure as rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, moreover, Newman invested a significant effort in historical writing. Just as his own study of the Church Fathers had removed the obstacles that stood in the way of his recognizing the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, so also did he prepare the Irish Catholic public to make a commitment to the high goal of liberal education by recounting for them its history, which he did in the twenty beautiful chapters of his *Rise and Progress of Universities*. Deep within that narrative is found a passage that in the present context presents a delightful irony, for it shows us Newman the historian discovering in the colleges of the medieval university—and then exercising his judgment by praising—the very system of education that seems to tell against the historian as we commonly meet him, that is, as a lecturer. Here is the conclusion to his account: “It is not easy for a young man to determine for himself whether he has mastered what he has been taught; a careful catechetical training, and a jealous scrutiny into his power of expressing himself and of turning his knowledge to account, will be necessary, if he is really to profit from the able Professors whom he is attending; and all this he will gain from the College Tutor.” If this passage is an example of the kind of principle of which historical study can somehow elicit acceptance, then perhaps even on pure Aristotelian grounds a role can be found for the historian and his tools in the workshop of wisdom.

*The Office of the Historian*

It will be well to begin with some distinctions. In the first place, let us set to the side the kind of teaching about the past that attempts to offer an interpretation of God’s providential activity in this or that
person, event, or trend. Such a reading of the signs of the times is of manifest importance for the Church, but it seems not to be the work of the historian as such, for the ability to do so is not gained through study or repeated practice; it seems rather to follow upon such causes as spiritual maturity, the gift of prophecy, and purity of heart. It is true that there are various scriptural principles that ought to shape any attempt to unravel the mysteries of providence: One thinks of the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24–30), or Christ’s promise to Peter that the “gates of hell shall not prevail” against the Church (Mt 16:18). But it seems that the application of these principles by those of us who are not Augustines ought to be highly tentative. And it certainly would be asking very much of historians to demand that they possess great spiritual gifts before practicing their craft.

We should also set to the side the role of historical study in the various speculative disciplines and even within what might be called the speculative doctrine of the practical sciences. Aristotle tells us in the *Metaphysics*, among other places, that it is profitable to consider the views of those who have come before us in a given line of inquiry. Yet this kind of dialectical sifting of opinions is part of the “way to the first principles” and thus belongs to the science under consideration. Newman’s own *Essay on Development* would seem to be an example of this kind of dialectical inquiry, for it begins with a generally acknowledged truth that the writings of the early Fathers are the essential intellectual records of the Christian faith, and then proceeds, at great length, to argue in favor of the conclusion that the Catholic Church teaches a doctrine in continuity with that of the Fathers. In proportion as an exposition employs arguments from the science in question—as Newman’s certainly does—it belongs to the consideration of that science, and its author is called a theologian or philosopher rather than a historian. Our present concern, however, is not with the historical part of the various sciences, nor even with the mixed-breed called the “historian of,” but with the jack-of-all-trades known simply as the historian.
There is broad, verbal agreement that historians are students of the past deeds of men and women. The accounts of this art, however, diverge from that point. This is not the place for a long, dialectical inquiry.49 In brief, however, we can say that the historian is not the possessor of a science in the strict sense, for “the contingency of historical events,” as Glen Coughlin put it, “is incompatible with that certainty which accompanies what is knowable in the fullest sense.”50 The historian studies man and the acts of his free will, and if he generalizes at all, he makes claims that are irreducibly probabilistic and true with moral certitude at best. Nor should we think of history as the art of reconstructing the past for its own sake, for then we will indeed be tyrannized over by the faculty of memory and our historian will be little more than a walking encyclopedia. If Newman was right to see in the good historian a faculty of right judgment, then history might best be understood as a subalternate part of ethics, and the writing of histories a species of rhetoric. For “good history,” as Christopher Shannon has argued, “requires moral judgment [both] in the selection of topics and in the focus of study within each topic.”51 This good judgment that the historian is called to exercise upon the past reposes upon his own moral virtue and is brought to an account by the science of ethics.52 Surely it is no insult to the historian to be told that the quality of his teaching and writing will be proportionate to the clarity of his perception and the purity of his love for the good. On the contrary, any historian ought to be delighted to be asked to make perfect his will and to nourish his mind with as much wisdom as it can store.

