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The following Paper was then read by the Author :—

*THE RULES OF EVIDENCE AS APPLICABLE TO
CREDIBILITY OF HISTORY.* By W. FORSYTH,
Esq., Q.C., LL.D., M.P.

TO believe without any evidence at all is irrational; but to disbelieve against sufficient evidence is equally irrational.

By sufficient evidence I mean such an amount of proof as satisfies an unprejudiced mind beyond all reasonable doubt. Mathematical truth alone admits of *demonstration*. All other kinds of truth can only be proved by probabilities, which vary in an almost infinite degree, from the faintest kind of presumption to what is called moral certainty, which is accepted as practically equivalent to demonstration.

Upon evidence depends all our knowledge of past events; and it is astonishing how little is often sufficient to satisfy us. The mere fact of its being written in a book is enough to make no inconsiderable number of readers believe in the truth of a statement, without reflecting whether the author had or had not the means of ascertaining the truth; for if he had, we may be justified in putting faith in his honesty; but if he had not, his own assertion is worth nothing.

By proof I mean anything that serves, either mediately or immediately, to convince the mind of the truth or falsehood of a fact or proposition; and proofs differ according to the subject-matter of the thing to be proved.

One of the most common, and, at the same time, most satisfactory modes of proof as to things which do not fall within the experience of the senses is Induction, by which is meant the inference drawn from proved or admitted facts. It is for instance by induction that the general facts of Natural History are proved. When we say that all ruminant animals are cloven-footed, we cannot show any necessary connection between these physical phenomena, but having ascertained by a very large number of instances that they co-exist, and that in

no single case that has come under the observation of naturalists they fail, we are led irresistibly to the conclusion that the proposition is universally true, and we should predicate with confidence if a new race of animals were discovered in some hitherto unknown region, that if they are ruminants they are also cloven-footed. The underlying ground of belief in this case is our innate conviction of the prevalence of uniformity in Nature in things of the same kind. This uniformity we call a Law.

One test of the probability of a fact is its consistency with other facts previously known or admitted to be true—such as the constitution of human nature, the ordinary course of events, or some well-established truth. But it must be borne in mind, as Laplace has said, although perhaps in a different sense, that “Probability has reference partly to our ignorance, partly to our knowledge.” We must be tolerably sure we do know the other facts—and that they are not really inconsistent with the fact in dispute. Otherwise we shall be following the example of the King of Siam, who rejected as incredible the statement of the Dutch ambassador, that water could become a solid mass. This was simply because he had never seen or heard of it before; and it was contrary to his limited experience, or what he thought a law of nature. Hume felt the difficulty of this instance in the way of his argument against miracles, and attempts to get over it by saying that though the fact was not contrary to the king’s experience, it was not conformable to it. But this is not a fair way of putting it. Frost *was* contrary to the king’s experience as much as walking on the water without support is contrary to ours. And it cannot be denied that when by universal experience certain laws of nature are known to exist, it requires the strongest possible evidence to make us believe in any deviation from them. Hume’s famous argument against miracles is, that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact, and that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, because it is always more likely that the testimony should be false than that the miracle should be true.

The late John Stuart Mill has dealt with this argument in his *Logic*, and, I think, conclusively. He says that Hume’s celebrated doctrine, that nothing is credible which is contrary to experience, or at variance with the laws of nature, is merely the very plain and harmless proposition that whatever is contrary to a complete induction is incredible. And he goes on to show that any alleged fact is only contradictory to a law of causation when it is said to happen without an adequate coun-

teracting cause. "Now," says Mill, "in the case of an alleged miracle the assertion is the exact opposite of this A miracle is no contradiction to the law of cause and effect; it is a new effect supposed to be produced by the introduction of a new cause." He adds, truly enough, "That if we do not already believe in supernatural agencies no miracle can prove to us their existence." And we may freely admit with him, that "there is an antecedent improbability in every miracle, which in order to outweigh it, requires an extraordinary strength of *antecedent* probability derived from the special circumstances of the case." I shall have occasion to allude to the subject of miracles again hereafter.

History, from the Greek *ἱστορία*, properly signifies "investigation" or "research," and implies, therefore, etymologically, a narrative based upon inquiry about facts.

Few persons consider what the evidence is of the genuineness of books attributed to authors who lived before the invention of printing, most of which are derived from manuscripts which themselves were only copies, the originals having been utterly destroyed or lost. This includes all the histories of Greece and Rome written by classic authors. I have dealt with this subject in a lecture I delivered in 1872, in the Hall of the Inner Temple, which has since been published under the title of *History of Ancient Manuscripts*. I have not time to enter upon it here, but it is a very interesting subject of inquiry. I will only mention what Tischendorf, the great German Biblical scholar says, about the manuscripts of the New Testament: "Providence has ordained for the New Testament more sources of the greatest antiquity than are possessed by all the old Greek literature put together."

