

CRITICAL STUDIES

GREEK HISTORIANS *

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THE AUTHOR starts from the premiss that “the most important aspect of the study of history is . . . historiography.” He means by this that the most important aspect of the study of the political history of classical Greece is the critical study of Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon. He selected Xenophon because “the problems of the composition” of the *Hellenica*—in contradistinction apparently to the corresponding problems of Herodotus’ and Thucydides’ histories—would seem to have been settled: a critical study of the characteristic theories proposed as solutions to those problems would reveal the greatness of “our modern approach to the historical writing of ancient Greece,” but perhaps also its limitations.

The bulk of Henry’s book is devoted to such a critical study. It has led him to a “singular disappointment” (p. 191) and to the conclusion that “we are not yet ready to interpret ancient histories, like the *Hellenica*” (p. 210). There is a general and a particular cause of the failure of nineteenth and twentieth century study of Greek historical writing. The general cause is insufficient attention to the peculiarity of Greek historiography as distinguished from its modern counterpart: the ancients did not study history “for its own sake,” since their approach was “esthetic” (p. 193). A moment’s reflection on the historical origin of this meaning of “esthetic” would show the inadequacy of Henry’s characterization of classical historiography. For the classical Greek, “history was a form of literature. . . . History is literature when an artist perceives the genius of an age and reveals it through the facts of history” (p. 193). This seems to be Henry’s interpretation of a

* A Critical Study of W. P. Henry, *Greek Historical Writing: A Historiographical Essay Based on Xenophon’s Hellenica*. (Chicago: Argonaut Inc., 1967).

saying of Quintilian which he renders "History has a certain affinity to poetry" (p. 191). Granting for a moment that the three classical historians perceived the spirit of the ages which they described, was their primary intention to reveal those spirits? A glance at the openings of Herodotus' and Thucydides' works would show the impropriety of this suggestion. This is to say nothing of the fact that the suggestion could not be expressed in their language. However justified Henry's criticism of nineteenth and twentieth century students of classical Greek historiography may be, he shares with them (or most of them) the prejudice that "we know today" the meaning of historiography in general and of classical historiography in particular.

The particular cause of the failure of nineteenth and twentieth century students to solve the problem of the composition of the *Hellenica* is their prejudice regarding Xenophon. They believe that Xenophon's nature is "patently simple" or that "although superficial [he] is yet sincere" or that because his manner "is candid it is uncontrived." They certainly speak about him in a "patronizing" or "condescending" way (pp. 191-192). Here Henry shows a rare awareness of an amazing defect of contemporary scholarship: the general run of present day scholars who as such have not shown particular sophistication and openmindedness, speak of Xenophon's simplemindedness or narrowmindedness as if sophistication and openmindedness were virtues that today can be acquired in the same manner in which one obtains a Ph.D. degree.

In order to show that Xenophon's manner is not "uncontrived," Henry discusses "three representative examples" (p. 193). The first is Xenophon's account of the trial of the generals who took part in the battle of the Arginusae.

Perhaps the problem which has proved most troubling of all is that of Xenophon's treatment of Socrates in this scene. Although Xenophon does not, to be sure, neglect here to mention Socrates' firm adherence to justice, beyond this passing reference nothing is said of the actions or speech of the great philosopher throughout the whole affair. Indeed, this one remark constitutes the very sum and substance of reference to Socrates in the entire *Hellenica*—the very Socrates who was the teacher and friend of Xenophon. . . . So little notice is taken of Socrates here, in fact, that when Xenophon at last mentions him, he identifies him as "the son of Sophroniscus," as though the reader would not otherwise be expected to recognize which Socrates was meant (p. 194).

Henry shows well that

the development of this entire scene was obviously contrived with no other object in view than to set off the adamant refusal of the great philosopher in the face of overwhelming constraint. All objections that Xenophon in according Socrates only this one line is slighting him or that he does not recognize the meaning of his life are intolerable and can only arise from a profound misconception of the artistry of the description. . . . And just as Xenophon is careful not to prejudice the effect through untimely anticipation, he does not dissipate it by ponderously dwelling on the morality of Socrates' deed after it has been mentioned or try by words to increase an impression already rendered supreme (197).