If the good historian is essentially characterized by right judgment, what, then, does he do? He would seem to employ two tools: description (which may include a good deal of analysis) and narrative. In presenting for our consideration examples from the past, the historian can help our understanding in several ways. One is by suggesting, in the example of an individual life, where it is that the mean of virtue lies. To the extent that we do not possess a given virtue, we do not accurately perceive the full implications of its excellence.
To investigate and even to analyze in its particulars the studiousness of Aquinas, or the magnanimity of St. Louis IX, or the fortitude of Blessed Junipero Serra is to gain a sort of road map toward the virtue in question.\(^{53}\) Reason can work to correct a defect in our desire for the good, but it must have something upon which to work. Laws, customs, and maxims all provide grist for reason’s mill, but, in the end, imitation is usually required as well. And, as living exemplars of the virtues we need are not always at hand or recognizable as such, the historian has a worthy task in describing them.

Historians commonly take interest not only in individual persons, but also in institutions and communities, in practices, customs, and laws. Here, too, the good historian can offer much help to the student of wisdom. For it is one thing to come to an understanding of what the common good is in general, and it is yet another to have the wherewithal to recommend a course of action that will bring our current way of life more closely in accord with the divine order of the universe. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that we ought to “recognize the existence of . . . the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs,” and has further suggested that the virtue is a “kind of capacity for judgment” that “manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.”\(^{54}\) Newman not only possessed this virtue to a high degree, he also urged that it be cultivated. “We have a vast inheritance,” he wrote, amidst the struggles of the Oxford Movement, “but no inventory of our treasures. All is given us in profusion; it remains for us to catalogue, sort, distribute, select, harmonize, and complete.”\(^{55}\) As it was with Anglican theology in the 1830s, so it is for us today, arguably, with respect to the whole patrimony of Christian civilization. Who among us can claim to have received intact from the past a fully articulated understanding of the kind of social order in which the Christian faith can thrive? Lacking as we do connatural knowledge of right living in Christian community, we rightly look to the past for clues to what it might be. There are, indeed, many signs that our generation
will be characterized—much as Newman’s was—by its creative re-appropriation of the Christian patrimony. But to do that well we need to cultivate this kind of right judgment: Not either idiosyncratically or rigidly, not, as Newman warned, in a “servile imitation of the past,” but, as he counseled, with a “reproduction of it as is really new, while it is old.” Here, again, Newman writes: “What we need at present for our Church’s well-being, is not invention, nor originality, nor sagacity, nor even learning... at least in the first place, though all gifts of God are in a measure needed, and never can be unseasonable when used religiously, but we need peculiarly a sound judgment, patient thought, discrimination, a comprehensive mind, an abstinence from all private fancies and caprices and personal tastes, —in a word, Divine wisdom.”

The subject of judgment naturally leads us to a third characteristic task of the historian: to praise and to blame. Prudent historians, knowing all too well the limits of their knowledge of the past, prefer to keep most of their judgments tentative, even hidden. Yet there are and always will be people and deeds that cannot be described or recounted under the pretense of neutrality. For someone who lived through the twentieth century, an attempt to write a biography of Adolf Hitler that avoided all semblance of negative judgment and blame would be not only unimaginable, it might well seem criminal. One of the marks of a healthy society is that it bestows public honors for virtuous deeds and systematically praises virtuous men and women. In fulfillment of that office, we might indeed find the historian’s highest role. What a beautiful achievement it would be if a new school of hagiography—patterned on Newman’s *Church of the Fathers*—were to make the saints of old newly intelligible and attractive to our generation and restore to them the praise that is their due.

Each of these tasks—the describing and analyzing of exemplars, the presentation of aspects of the common good as actually realized in human community, and the praise of the virtuous—is normally accomplished, and generally received, in a narrative mode. Men
and women live by story. The stories that we tell ourselves and our children about our own lives, about our local institutions and communities and the larger political communities to which we belong, and especially about our faith, provide us with the context in which we seek the good. At least implicitly, every story we tell about the drama of human existence is situated in the context of a universal history. Good historians, historians whose judgment is rightly informed, have as their essential office the custody of that universal narrative, our common memory. In an age of cultural integration, the historian is therefore an elder of one kind or another, and the active custody is a positive task of lovingly remembering and handing on that memory. Families, institutions, crafts, and sciences each have their own lore, and that lore needs to be kept in good order for the community to be perpetuated over time—but such tending seems to be different in kind from what academic historians generally spend their time doing and, in fact, rightly the province of the community’s older and wiser men and women. The Church and the various levels of political community, in turn, take care of the broader framework of memory by annually reminding the community of its essential turning points through liturgical memorials of the saving acts of God and secular celebrations of the founding and preserving acts of the society.

