Why Brutus Stabbed Caesar

"The key to every man is his thought," wrote Emerson. But how should the historian approach that most characteristic of human activities? And what is the relationship of the history of ideas to the history of events? Elie Kedourie here ponders one of the central problems of the historian's craft.

by Elie Kedourie

The study of history assumes time and place, without which a past event cannot be understood. Both are necessary, but are they sufficient? The question arises because there are often inquiries that are clearly not couched, as the physical sciences are, in terms of timeless causes and effects but that we do not consider to be history—inquiries relating to geology, botany, and zoology, in which it is necessary to specify time and place. Such inquiries have indeed been sometimes described as history. Thus the author of a book on ornithology dating from the end of the 18th century could title his book *A History of British Birds*, and French schoolchildren have long had to study a subject called *histoire naturelle.*

Natural history, however, is clearly not history, and we may distinguish between the two by saying that, unlike natural history, history proper is concerned with human activity, to understand which we must indeed see it as taking place at a particular time and in a specific place. But of human activity we also predicate that it is coherent and purposive, that it is not a sequence of (changeless) causes issuing in (uniform) effects, but rather that it is a complex of choices that are by definition unpredictable—and to say choice is necessarily to imply mind and will.

If choice, mind, and will are the hallmarks of human action, and if history proper is concerned with human activity, then a description of the historian's business such as that offered by the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (1946) would seem at first sight to be reasonable and convincing. "Historical knowledge," Collingwood says, "is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past." He says, further, that the "historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, tries to understand these actions, that is to discover what thoughts in Caesar's mind determined him to do them." This implies the historian's envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood and thinking for himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. This activity Collingwood calls "the reenactment of past thought in the historian's mind." Can one speak in this way? Can one "reenact" past thought? The historian, after all, is someone who, having

The Assassination of Julius Caesar, *by H. F. Auger*

present to him certain objects, documents, etc., which he comes to consider as "evidence," proceeds to compose a narrative that accounts satisfactorily for, and is seen to remain within, the four corners of the "evidence." This is what distinguishes historical from fictional narrative.

Evidence, however, is neither fixed nor univocal. New evidence is always cropping up; indeed, anything to a historian's eye can suddenly and unpredictably become evidence. Further, all evidence is equivocal: The historian has to account satisfactorily for all the evidence, and there can be more than one way of doing so. Consider for instance what the historians reviewed in Pieter Geyl's *Napoleon For and Against* (1944) have done in their diverse ways with the evidence relating to Napoleon, or again how other historians have tried, each in his own particular way, to identify Shakespeare's Dark Lady of the Sonnets. If so many different accounts are offered, then there can be no question of the historian "reenacting" past politics or past warfare as conducted by Caesar or Napoleon or Churchill. Ten or 20 historians, each giving a different account of some past action or event, cannot possibly all be reenacting the same event. Again, to mention these examples, widely separated in time, is to make the point that the nearness or remoteness of the past does not affect their argument. Furthermore, the historian has the privilege—his only privilege—of hindsight. He knows more than Churchill or Napoleon can have known about their own situation. If nothing else, the existence of this knowledge must forbid any talk of reenactment.

The way in which Collingwood envisages the historian's activity, as a reenactment of past thought, leads him to his well-known and striking definition of history: "All history," he asserts, "is the history of thought." If this means that all history exhibits the presence of purpose and choice,

and therefore of mind, then no possible objection can be made. But Collingwood does mean something more by this definition. In order to illustrate his meaning, he goes on to describe the historian's activity in this way:

> The historian of philosophy, reading Plato, is trying to know what Plato thought when he expressed himself in certain words. The only way in which he can do this is by thinking it for himself.... So the historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, that is, tries to discover what thoughts in Caesar's mind determined him to do them. This implies envisaging for himself what Caesar thought about the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it.