According to Henry, these and similar considerations dispose of the criticisms of Xenophon based on his patronymic designation of Socrates in this passage and his complete silence in the *Hellenica* about Socrates' trial and his death (p. 199). Henry finds only one "artistic flaw" in Xenophon's account of the trial of the generals. The mention of Socrates' courageous resistance to the mob's lawless demands is immediately followed by Euryptolemus' speech in defense of the generals which is "extended, reasoned, unimpassioned" and apparently "heard out by a patient and . . . even sympathetic audience." This speech is presented as having taken place a few minutes after the violent eruption of the mob. Henry thinks that "this is simply impossible." "In short, art has somewhere intervened, and Xenophon has taken liberties with his matter." But is the intervention of art as such an artistic flaw? In addition, Xenophon says that Euryptolemus spoke "thereafter." "Thereafter" does not necessarily mean "immediately thereafter," as is shown by the very beginning of the *Hellenica*. Even if Euryptolemus' speech had been delivered days after Socrates' intervention, it still could have been the effect of Socrates' intervention. Above all, the immediate juxtaposition of Socrates' single sentence (in indirect speech) and Euryptolemus' long oration (in direct speech) compels us to note that Xenophon's Socrates never delivered any public speech except the speech in his own defense.

The flaw of Henry's otherwise praiseworthy interpretation of the above story is surely graver than the flaw of which he accuses Xenophon. Henry's critics could justly demand of him that he explain why Xenophon here designates Socrates with his patro-

nymic and why he is silent about Socrates' condemnation. Xenophon's general silence in the *Hellenica* on Socrates may have to be understood in the light of Thucydides' well known silences on Athenian "life of the mind." The questions which Henry fails to answer cannot be properly raised unless one considers the two other references to Socrates by Xenophon in his writings other than his Socratic writings (*Anabasis* III 1.4-7 and *Cyropaedia* III 1.14 and 38-40) and one interprets first Xenophon's Socratic writings. For the particular wisdom conveyed through the *Hellenica* cannot be understood except in the light of Xenophon's general understanding of wisdom, and this general understanding is identical with that of his Socrates. It is certain that the purport of the *Hellenica* does not become sufficiently clear from that work itself, as is shown by its strange opening.

Henry's two other examples deal with the question whether Xenophon's prejudices in favor of Sparta (and of Agesilaus) and against Thebes (and Epaminondas) can be used as keys to the understanding of the *Hellenica* (or its bulk). He shows that if Xenophon was simply under the spell of these prejudices, he would have ended the *Hellenica* differently (pp. 200-204). And finally he takes issue with the prejudices regarding Xenophon's prejudice. He notes in particular that the scholars who accuse him of prejudice made "no attempt to define prejudice" (p. 204). "Yet Xenophon favored Sparta and disliked Thebes—this fact is undeniable." But this fact does not prove that he was "prejudiced" toward these cities (p. 205). "This is the most important problem of Xenophon's historiography" (p. 206). The question is whether Sparta did not deserve Xenophon's admiration and Thebes did not deserve his contempt, or what to Henry seems to be the same thing, whether Xenophon's conviction regarding the two cities "was not a conviction generally shared by his contemporaries" (p. 208). Henry's answer is not satisfactory since it is not based on an explicit consideration of all passages in which Xenophon speaks in his own name of the virtues and vices of the two cities. (Cf. pp. 162-163 where he treats as equivalent a passage in which Xenophon speaks in his own name of the "aggressions" committed by Sparta and another passage in which Xenophon reports the utterance of some-

one else on this same subject.) Surely the faintest recollection of the Funeral Speech should have prevented him from concluding that "every Greek was philo-Laconian" (p. 210). Nevertheless, as matters stand, we must be grateful to Henry for having raised the questions which he did raise.

