

Journalism and History

"Our historians lie much more than our journalists," says Gilbert K. Chesterton. This puts us in a bad light whatever way you take it. In order to defend the historian we must acquit the journalist of mendacity, and we fear the jury is packed against him. So we prefer to ask to have the case thrown out of court on the grounds that Mr. Chesterton brought the charges merely for the sake of eulogizing a third individual — the artist — as a true recorder of the past. Of which more anon.

In spite of this implied indictment of journalism, we wish to announce that the next issue of THE PALIMPSEST will be a Newspaper Number, wherein will be disclosed some of the words and ways of the early editors. They were often more pugnacious than prudent, and since prudence sometimes conceals the truth, perhaps their pugnacity may be counted as an historical asset. At all events, newspapers can not avoid being more or less a mirror of the times, and an adequate history of any people can scarcely be written without an examination of its journalism.

ART AND HISTORY

But to return to Chesterton. His arraignment

of historians and journalists occurs in an introduction to *Famous Paintings*, in the midst of an argument for the effectiveness of the work of the old masters in popular education and the value of the canvas in portraying the real conditions of the past. Nor will we gainsay him in this. The artist who goes back of his own era for subjects must make a careful historical study of his period. The style of clothes worn by his subjects, the type of furniture or tapestry, and the architecture of the houses and bridges and churches of his backgrounds must be accurate. He is in that sense an historian as well as an artist, and his contribution is truthful or otherwise in proportion as he has taken the pains to be a competent historical student.

Nevertheless the best of artists and the best of historians make mistakes. We remember the discussion that arose a few years ago when Blashfield's fine canvas was placed in the Capitol at Des Moines. It depicts the westward travel of a group of pioneers crossing the prairies by means of the ox-drawn prairie schooner. It is a splendid piece of work, but some pioneer who had lived through such scenes and knew whereof he spoke observed that Blashfield had pictured the driver of the oxen walking on the left side of his charges, whereas in reality the driver always walked on the other side. True enough as Blashfield himself admitted. Yet there were difficulties having to do with the com-

position of the picture. The scene was arranged with the caravan moving toward the left or west side of the picture. Therefore, if the driver had been properly placed he would have been more or less hidden by the oxen — an eclipse scarcely to be desired from the standpoint of the artist. If the directions had been reversed, the canvas would have been criticised as showing the group coming out of the west — thus defeating the basic idea.

The last straw of criticism was added when another pioneer, referring to the symbolic figures which Blashfield had painted in the upper part of the picture hovering above the caravan and leading the way to the west, remarked that when he went west there were no angels hovering over *his* outfit. So we hesitate to accept Mr. Chesterton's implication that the artist is more infallible than the historian or journalist.

THE REALM OF THE HISTORIAN

But the historian is vitally concerned with the question of the accuracy of the artist who paints of the past, the essential veracity of the novelist who chooses historic settings, and the truthfulness of the journalist who, with his editorials, his cartoons, and his advertisements, is usually the first to write the record of events. In fact the historian must concern himself with these and all other recorders, for the things of the past are the subjects of his particular realm and he must keep them in order.

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