Thinking for himself what Caesar thought? As is well-known, the novelist Flaubert said, *Madame Bovary c'est moi.* Madame Bovary is Flaubert simply because she is entirely his creation, but Martin Gilbert cannot say, *Churchill c'est moi,* John Morley cannot say, *Gladstone c'est moi.*

Collingwood's definition, again, leads him to put on the same footing an account of Caesar's wars and an account of Plato's philosophy, and thus to refuse to make a distinction between what may be called the history of events and what may be called the history of ideas. Is this distinction really superfluous? Let us again borrow a statement of Collingwood's: "When an historian asks, 'Why did Brutus stab Caesar?' he means, 'What did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?'" History, we have said, is concerned with giving an account of past human activity, an account guided and delimited by the available evidence. When we hear that "Brutus" stabbed "Caesar," if we are to go beyond this bare, sterile, and meaningless record—and it is not always possible to do so, as the great number of unsolved murders testifies—we have to provide a coherent account of the situation, an account that will make comprehensible the incident of Brutus's stabbing of Caesar. If we possess sufficient evidence, and if we have industry and imagination, we will proceed to exhibit Marcus Julius Brutus in his antecedents, his character, his associations, and his political activities. We will describe the political situation he confronted, what we may call the decay of the traditional republican institutions, and Caesar's roughly getting hold of power. We will show Caesar's political and military activities, we will trace his dealings with Brutus, and we will try to show if these dealings can have led to the stabbing. What we may possibly say goes something like this:

Marcus Junius Brutus was a descendant of Lucius Junius Brutus, the nephew of Tarquinus Superbus, the last king of Rome, against whom Lucius Junius Brutus is said to have led the uprising that ended kingship in Rome and established republican institutions. This Lucius Junius Brutus became one of the first two consuls under the Republic, and he is said to have put to death his own sons, who had attempted to restore the Tarquins. Marcus Junius Brutus was also the son of a half-sister of Cato of Utica and married to Porcia, Cato's daughter. This Cato of Utica was the great-grandson of Cato the Censor, who in his time preached a return to the simple virtues of the early Republic, and who was a man given to the uncompromising assertion of political principles. We will also say that in the civil war between Pompey and Caesar, Brutus was on Pompey's side but that after the battle of Pharsalus in which Pompey

---

Elie Kedourie, *a Wilson Center Fellow, died in Washington, D.C. on June 29, 1992, only days after completing this essay. Born in 1926 in Baghdad, Iraq, he was educated in England, where he lived and wrote for most of his life. Kedourie, who taught at the London School of Economics, was a well-known authority on the modern history of the Middle East, but his interests extended to the history of European political thought. The recipient of many honors, he was a Commander of the Order of the British Empire and a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study. Kedourie founded the journal* Middle Eastern Studies *and was the author or editor of 19 books, among them* Nationalism *(1960),* The Chatham House Version *(1984), and* Politics in the Middle East *(1992).*

was defeated, he was pardoned by Caesar, who made him first governor of Cisalpine Gaul and then praetor. We will argue that a man of this character—an unbending character (the 48 percent interest he charged on money lent to Salamis in Cyprus, to collect which his agent shut several prominent Salaminians in the Senate House and kept them there without food until some of them died, may illustrate this aspect of his character)—also aware and proud of his ancestors and what he believed they stood for, mistrustful of Caesar and his appetite for power, fearful of betraying his principles and his ancestors out of gratitude to Caesar, determines—and Caesar's benefits make him all the more determined—to kill the usurper and save republican institutions.

This is a very short abridgement of what a historian would say in answer to Collingwood's question, Why did Brutus stab Caesar? The answer goes far beyond what could be an answer—if an answer were possible—to the question as Collingwood reformulates it, namely, What did Brutus think which made him decide to stab Caesar? The answer to this particular question understood literally and precisely is, in the absence of evidence about it, that God alone knows—the All-seeing and All-knowing, as Muslims describe him.

Brutus's stabbing of Caesar—or rather an account, having regard to the evidence, of how it could possibly have happened—it always being remembered that it need never have happened, either at all or in the way in which it did happen—is the kind of thing one means by a history of events. It is an account of men in the peculiarity, idiosyncrasy, and specificity of their personalities, outlooks, capacities, and positions, confronting or dealing with other men differently placed in respect to these things, and confronting or dealing with them in situations different from one another at least in respect of time and place, initiating, originating, taking measures, parrying, responding, reacting—the vocabulary we use to describe all this amply indicating that here are present an involved purpose and choice, mind and will.