Henry raised these questions because of his dissatisfaction with the prevailing theories regarding the *Hellenica*, and this dissatisfaction was the result of his examination of those theories. Within that examination—the bulk of his book—there occur very few signs of his dissatisfaction with the "patronizing" or "condescending" view of Xenophon on which he speaks so strongly and so sensibly in his Epilogue. Could it be that he became dissatisfied with the "patronizing" view after he had completed the bulk of his book and that he did not think it worth his while to revise that bulk, i.e., that he wrote his book as a whole in a way resembling the way in which Xenophon is believed to have written his *Hellenica*? He is no less vocal on the "enormous deficiencies" of the first two books of the *Hellenica* than the scholars with whom he takes issue. Those two books, he says, are "a lowly and feeble production which at best hardly matches the poorest of his own efforts elsewhere" (pp. 53-54). As for the last five books, their "unity . . . is not great"; they suffer from "the same want of proportion that characterizes the narrative of the early books" (p. 133). In the part dominated by Agesilaus "the naiveté is contrived and the artless expression of great ideals is here wooden and stilted" (p. 156). "Xenophon was writing those parts of the *Hellenica* for those young boys he seems always to have been carrying about with him in his head" (p. 158). But how does it happen that this misplaced or spurious boyishness, while "always" present in Xenophon's head, affects only some parts of the *Hellenica*, and the *Anabasis* hardly at all? More generally stated, what is the purport of the *Hellenica* as a whole?

One of the "theories" which Henry rejects is "the thesis that in the first two books of the *Hellenica* Xenophon was intending to write the formal continuation and conclusion of Thucydides. So far from finding any conceptual relation between the two works, however, we are at a loss to discover much evidence that Xenophon was even acquainted with Thucydides' history or came under its

influence in any respect" (p. 49). If the thesis criticized by Henry were correct—if "Xenophon conceived his works as the completion of the history of Thucydides" (p. 53)—Thucydides' statements about his intention could be used as the key to the intention of the *Hellenica*. Accordingly, that thesis is "perhaps the most fundamental of all the assumptions made about the *Hellenica*; so basic is it, in fact, that it might appear surprising that it should be referred to as an assumption and even more surprising that the assumption should be called into question" (p. 15). And yet that thesis is the outcome of a gross fallacy—of the conclusion from the observation that the *Hellenica* "begins generally" where Thucydides' work ends, to the assertion that "Xenophon must be completing Thucydides" (p. 22, n.). How then can we discover the purport of the *Hellenica*? Henry fails to raise this question. The *Hellenica* is the only book ever written which begins with the expression "Thereafter." The absence of a normal beginning, and in particular of a proem stating the author's intention, is the beginning of the troubles that the book causes the reader. It is usually not observed that within the limits of the grammatically possible the same book also ends with "thereafter": "After the battle there was still greater disorder and confusion in Greece than before. Now let the writing be mine up to this point. As for what happened thereafter, perhaps another will care for it." If we read the first two or more pages of the book in the light of its ending, we may be inclined to think that according to Xenophon there is always confusion in the affairs of men, that what we call "history" is a sequence of states of greater or lesser confusion, and that therefore the historian can begin and end his work more or less at the points most convenient to him. "The more it changes, the more it is the same thing": At the end of the Peloponnesian war for instance, when Lysander sailed into the Piraeus, the exiles returned, and the walls of Athens were pulled down, many thought that that day was the beginning of freedom for Greece (II 2.23) but as Xenophon silently shows by the sequel, they were mistaken. "For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy," says King Edward at the end of the Third Part of King Henry the Sixth, although he is in a manner refuted by the mere presence of the future Richard III. At first glance, the view according to which "the historical process"