It is in an age of cultural dislocation and fragmentation that the historian takes on another role, becomes a raider of archives and a wielder of footnotes, and rides out like a knight-errant in defense of wisdom. For, as Newman experienced, it is quite possible for an entire nation to labor under a false narrative, a myth that not only radically alters a part (or even the whole) of the universal narrative, but that also routinely misidentifies the mean where virtue lies, recommends practices and institutions that do not in fact conduce to virtuous living, and, finally, systematically praises and blames the wrong persons and deeds. Faced with this kind of prejudice or false myth—which at times reposes upon centuries of tradition and is celebrated in public festival (e.g., Guy Fawkes Day or Bastille
Day)—the historian’s task is that of the critic who removes difficulties that stand in the way of the persuasive power of the truth. As Newman himself said when engaged in just such an enterprise: “While a community is overrun with prejudices, it is as premature to attempt to prove that doctrine to be true which is the object of them, as it would be to think of building in the aboriginal forest till its trees had been felled.”

With all these thoughts in mind, it seems reasonable to conclude that the historian, with his tools of right judgment, has an essential supporting role to play in today’s workshop of wisdom. Like all teachers, the historian is called upon to exercise what Pope Benedict XVI has called “intellectual charity.” The historian today exercises that charity by removing some of the difficulties that our prejudices and bad habits pose to our reception of the truth. His task is a kind of clearing of the forest, so that the proper liberal arts can more readily accomplish their work of digging the foundations so that the building of the edifice of wisdom might proceed without difficulty. Until we have fully recovered and internalized the intellectual custom of the Church, the historian will have plenty of pagan oaks to smite and gnarled weeds to uproot. And, should we reach that blessed day when our minds are no longer clouded by prejudice, when, that is, the workshop of wisdom can again go about its business knowing that the tradition that supports it is in good order, widely known and loved and carefully tended, then the historian can set aside his footnotes and return to his place at the hearth as an elder and storyteller.

Notes


6. Ibid., 25.


10. Ibid., 36–37.

11. Ibid., 57.

12. Ibid., 67, 78.

13. Ibid., 80–81.


15. For these and other instances, see Ker, *John Henry Newman*, 103, 145, 159–60, 166.


17. Ibid., 114, 134.

18. Ibid., 148.

19. Ibid., 57.

20. Ibid., 186, 187.

21. Ibid., 182.

22. Ibid., 211.


25. One might come to such a conclusion through a lopsided interpretation of Christopher Dawson’s suggestion that the study of Christian culture serve as “a means of integration and unity” within a curriculum. See *The Crisis of Western Education* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 134.


28. Ibid., 84–85.

29. Ibid., 21.


36. Ibid., 107.
37. Ibid., 255.
40. Ibid., 107.
41. Ibid., 127. The passage is part of an extensive, approving quotation of his Oriel mentor, Edward Copleston.
44. Ibid., 99.
47. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, I. 4 1095a31.
48. What Aristotle says of the art of rhetoric seems applicable by analogy here, see *Rhetoric*, I. 4 1359b12ff: “The more we try to make either dialectic or rhetoric not, what they really are, practical faculties, but sciences, the more we shall inadvertently be destroying their true nature; for we shall be re-fashioning them and shall be passing into the region of sciences dealing with definite subjects rather than simply with words and forms of reasoning.”
52. Compare Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I. 1 1355b17: “What makes a man a ‘sophist’ is not his faculty, but his moral purpose. In rhetoric, however, the term ‘rhetorician’ may describe either the speaker’s knowledge of the art, or his moral purpose.” And on the virtue of judgment—a potential part of prudence—see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 51, a. 3 and II–II, q. 60, a. 1.
56. Ibid., 103.
57. Ibid., 76.
59. See chapter 15 of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, “The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of Tradition.”
60. See MacIntyre’s discussion of philosophy as a craft in his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 61–66.