We may then say that there are many objections to describing all history as the history of thought. Taken literally and precisely, it is not true, since history includes accidents, coincidences, and unpremeditated and unregarded happenings issuing in prodigious and unexpected events. We recall Pascal's observation that if Cleopatra's nose had been a shade longer the history of the world would have been different. We recall also the meteorological conditions in the Mediterranean in the year 1798 which facilitated Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt and his later escape to France which, had these conditions been different, would have put out of the question the 18th Brumaire and all that followed. Again, if after the first sustained bombardment of Gallipoli in March 1915, the British command could have known that the Ottoman troops had exhausted their ammunition, the Dardanelles expedition could have had quite a different outcome, with far-reaching consequences for Russia and the Middle East.

These are not a matter of thought in the literal and precise sense. Thought is, of course, involved in the decision to cope with the situation in this way rather than that, but it does not, all the same, make Collingwood's language any more satisfactory. Even taken figuratively, Collingwood's language is still not satisfactory. Whatever such figurative language is intended to convey, it does in fact obscure, indeed obliterate, differences between the historian's activity when he is elucidating the fortunes of a particular notion used and modified by successive generations, and when he is dealing with a statesman's character and career, or the ups and downs of a firm, or the course of a military campaign. There is a difference between having to cope with winds and tides, and having to examine, scrutinize, and bring out the implications of an idea or an argument. The aim in the criticism of ideas is to effect the utmost transparency of understanding, which no admiral could approach, desire, or comprehend.

A question, or an objection, may arise. History, it might be said, is a seamless robe. The past contains no obviously necessary boundary shutting off one event from another: For the All-knowing, history is a chain linking every happening to all the other happenings in the world. As Leibnitz put it: *Tout est conspirant*, all things work together, so that a division of history into

"periods" or "areas" or "subjects" has always something arbitrary and temporary about it, and we could say that any event in the past implies in principle the whole past, that the historian is led by the very logic of his activity to look upon history as universal history.

However, even in the writing of universal history, the historian cannot treat events as an undifferentiated and uniform body of water flowing under the bridge. The evidence (by which he is bound) will seem to disclose highlights and obscurities, ups and downs. If only because of this, the historian will be led to enhance or emphasize here and pass over in silence there. But the record of historiography shows that "Dark Ages" can suddenly become illuminated and take on the strong hues of a distinctive character. This is the case of the Dark Ages of Europe, consigned for so long to darkness by a Renaissance periodization that considered nothing to be worthwhile in the interval between classical antiquity and its own day. It is only yesterday, in the last 150 years or so, that historians have begun to seek for and examine the evidence pertaining to the Dark Ages of Europe. Sometimes, again, dark ages can stay obstinately dark. Thus, the couple of centuries of British history following the Roman evacuation of the island have remained dark because, though there is a "past" there, no one has been able to describe its particular contours and specific anfractuosities.

If the historian does not, and cannot, look upon the past as placid and uniformly flowing water, he is not obliged to look upon it as a wild and romantic "English garden." He may even consider such a picture highly misleading. He would say: I do not see any Niagaras here, but I do see water slowly, imperceptibly flowing and meandering over the centuries. This is the picture called to mind by H. S. Maine's work on ancient law, or by Fustel de Coulanges's on the *polis* and the *civitas*. The picture is given a theoretical defense, indeed argued to be the only true likeness, by the school of history associated with the French journal *Annales*. The founders and leaders of this school distinguish between *histoire événementielle*, event-centered history, and *histoire structurale*, structural history. They believe that somehow the latter is deeper, more important, more fundamental than the former: that the study of "feudal society," to take the title of Marc Bloch's well-known work, is more important than the study of the Hundred Years' War, that the study of inflation in the 16th century should somehow take precedence over the study of the so-called wars of religion in that century. If it is taken seriously, the metaphor "structure" would mean the transformation of history into sociology, and "feudalism," "capitalism," etc., would become changeless ideal types. The distinction between structural and event-centered history is, however, fallacious, since so-called structures are also events continuously changing into other structures, that is, into other events, through the mediation of events. The change in the ties of feudal dependence may be so gradual as to be almost imperceptible, but it is change of the same character as something more spectacular—such as a change of dynasty or the outbreak of a war, or a nose job for Cleopatra. *Histoire structurale* is *histoire événementielle*, and feudalism is no more important or fundamental than the Hundred Years' War. It all depends on the question you ask, on the seam you decide to make in the seamless fabric of history.

