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MARGARET MACMILLAN

HISTORY'S PEOPLE

PERSONALITIES AND THE PAST

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY, I SOMETIMES THINK, is like a rambling, messy and eccentric house. It has been built, added to and renovated repeatedly over the centuries. Its foundations are buried in that conveniently vague place "the mists of time" but some of the spade work was surely done in the Near East by the anonymous author or authors of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in Europe's classical world by Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus and Livy, or in China by Sima Qian, the great historian of the Han dynasty, while Homer, Virgil, or the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta have added their decorative flourishes. Monkish scribes, Chinese scholars, Arab chroniclers, all painstakingly have placed their bricks and stones. The Renaissance produced some elaborate rooms devoted to understanding princes and popes while the Reformation and Counter-Reformation created some sober undecorated spaces with strongly moral tales. In the nineteenth century the inhabitants added orderly libraries and well-organized files while the twentieth century brought tiled laboratories where the past could be dissected and analysed. There is one wing, the post modernist one, where there appears to be no order at all and no clear style; every room, say those who live there, is as valuable or as meaningful as any other.

It is impossible to discern a single use or a dominant style in history's house. Nor can anyone tell where it begins or ends for it is eternally under construction, and there is always a new corridor to discover or neglected rooms which might be worth cleaning up and letting in the light. Strange noises come from the basement or the attics. Some rooms are like those in Blue Beard's Castle striking dread into anyone who draws near the door much less opens it. Other rooms still open to gardens where it looks like a new spring is coming.

Historians, if I can continue the metaphor just a little bit more, are the house's caretakers. Some of us, like the mediaeval chroniclers, believe in visiting one room after another in the order in which they were built while others prefer to settle on a particular part of the house and get to know it in the round. One group of caretakers thinks it is important to focus on what they deem to be the house's most powerful and influential inhabitants. Yet another insists that we cannot understand the house without gathering as much information as we can on the millions whose toil ensured its construction and upkeep as well as the food and clothing for its inhabitants. Each age brings its own preoccupations which produce an ever-shifting perspective on the past and so we ask different questions when we interrogate the past. Not surprisingly, environmental history or the history of economic booms and busts are increasingly popular subjects today.

Differences among historians sometimes spill over into civil wars which can make us forget that we are all engaged in the same endeavour to unearth and analyse the past. Yet history needs us all, from the material to the intellectual historians. The products of agriculture or of manufacturing

can tell as much about past societies as the ideas which animated them. Cultural and social historians help us to understand the values, assumptions and social organization of long gone peoples while political or economic historians bring out the forces that shape societies or have brought change. We also need to compare, to study other histories than the ones we know best. And we should use the insights of other disciplines. Archaeology comes to mind at once but anthropology, sociology, biology, all can and have enriched history.

So does biography although the relationship between historians and biographers is often an uneasy one, marked by mutual suspicions. Historians complain that biographers do not properly understand or short change the context while biographers feel that historians miss out the individuals who help to make history. That tension in turn feeds into the long-standing debate in history over whether events are moved by individuals or the great objective forces such as economic and social changes or technological and scientific advances.

My own view is that there is no right or wrong answer. Individuals are enmeshed in their times. We are all products of our own histories but those in turn are themselves shaped by class, place, ideas, values, institutions and the wider history unfolding around us. Yet, having said that, we have to face the possibility that sometimes a single individual can alter the course of events. If Napoleon had never existed, was there anyone else in France at the time with his combination of talents, intelligence and ruthlessness who could have seized power and taken France to the dominance of Europe? Without Karl Marx to sum up socialist thinking and create of it a powerful and persuasive

theory would so much of the twentieth century have been shaped by that particular ideology? Marx himself was aware of the need to find a balance between individuals and their times. As he wrote in 1852: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."

For all of us, and not just historians, there is something exhilarating in becoming aware of other human beings from very different worlds to our own. They will never know us but we can think about them and an individual life can be a way into another time. From villains to saints, with all the great variety humanity is capable of in-between, we can wonder why the figures of the past behaved as they did and what that meant. "The poetry of history", the great British historian G. M. Trevelyan wrote, 'lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.'

When I started to plan this book, I made a list of personality traits which I felt were important in shaping human affairs. Love, fear, hatred, jealousy, ambition, altruism, loyalty, integrity: we can all add still others to the list. My problem was to narrow those down to a manageable few. In the end too I tried to find a balance between those qualities of personality which could be rightly said to change worlds and those which make it possible for us

to have contact with the past. I also wanted to be able to find the people who could best illustrate what I meant. I decided first to look at those leaders who were effective, who managed to persuade sufficient numbers of their contemporaries to support them, and who achieved great ends. I then turned to those who also possessed many of the qualities that make good leaders but who, in the end, threw their position or their people away because they had become convinced that they were invariably right. Perhaps I have been slightly provocative in lumping together Woodrow Wilson, Margaret Thatcher, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin but each in his or her own way fell prey to what the ancient Greeks described as hubris. The third characteristic I chose—that of daring—is again something that leaders often have but I wanted to focus in on the moments when a willingness to take risks had momentous consequences, whether it was Samuel de Champlain venturing across the Atlantic to the New World in the seventeenth century or President Richard Nixon going to Beijing in 1972. Then, in the last two chapters, I considered those who asked the questions and took the notes that make the understanding of others and history itself possible.