consists of confusion followed by confusion differs wholly from Thucydides' view. According to Thucydides, it seems that the historian's beginning and end is imposed on him by the beginning and the end of a grand movement or motion, such as the Peloponnesian war; the unity of Thucydides' history imitates the unity of that war. Hence the *Hellenica*, and even its first two books, cannot in any serious sense be a continuation of Thucydides' history. But this makes it all the more urgent for us to seek the conception which renders Xenophon's account of things worthy of being remembered and which gives the whole of these accounts the kind of unity that they possess. The thought suggested by the title, "Things Greek from 411 to 362," if it can be called a thought, is insufficient. Xenophon's *Banquet* is devoted to playful deeds of perfect gentlemen; for such deeds as well as serious deeds are worthy to be remembered (1.1). The *Hellenica* can be said to be devoted above all to the serious deeds of perfect gentlemen (which were performed between 411 and 362). This suggestion derives perhaps some support from the explicit excursuses occurring in the *Hellenica*, i.e., from the passages described by Xenophon himself as excursuses (for excursuses are passages which do not strictly belong to the theme of a book). The explicit excursuses occurring in the *Hellenica* (VI 1.19 and 5.1, VII 3.4 and 4.1) deal with tyrants, i.e., with such monarchic rulers as by definition are not perfect gentlemen. It almost goes without saying that one cannot lay bare Xenophon's notion of the perfect gentleman except through the study of his Socratic writings.

Finally, in trying to understand any book of Xenophon, one must always keep in mind his view that "it is noble, as well as just and pious, and more pleasant, to remember the good things rather than the bad ones" (*Anabasis* V end). Despite his sad and saddening view of "the historical process" Xenophon always tried to write nobly, justly and piously, and even pleasantly, in this sense. One surely must take this maxim into consideration in order to appreciate properly the passages which Henry disparages as "tender drivell" (p. 160).

Reflections on the purport of the *Hellenica* like those sketched in the preceding lines will induce one to contemplate a revision of the negative judgments on that book and especially on its first

section. For respectable reasons Xenophon could not take history as seriously as Thucydides had done. For a man whose memoirs or recollections par excellence were the private conversations of Socrates, the public speeches and deeds of the perfect gentlemen, in the common meaning of that expression, were not serious enough. Here we have the root of what one may call the levity of the *Hellenica* as contrasted with the gravity of Thucydides' work. On the basis of the *Hellenica* taken by itself one might say that Xenophon's gravity lies in his piety (cf. V 4.1). But gravity in these terms makes Thucydides none too grave. Yet the sole conversation between Xenophon and Socrates reported in the *Anabasis* would seem to show that Xenophon's posture toward piety was not altogether free of levity. Perhaps eventually one will consider the possibility that the fundamental difference between the two great historians consists in this: according to Xenophon there does not exist such a close or direct connection as Thucydides seems to suggest between the *archai* that enable one to understand "history," and the *archai* of the whole.

If one grants that the *Hellenica* is in no serious sense a completion or even a continuation of Thucydides' work, the beginning of the *Hellenica* forces one to admit that this book is a continuation of something. But of what book other than of Thucydides'? Surely Xenophon wished it to appear that he was simply continuing Thucydides; this would explain in particular why he did not take up the thread of the narrative at exactly the point at which Thucydides dropped it by accident or by design.

Scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have invested much labor in trying to show that there is a vast difference within the *Hellenica* between the section devoted to the last years of the Peloponnesian war (i.e., the section which might be regarded as a substitute for the unwritten end of Thucydides' work), and the rest of the *Hellenica*. Henry believes that he has refuted all arguments in favor of that "theory." Yet he does not discuss all of them. In particular he does not discuss the argument based on the fact that the first two books of the *Hellenica* avoid explicit references to sacrifices before battle, while such references occur frequently in the last five books. This difference belongs according to Henry to the class of "inconsequential stuff" (p. 54). Such a dismissal is

unjustified. The author of *Hellenica* III-VII regarded sacrifices before battle and the like as important; Thucydides and the author of *Hellenica* I-II regarded them as unimportant; the two historians regarded the question concerning the importance of sacrifices before battle as important. But this modern scholar asserts that both were wrong without even taking the trouble of refuting them, nay, of making his assertion explicit. Be this as it may, a serious study of all references occurring in *Hellenica* III-VII to sacrifices before battle and the like is indispensable. Xenophon does not in all cases refer to "such inconsequential stuff"; why did he do it in some cases and not in others?