Because it is incontrovertibly true that history is a seamless robe, it is no less true that the historian's activity seems to involve the making of seams—which are, however, highly provisional, being continuously made and unmade, and this not only when he is dealing with a "period," a "subject," or an "area," but also when he forswears such delimitation and proclaims the intention to write a universal history. Arnold Toynbee's *Study of History* (1946–61) is the most ambitious attempt so far to write a universal history. Toynbee articulates this history in terms of what he calls "civilizations," which he considers (arbitrarily) to be the only "intelligible" objects of historical study. In his first volume Toynbee thought he had identified 20 of the then-"intelligible" civilizations. At the end of his life some four decades later, he increased these to 28.

If, then, the historian's activity is quite impracticable without the making of seams (even if they are made only to be unmade),

if an historian is to distinguish and discriminate within the historical past, then the question will always arise concerning any particular distinction or delimitation whether it is at all, or more, or less appropriate. If so, we can examine whether the distinction between a history of ideas and a history of events is appropriate, and the manner in which it is appropriate.

Let us consider Brutus once again. The historian's account of Brutus's stabbing Caesar dwelt on his concern that the traditional republican institutions of Rome be defended against Caesar's ambition and restored to their original condition. When we speak of "republic" and "republican institutions," the expressions denote a cluster of ideas which we think the evidence warrants us in asserting that they were present to Brutus, that they constituted some of the ways in which Brutus articulated his objections to Caesar and justified the conspiracy and the assassination. We might be tempted to take this for a justification of Collingwood's assertion that all history is the history of thought. We would then be understanding the assertion in a way different from Collingwood's. We would be committing ourselves to the general proposition that "ideas govern events" or that "ideas move men": a proposition both current and popular, exemplified in, say, the conclusions of John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, where he says that

> Practical men, who believe themselves quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.

Whatever the exact significance of this general proposition, it is clearly incompatible with the historical mode of thought. In historical understanding, events have to be understood as mediated by other events, always in a context of time and place. In history, an event cannot be directly caused in the same way that pushing a button causes an engine to start.

If the historian refuses to commit himself to such a general proposition, he still has to elucidate what "republic" meant to Brutus and in his time. The historian's inquiry would be one into linguistic usage obtaining at a particular time and place. If he were to extend his inquiry into the meaning of the term from its first appearance in the evidence at his disposal, to follow and account for the changes in meaning which it underwent from *res publica* through to *res publica christiana*, and then from "republican virtue" and "republican legality" to "republic" as contrasted to "monarchy," he would then be doing a kind of history of ideas. The first thing to be said here is that the history of ideas arises because human thought is expressed, communicated, and handed down in words. As Genesis 2:20 puts it: "And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast in the field."

"Adam gave names to all cattle": If that had remained the extent of the human vocabulary, the activity of the historian of ideas would have been extremely restricted, and its interest very small indeed. However, the ostensive function of language—the naming of cattle—is not its most significant one. In a celebrated essay on the origin of language, J. G. Herder argued that language can never have been, even at the origin, purely ostensive, because man as active mind never merely catalogues the things surrounding him but is always simultaneously expressing his attitude toward them.

If man, then, is a self-conscious creature, feeling a need to represent his experience in a fabulatory, symbolical, or ratiocinative manner, then words acquire from use in human intercourse a burden of nuances, associations, meanings, and overtones which are both implicit and continuously changing. This is why, as Francis Bacon said, words shoot back upon the understandings of the mightiest; the reason why, as the poet T. S. Eliot puts it,

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still.