This book is the result of my own experiences over many years of reading and writing and, always, enjoying history. I have taken the opportunity offered here to discuss the people from the past I have found most interesting. My choices are highly personal but I hope they will serve to raise some of the important issues we must all think about as we look at the past. History matters and we must do it well. When it is false or one-sided it can be used to mobilize people for evil ends. At its best history can explain others and help us to better understand ourselves and our world. It can also remind

us that what we think is normal or the only way of doing things is not necessarily so. There have been other worlds with other values than our own and we need to be reminded of that, if only to give us some sense of humility. In the end I love history because it is such a marvellous combination of enlightening and fun.

ONE

PERSUASION AND THE ART OF LEADERSHIP

OVER THE PAST DECADES, historians have broadened their scope from political, economic, or intellectual history to include the study of emotions, attitudes, tastes, or prejudices. (And in what I find a rather tiresome trend, historians have also been looking increasingly at themselves; how they "created" the past.) And in the house of history are those who think in centuries and those who focus on a single moment. Some historians prefer to deal with the great changes, sometimes over millennia, that have taken place in human society. They look at the shift from hunting to agriculture, for example, or the growth of cities; or they count such things as population growth and migrations or economic output. The great French historian Fernand Braudel argued that the true object of historical research was to look beneath the surface of events and discover the longer-term patterns—what he called the *longue durée*. He saw human history as a great slow-moving river, affected in its course more by geography, the environment, or social and economic factors than by such transient or short-lived events—he called them "froth"—as politics or wars. While biography cannot

explain all, it is perhaps no coincidence that Braudel spent the Second World War in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. From that perspective the *longue durée* must have offered hope that Nazism would disappear like a bad dream as history moved slowly on.

We cannot dismiss the short term so easily. Ideas and sudden shifts in politics, intellectual fashions, or in ideology or religion matter too. Think of the startling growth in the past two decades in fundamentalism in religions as different as Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam. Historians rightly look at key moments which signalled or set in motion great changes, such as the storming of the Bastille, which marked the French Revolution, or the assassination of the archduke in Sarajevo, which led to the outbreak of the First World War. And historians can take an apparently insignificant incident and use it to illuminate an age, as Natalie Zemon Davis did with sixteenth-century France in her telling of the return of Martin Guerre (who came back to claim his wife and property from an imposter).

Nor can we dismiss the role of individuals, whether thinkers, artists, entrepreneurs, or political leaders. If Albert Einstein had not grasped the nature of the atom early in the twentieth century, could the Allies have developed the atomic bomb during the Second World War? Another question, of course, is what Germany might have done if the Nazis had not driven Einstein and many of his fellow physicists into exile so that they offered their services to the Allies. Without the bomb it is almost certain that the Allied war against Japan would have dragged on for another year or more. And what if the world had never developed nuclear weapons at all? In the nineteenth century, with Europe undergoing the massive changes brought by the Industrial Revolution, Karl Marx

took many of the political, economic, and social ideas that were circulating and tied them up into a coherent and apparently irrefutable package that not only explained the past but predicted the future. Generations of men and women around the world believed in Marxism as their ancestors had believed in religion — as a revealed truth — and so tried to change the world in accordance with its precepts.

At certain moments too it really does matter who is in the driver's seat or who is making the plans. The Cold War could have ended very differently — or not ended at all — if someone other than Mikhail Gorbachev had been the Soviet leader. He was not prepared to use force in the 1980s to cling onto the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe or to keep the Communist Party in power in the Soviet Union itself. The Chinese Communist leadership reacted very differently in the face of dissent, and their crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989 was the result. If the Supreme Court decision on the 2000 vote count in Florida had gone differently, George W. Bush would not have been president. President Al Gore would not have surrounded himself with the same hawkish advisers, and it is easy to imagine that he would have resisted the temptation to invade Iraq.