If one reads the first two pages of the *Hellenica* just as "literature," without any scholarly intentions or pretensions, one will find them dull, uninspired, uninformative; one may even find them confused—imitating, as it were, the confusion of a war whose outcome has not yet been decided. Then suddenly the mist and darkness is pierced by a flash of lightning: Alcibiades himself appears, calls together an assembly of the Athenian warriors and says that they must fight on sea, fight on land and fight on walls, for "we have no money but the enemies have plenty of it from the king." The previous day Alcibiades had taken appropriate measures so that no news about his naval arrangements could leak out to the enemy: "whoever is caught sailing across to the opposite coast, death will be the punishment." If we stop here and go back to the beginning, we note that the name of Alcibiades is mentioned up to this point (I 1.1-15) twice as often as the name of any other individual. Xenophon thus prepares his answer to the question concerning the proximate cause (and not only the proximate cause) of Athens' final defeat: Lysander's decisive victory over the Athenians was rendered possible by the Athenian generals' contemptuous rejection of Alcibiades' advice (II 1.25-26). This subdued praise of Alcibiades, this implicit suggestion that if Alcibiades had been in command, Lysander would not have won his decisive victory, was the utmost that a man in circumstances such as the author of *Memoabilia* I 2.12-13 could do. By understanding the crucial importance of Alcibiades in the final stage of the Peloponnesian war (cf. also I 5.9), one understands other incidents narrated in the beginning of the *Hellenica* without crossing the t's and dotting the i's.

Examples of this are, for instance, the contrast between the Athenian generals' silly imprudence leading to the Spartan victory at Aegospotami, and Callicratidas' noble ("boyish") imprudence leading to the Athenian victory at the Arginusae, a victory followed by the Athenian *demos* murdering the victorious Athenian generals; or the contrast between the fate of those generals and even of Alcibiades and the fate of Hermocrates who was exiled (not murdered) only after he had saved Syracuse. Henry however complains about Xenophon's devoting 22 lines to "the momentous encounter" at Abydus and 36 lines to Hermocrates' "pleasant adieu" (p. 9).

One of the best sections of Henry's book is his interpretation of Xenophon's judgment on the battle of Coronea (pp. 147-154). He realizes that that judgment implies, or suggests in a subdued manner, an unfavorable judgment about the "reckless tactics" employed by Agesilaus in that battle. But it is necessary to pursue this theme much further, i.e., Xenophon's concealed and serious judgment on Agesilaus. I would not hesitate to say that Agesilaus was not a man after Xenophon's heart. How could a man with Xenophon's lack of pomposity and even gravity have unqualifiedly liked a man as absurd, as pompous, as theatrical as the Agesilaus of Xenophon's description (as distinguished from his explicit judgments)?⁹ The man after Xenophon's heart was Agesilaus' predecessor in command, Dercylidas, whom people gave the nickname "Sisyphus," a man who was once punished for his lack of discipline, who in eight days took nine cities, who did everything with the greatest deftness and minimum of fuss, and who always liked to be away from home (from Sparta). Xenophon's posture toward Agesilaus, which at first glance seems to be one of the keys to the understanding of his mind, becomes more and more a riddle the more one understands Xenophon. Agesilaus seems to have thought highly of Xenophon (Plutarch, *Agesilaus* 20.2); he, the king and the descendant of a long line of kings, may have been Xenophon's *praesidium et dulce decus*. Thus it would not be surprising if Xenophon was grateful and loyal to him. But Xenophon knew that there are duties higher than those imposed by gratitude and loyalty, that the duties imposed by gratitude and loyalty may sometimes have to be superseded by the duty to see things as they are and to communicate one's insights to those who are by nature

and training fit for them. The proof of this is the difference between his obtrusive and his unobtrusive judgments on Agesilaus.

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