The historian of ideas has, in a manner transcending lexicography, to exhibit the character and progression of this continuous change.

Take as an example the maxim of British foreign policy in the 19th century, that British interests required the maintenance of the independence and integrity of the Ottoman Empire. The maxim occurs in state papers, speeches, and official and unofficial discussions from about 1830. At its origin, it was a practical rule of thumb, formulated in the course of coping with a situation in which Britain was a powerful state with means such as to endow this maxim with more than academic significance; a state, moreover, which had substantial interests in regions whose safety would be affected by a change in the control of Ottoman territory, to the benefit of powerful European rivals tempted by Ottoman weakness into trying to annex some of that empire's domains. This state of affairs underlay the Near Eastern crisis of the 1830s involving Britain, France, and Russia. The maxim was formulated during this crisis and in the historian's eye is inseparable from it. To write the history of the Near Eastern crisis is to write a history of events, and this history will of course include this particular event, namely the formulation of the maxim concerning the independence and integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which is inseparable from these events.

Is it really inseparable? We have reason to think the contrary, for the maxim, once formulated, begins a life of its own which may have little connection with the circumstances of its coming to be. Such a maxim can have a life of its own because states are generally stable entities, as are, also generally, international alignments and rivalries; as are, similarly, the traditions of departments of state. Distinct from the history of the Eastern Question, which is a history of diplomatic and military transactions, there is the history of the maxim itself. This history may be elucidated under two distinct but related aspects. There is, first, the character of the maxim as a maxim, i.e. as a general rule, and its influence as such on the actions of statesmen at different points in the history of the Eastern Question or as a justification given for these actions. And there is, second, the elucidation of changes in what the maxim came to mean in the usage of successive statesmen, diplomats, and writers, according to their changing views about the Ottoman Empire and the possibility of its reform and also according to the states against whom it was directed, the earnestness with which it was accepted, and the manner in which it became, toward the end of its history, a meaningless and convenient cliché. As it happens, just as it has a particular beginning, the history of this maxim also has an end, for in November 1914 Britain and the Ottoman Empire went to war. Ironically, for a year or so thereafter, the maxim carried on a kind of ghostly existence, for we see an official interdepartmental committee in 1915 laying it down that the independence and integrity of the Ottoman Empire remained a British interest. To write the history of this maxim is to do the history of ideas.

•

Alike in the life of mankind and in the development of the individual," writes the philosopher F. H. Bradley, "the deed comes first, and later the reflection." More gnomically, the poet Paul Valéry, echoing and emendating Descartes, wrote: *"Tantôt je pense et tantôt je suis"*—now I think and now I am. This is another way of making the distinction among events, ideas, and their respective history. If the deed comes first and the reflection afterward, yet the reflection, which takes one specific form of words, owing to its eloquence, to its evocative power, or to some other reason, may come to have significant connections with subsequent action. Consider Don Quixote, who immersed himself in romances of chivalry; Madame Bovary, who read too many sentimental novels; or Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, of whom the chronicler Commines writes: "Covetous he was of glory, which was the chief cause that made him move so many wars. For he desired to imitate those ancient Princes whose fame continueth till this present." For, says another chronicler, Charles "delighted only in romantic histories and the feats of Julius Caesar, Pompey,

Hannibal, Alexander the Great and many other great and high men whom he wished to follow or imitate."

There is, thus, a continuous mutual influence of action upon reflection, and further action following the preceding reflection, giving rise to yet further reflection, in an endless gallery of (distorting) mirrors. From this is apparent the particular difficulty of doing the history of ideas—a difficulty further complicated by the fact that words over time acquire a miscellaneous burden of meanings that do not obviously or necessarily cohere with one another (e.g., Whig, Tory, Conservative, Liberal); or else that words used, to start with, in a technical sense, come to acquire a common currency: *enthusiasm* (which was once strictly part of the vocabulary of Christian theology), *establishment* (which had to do with the position of the Anglican Church within the state), *melancholy* (which formed part of the classification of "humors" in ancient Greek medicine), *traumatic* (which comes to us from the science of psychiatry). The difficulty is akin to what is involved in trying to use a gun whose bore is subject to continual and unpredictable change.

