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**Title:** "The Historian," by Flavel C. Barber

**Format:** Commencement Oration

**Date:** July 11, 1850

**Location:** Orations-1850-B234h

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# The Historian

There is a check implanted in the nature of man, which though apparently weak, yet in reality exercises far more power over his actions than any external force; than the fear of present punishment, or the hope of present reward. This check is the judgment which posterity will pass upon his actions, & the knowledge that from this judgment there is neither escape nor appeal. It has cheered the patriot in the dungeon or on the scaffold, to know that posterity would do justice to his name, & would requite his wrongs. It has made the tyrant tremble, in the midst of his deeds of blood, to know, that on his memory would be loaded the infamy, which his power was now able to avert.

Without history there would be to us no past. Buried in dreamless oblivion, would lie the deeds & the memories of former generations. By the dim light of tradition alone would be handed down to us the annals of former times, in the shape of exploits of heroes & demigods. Without history man would lose his strongest incentives to action. Who would toil a life time for fame, when posterity would consign fame & body together to the cheerless tomb. They make no account of mouldy skeletons, but ever turn their eyes to the idol of the hour. But history always keeps before them, in unfading characters the virtues of the dead & compels them, even unwillingly, to render homage to their memory. Over the vast confines of Central America in ages whose reckoning is lost, existed empires almost as great as that which laid its tributes at the foot of the Roman Caesar.

In those gloomy forests, the Indian yet approached, with <sup>super-</sup>stitious awe, the ruins of cities, whose paved streets <sup>were</sup> worn with the tread of a thousand years, in whose gorgeous temples, the priests of an unknown religion offered up sacrifices for an unknown people. But the historian took no note of them: they passed away & were forgotten. Their only records, and the sealed hieroglyphics of Copan & Palenque.

So time flew by, strong upon the wing, nor dropped one falling feather, where with some hoary scribe might register their honor & renown. The judgment of the past is confided by posterity to the historian. All the past, its actors & its actions, the haughtiest sovereign & the meanest peasant, the blackest treason & the most spotless purity, alike must appear before the tribunal of history — a tribunal more just & inflexible than the judgment seat of Minos & Rhadamanthus. There are judges who can be neither terrified by threats nor bribed with gold. — Nothing will pass that ordeal unscathed, but right actions & right motives. The flimsy veil of hypocrisy which covered secret vices will then be torn off; the false glare of successful crime will then be extinguished; the covering of modesty which merit often wears will then too be removed; & good deeds which were hidden from every eye will then be brought to light. Then will man stand forth before his judges, either in naked deformity or in uncovered loveliness.

The position of the historian is one of no slight responsibility. If through party spirit or malice or carelessness he casts a stigma on the character of the good, <sup>or</sup> over the vices of the bad; if, in any manner, he go

his high office - an office which he has received from God - he should be numbered among the most infamous of men. He has done an irreparable injury to the cause of Truth, an injury which no time can erase.

The historian must be a free man. He must tear away the idols of his heart. He must set up but one divinity, & at the shrine of truth, yield earnest & undying obedience. In his judgment of character, he must alike despise the fierce clamor of democracy, & the pullen blindness of bigotry. He must tear off, with merciless hand, the covering which party spirit would throw around its favorite hero, & probe to the very quick his hidden faults. But his pursuit should extend not so much to bad men as to bad principles, & these he should hunt down with the blood-hound's scent. There is no sanctuary so holy into which he should not penetrate, no character so blameless which he should not analyze. Yet merciful as he ought to be toward bad principles, he should learn to pity the victim of his own vices. The former should be pursued with undying hatred; the latter should be remembered as a man & pitied as an erring brother.

The mind of the historian must be gifted yet laborious.

"Priest of truth, champion of innocence, warder of the gates of praise,

Carefully with sifting search, laboreth the pale historian."

Nowhere will superficiality sooner display itself than in history.

The mere brilliant flash of genius may impose even on sensible men elsewhere, but the moment it approaches

this sacred ground, all external covering falls <sup>true</sup>

This is no arena for the display of wit, no

for the display of eloquence. There is not needed the acute-  
subtlety of the metaphysician, which builds splendid-  
systems on hypothesis, but the deep, strong, earnest mind  
which never leaves its foothold upon facts, & builds  
no theory, save on the sure foundation of experience.  
The mind which loves to wander through the  
unknown regions <sup>beyond</sup> the Empire of facts, is not always  
the truth seeking mind, and is by no means fit for the  
historian. He prefers the plain, solid road, rather than  
the winding labyrinth, light rather than darkness, truth  
rather than mystery.

But of what avail is it for us to pore over the  
record of events which have passed beyond our control?  
To be soothed to emulation by examples of former virtue,  
to be restrained from vice by examples of former degradation,  
is but a minor object of history. We read the past  
that we may read the future. The historian stands  
before us as a prophet sent from God, & from his pythian  
leaves we may learn our destiny. Without him we would  
stand upon a narrow verge; behind us, oblivion; before us,  
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precipices, rushing floods, would lie at our feet, and we  
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From such a calamity are we preserved by  
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Chaldean Astrologer & the Moorish Magician never knew.  
With an eye which sees clearly through the mists —  
which envelop the minds of the multitude, he watched  
the operation of principles in the past, and  
deduced the operation of <sup>the same</sup> principles in the future.  
To his eye order appears in the midst of confusion, in  
the very chaos of revolutions. He observes those great  
laws which alike, in all ages, govern all men, the versatile  
Athenian as well as the stern Roman, the plianish  
Oriental as well as the enterprising Anglo Saxon. The  
study of the laws of human motives — the noblest  
study which man can undertake — is his peculiar  
pursuit.

He has need of no empty popularity, but over  
the minds of men, he exercises a dominion, silent —  
indeed in its operations, but most pure & powerful —  
in its effects. He writes not for one day or for one  
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Havel E Barber.

Commencement Oration of Flavel C. Barber, Class of 1850  
Transcribed by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, May 2008  
Edited by Chris Altieri, June 2008

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