I find in the subjects I have chosen for books — most recently key moments in international history such as the start and the end of the First World War — that I have to pay attention to individuals. If the troubled and erratic man who was Kaiser of Germany in 1914 had been the king of Albania — as his distant relative was — he could not have caused much trouble for Europe. But Wilhelm II was the ruler of a major economic and military power at the heart of the Continent. What is more, under Germany's imperfect constitution he had considerable power, especially over

foreign policy and the military. In the end, he was the man who had to sign the order that took Germany to war. So it is impossible to look at the causes of that catastrophic conflict without considering Wilhelm, or his cousin Nicholas, who as tsar of Russia had equally great power and responsibility. And can we write the history of the twentieth century properly without looking at the roles played by democratic leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, or William Lyon Mackenzie King, and even more so those played by the great tyrants such as Hitler, Mao, Mussolini, or Stalin?

Sadly, biographers themselves, as well as historians who use biography, have too long been regarded with suspicion by much of the historical profession — dismissed as amateurs whose grasp on history is shaky, or accused of ignoring society and focussing too narrowly on individuals in the mistaken assumption that "great men" or "great women" make history. The nineteenth-century writer and intellectual Thomas Carlyle is often hauled out as an exponent of the theory that key figures — he called them heroes — are the shapers of the past. In the academic world, this view is treated with contempt (although, not surprisingly, business leaders find it rather attractive). This does an injustice to Carlyle, whose view of history was more complex. In an early essay he asked, "Which was the greatest innovator, which was the most important personage in man's history, he who first led armies over the Alps, and gained the victories of Cannae and Thrasymene; or the homeless boor who first hammered out for himself an iron spade?" Society itself, he argued, was the product of the work and lives of countless human beings, and history therefore "is the essence of innumerable Biographies." Although he is remembered more for his works on heroes, he

saw them less as the makers of history and rather as people who summed up the feelings of a particular age or could see most clearly where society was headed and what it needed.

Carlyle understood that the secret of good biography — and indeed of much good history — is to understand that relationship between individuals and their societies. To understand the people of the past, we must start by respecting the fact that they had their own values and ways of seeing the world. They were shaped by different social and political structures; their ideas came from different sources than our own. Sometimes we have to work hard to understand their thinking. The great British historian James Joll talked of an era's "unspoken assumptions" — the sorts of things people didn't say, just because they were so taken for granted. We ourselves don't usually bother to explain why, for example, we think democracy is the best form of government, because generally, in Western societies, we assume it is.

So we must always locate people in their times and also remind ourselves that we cannot expect them to think things that hadn't yet been discovered or articulated. The Romans, we know thanks to historians, had very different ideas about families and honour than we do. The Byzantines lived in a world where the unseen was as important as what was visible to them. On the other hand, we should never forget that the people of the past were as human as we are. I will be looking at some who were important for what they did, but I also want to tell you about those who speak to us, about themselves, their contemporaries, and the worlds they lived in. The acerbic sketches of Michael Psellus, written in the eleventh century, tell us something of the long-vanished Byzantine Empire and the men and women who ruled over it, thanks in part to the details he includes; for example, the plump,

golden-haired Empress Zoe, who ruled with her younger sister in 1042, was clever, passionate, and much more generous than the skinnier Theodora, who was talkative, stingy, and rather dull. The memoirs of Madame de la Tour du Pin help us to understand what it was like to live through the French Revolution and to go, as she did, from being a lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette to milking cows on a farm in northern New York State. Or a simple object can bring the past to life. I still remember the first exhibition to come out of China after the Cultural Revolution. We all marvelled at the leopards made of gold and the jade suit made to give a long-dead princess immortality, but it was a dried-up dumpling that moved me most. Just as a labourer would do today, a Chinese working on the tomb centuries ago had brought his lunch — and by mistake had left a bit behind.

Like us, the people of the past faced the challenges posed by life, even if we worry about different things. The Black Death, mercifully, is no longer with us, but then the past centuries did not have to fear nuclear annihilation. Yet while we must acknowledge the differences between then and now, we recognize in the people of the past familiar characteristics; they too had ambitions and fears, loves and hates. We can share in their pleasures and sorrows, and sympathize as they try to deal with problems or decide what is best to do. There is a particular pleasure in hearing a voice which reaches across the decades or centuries and reminds us that we share a common humanity. We read the great diarists — Samuel Pepys, for example, or James Boswell — because we find them such entertaining and interesting individuals.

Michel de Montaigne, a wealthy French nobleman living in the troubled sixteenth century, matters to us, as he has to all the generations between then and now, because

his writings are an exploration of what it is to be human. His essays were never finished because their subject was in large part himself, his thoughts, his emotions, and his reactions, and, as he said repeatedly, he and they kept changing. "We are entirely made up of bits and pieces," he once wrote, "woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each one of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people."