The maxim relating to the independence and integrity of the Ottoman Empire is an example of an idea whose history is intimately tied to the history of events, to wars, changes in alliances, in the balance of power, etc. There are ideas not so, or not so intimately, connected: the idea of the Trinity, or of happiness, or of natural law. These are really clusters of ideas more or less transparent, more or less coherent. If we were to do the history of these clusters of ideas, we would see that this means tracing how the "more or less" of transparency or coherence gives rise to successive objections, rejoinders, changes of emphasis and reformulations, such that through a process of continuous internal change a particular cluster of ideas ends by looking like an entirely different cluster. In his *European Thought in the 18th Century* (1954) Paul Hazard examines how, by this process of internal change, a cluster of ideas roughly described as classical becomes the cluster of ideas we loosely describe as romantic. This is how Hazard, in the first paragraph of the first chapter of his second volume, describes what he is doing:

> We shall now look at another spectacle which will show us, in the coherent objectives which we have studied, the incoherency which will partially change them. We have, in fact, to examine how one of the transitions, which make the history of ideas a perpetual change, has taken place; how a doctrine was dissolved, not through the intervention of outside enemies, but from the inside; how obscurities subsisted in a theory which seemed most lucid, contradictions in a system which seemed most logical; how a proclaimed victory was yet premature; and how an immense effort to attain human happiness was once again to fail.

In the same chapter he poses questions which the book purports to answer:

> Through what psychological necessities, through what subtle operations which, to start with, were almost invisible; not only through what estrangements, but rather through what help, through what compromises, through what misunderstandings did the *philosophe* set free the *anti-philosophe* and let loose the man of feeling?

To exhibit these transitions and their mediations is finicky and difficult work. It can be made even more difficult, not to say impossible, if we allow ourselves to fall prey to two prevalent and powerful temptations. The first I have mentioned earlier, namely the assumption that ideas govern events. John Milton in *Areopagitica* gives a striking example of this belief. "For Books," he says, "are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule whose progeny they are.... I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men." Thomas Hobbes, too, in *Leviathan*, is extremely vehement about the subversion and disorder which the reading of classical literature and philosophy caused in his own day. The picture that Milton and Hobbes paint is of a special situation that frequently is taken to be generally true of all politics. The situation that both depict is one that obtains when an ideological style

of politics, in which great importance is attached to general formulations and bookish knowledge, has taken hold. Milton and Hobbes of course lived through a period when this ideological style waxed very strong. Even so, contrary to their belief, it is not possible to establish a direct, causal connection between Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* and the liquidation of the kulaks, between *Mein Kampf* and Auschwitz.

The second, even more prevalent temptation is to believe that ideas are "produced" by, are a "reflection" of, events, that they are a "superstructure" resting on some "substructure" somehow more fundamental, more real than the "superstructure." Such a view, held by Marxism, and more generally, by the sociology of knowledge, makes impossible the pursuit of the history of ideas. It is pointless to bother about the ideas in men's heads since we know that they are the reflection of their class interests or the time in which they live. This, however, is untenable, since contemporaries of the same class so-called, are found again and again to hold very different, not to say irreconcilable ideas: Consider Thomas Hobbes and Lord Clarendon, who belonged to the same intellectual set before the English Civil Wars, the second of whom vehemently attacked the political doctrine which the first was to set out in *Leviathan*, or Jean-Paul Marat and Joseph de Maistre, the one a revolutionary and the other a reactionary. The sociology of knowledge, further, finds itself in a vicious circle: The sociologist accounts for men's ideas by their social circumstances, and the cogency of these ideas, the pursuit of truth or coherence which they embody, cease to matter. If he is right, the sociologist finds himself in the same boat, obliging us to discount wholly what he says about the subjects of his study as being the mere reflection of his own circumstances and class interests: the biter bit.