At the age of thirty-eight Montaigne retired from public life to run his estates and to ruminate in a tower at one end of his château. (His wife was put a safe distance away in her own tower at the other end.) In his capacious library, he wrote and revised and then wrote some more. He loved to pose questions: Why do we get angry at inanimate objects? Why are we suddenly overcome by emotion? Why, he asks, do our minds wander so much? His certainly did. In his essays he frequently pulls himself up with a "Let's get back to the subject," but it is no good. He starts on one topic then promptly wanders off into highways and byways. In the middle of a long essay on a contemporary theologian, we find Montaigne speculating on what is the best position in sexual intercourse for a woman to get pregnant. An essay titled *On Coaches* starts with the vehicles but includes, among much else, reflections on why monarchs need excessive grandeur, on the recent European discovery of the New World (and some caustic remarks on the folly of the Europeans in thinking they were more civilized than the peoples they found there), and on the fear of death. He also throws in a remark about fashion: "When I was a young man, in default of other glories I gloried in fine clothes. In my case they were quite becoming; but there are folk on whom fine clothes sit down and die." He

is funny, sensible, and brisk. "If you do not know how to die," he advises in one of his last writings, "never mind. Nature will tell you how to do it on the spot, plainly and adequately." To read Montaigne, said Sarah Bakewell, who has written so wonderfully about him, "is to experience a series of shocks of familiarity, which makes the centuries between him and the twenty-first-century reader collapse to nothing."

Yet Montaigne also tells us something about his own times and its preoccupations—its fascinated rediscovery of the classical world, for example, or the discovery of the new ones in the Americas or the Far East. Perhaps because his own times were so turbulent, he ponders the question of what makes good government and bad. For much of his life, France was torn apart by wars between Catholics and Protestants, and so he wonders about the ways in which religion can lead to evil. Although he was a good Catholic, Montaigne was horrified at the intolerance of both sides: "Some approach it from this side, some from the other; some make it black, others make it white: all are alike in using religion for their violent and ambitious schemes, so like each other in managing their affairs with excess and injustice, that they make you doubt whether they really do hold different opinions over a matter on which depends the way we conduct and regulate our lives." He notes sadly that the French have got used to cruelty and wickedness.

In their own ways, all the people I have chosen to discuss have added their pieces to history, whether by making it or recording it or both. Leaders such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Joseph Stalin are famous for riding the currents of history and diverting them in one direction rather than another. Others, like the intrepid men and women who became explorers and adventurers, went against the current,

often at great personal cost. Others still, like Montaigne, are better known as observers, standing on the sidelines. Yet without those who kept the records, wrote their diaries or letters, etched their graffiti, or even buried their garbage, we historians would not have the evidence we need to examine the past.

In the first three chapters I will concentrate on those who might be said to have left their mark on history. What were the qualities that they possessed, and what were the circumstances that made it possible for them to become leaders or merely risk takers. Why did they behave as they did? While all the leaders I am going to be considering had an instinctive understanding of the mood of their times, some proceeded by building consensus while others imposed their will by fiat and force. But both sorts of leaders have choices and the capacity to take history down one path rather than another. Then I will look at the particular quality of daring, where individuals take risks, leap into the unknown. What makes them do it? And what difference has it made? In the last two chapters, I am going to move from those who changed the course of history and turn to the sort of people you might want to have dinner with because they would be so entertaining. (And unlike many leaders, they would not hold forth but listen.) Some did occupy positions of power, like the Indian emperor Babur, while others were middle-class Englishwomen, but all had a great curiosity about the world. They shared a refreshing freedom from the prejudices and judgements of their own times. Some were prepared to travel—often in conditions of great discomfort, even danger—while others stayed where they were and observed what was going on around them.

History's people, for me, are those who stand out in the foreground, like a Madonna in a Renaissance painting, the

pop-up figures in a children's book, or the one face a movie camera fixes on when it passes over a crowd. While a single life cannot stand in for a whole era, it can illuminate it and make us want, indeed oblige us, to know more. Catherine the Great was fascinating as a person, a woman of strong passions and equally strong determination, but to properly understand her we need to ask about her times. What was Russia like in the eighteenth century, especially to a young woman who came from a small German court? What values did she bring with her, and what did she acquire in her new life? She was able to survive and thrive in the treacherous and dangerous world of the Russian imperial family and in due course left her stamp on it, on Russia, and on Europe. The size and shape of Russia today owe much to her conquests, as at least in part do its complicated relations with its neighbours to the west. Otto von Bismarck had an outsize personality which would have sent waves through whatever society he found himself in, but he was fortunate, even if much of Europe wasn't, that fate gave him a big stage on which to act. As we follow Bismarck through his life, we learn about the emergence of Germany as an independent state and what that meant for his own times and for posterity.

LEADERSHIP — MY INITIAL topic — is a fashionable subject at present. If you do a search on the Internet you will find literally millions of links to leadership academies. Everyone, it seems, from business schools to Oprah Winfrey, is in on the business of teaching people how to be successful leaders, and often they promise to do so in only a few hours or days. It makes you wonder whether there can be any followers left. As the American historian Garry Wills has pointed out, not