In one of his essays Lord Macaulay says of history:—"Perfectly and absolutely true it cannot be: for to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record *all* the slightest particulars of the slightest transactions—all the things done, and all the words uttered during the time of which it treats. The omission of any circumstance, however insignificant, would be a defect. If history were written thus, the Bodleian library would not contain the occurrences of a week." And Lord Macaulay might have added that no one would care to have such a mass of useless verbiage in existence. He is surely wrong in saying that history is not absolutely true simply because it does not give us *all* the particulars of the slightest transactions. Even in a court of justice we do not think that a witness is not telling the absolute truth because he does not relate every particular, however insignificant, of the fact or conversation to which he

deposes. And this leads me to consider the difference between historical and judicial evidence. The late Sir George Cornewall Lewis says in that most valuable and learned work, *The Credibility of the Early Roman History* (Preface, p. 16), "Historical evidence, like judicial evidence, is founded on the testimony of credible witnesses. Unless those witnesses had personal and immediate perception of the facts which they report, unless they said and heard what they undertake to relate as having happened, their evidence is not entitled to credit. As all original witnesses must be contemporary with the events which they attest, it is a necessary condition for the credibility of a witness that he be a contemporary, though a contemporary is not necessarily a credible witness. Unless, therefore, a historical account can be traced by probable proof to the testimony of contemporaries, the first condition of credibility fails." If, however, it is meant to be asserted that the same degree of certainty ought to be required in historical that is required in judicial evidence, it would be exacting too much, and carrying scepticism too far. In the first place, the thing is an impossibility, and the consequence would be, that we should be logically compelled to withhold our belief from nine-tenths of so-called historical facts about which we have really no doubt at all. But, secondly, the circumstances are wholly different. Judicial inquiries relate to minute and special facts in dispute, where two parties are opposed to each other, and it is the duty and interest of both to adduce the best evidence of which the thing to be proved is susceptible. And in all civilized communities, their systems of jurisprudence lay down technical rules of evidence—in some countries much more strict than in others—which circumscribe the range of proofs. For instance, in France, hearsay evidence is always admitted; in England it is always excluded. In some parts of Germany a sort of arithmetical scale is applied to the testimony of witnesses. Different countries apply different rules of legal presumption, which are really not instruments of truth, but technical and positive modes of quieting controversy. But, to quote the words of an eminent writer on the law of evidence, "However widely different codes may vary from each other in matters of arbitrary positive institution, and of mere artificial creation, the general means of investigating the truth of contested facts must be common to all. Every rational system which provides the means of proof must be founded on experience and reason, on a well-grounded knowledge of human nature and conduct, on a consideration of the value of testimony, and on the weight due to coincident circumstances."—Starkie *On the Law of Evidence* (Preface).

But history deals with general rather than particular facts—with results rather than details—and from the nature and necessity of the case must be content with looser modes of proof than is necessary or expedient in judicial trials. All that we are entitled to ask from her is such an amount of evidence for the truth of the facts which she records as would satisfy the understanding of a reasonable man in the ordinary affairs of life. Every day we act upon evidence which, if offered in a court of justice, would be rejected. Too often we act upon very slight and insufficient evidence, especially in cases affecting the character of others; but in so far as we do this we act wrongly; and in the same manner we act wrongly when we accept as true the mere statement of a historian on any question where truth is of importance, when we have it in our power to examine his authorities and judge of their value for ourselves.

It is part of the constitution of human nature to confide in the veracity of others. If this were not so, a man's belief would be limited to matters within his own personal experience, and no progress could be made in knowledge, nor would improvement be possible. There is a tacit assumption, when we yield to the force of oral evidence, of what I may call the major premiss of our syllogism, viz., that men will generally speak the truth. Experience teaches us, if indeed it is not an intuitive impulse, to put faith in human testimony.

How beautiful is the trusting simplicity of childhood, and the absolute reliance which a child places in the word of its parents. But as we grow older this confidence is shaken, and experience compels us to acquiesce in the truth of the melancholy maxim of Lord Chatham, that "confidence is a plant of slow growth in an aged bosom." That stern monitor experience tells us that it by no means follows that because we have contemporary testimony to a fact the fact is true. Witnesses are often mistaken, and their evidence is not unfrequently false. We must, therefore, so far as is possible, apply certain rules by which to test the probability of its truth. I have already alluded to one test of probability, and that is the agreement of the fact with other facts known or admitted to be true. Another test is the concurrence of the testimony of independent witnesses, always supposing that each of them has had the means of knowing the fact or facts to be ascertained. Of course I exclude all copying from the same original, and this, perhaps, is implied in the word independent. As Archbishop Whately has observed, "For though in such a case each of the witnesses should be considered as unworthy of credit, and even much more likely to speak falsehood than

truth, still the chances might be infinite against their all agreeing in the same falsehood" (*Rhetoric*, pt. i. ch. ii. sec. 4). And in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Dr. Campbell says: "It deserves likewise to be attended to on this subject, that in a number of concurrent testimonies (in cases wherein there could have been no previous concert) there is a probability distinct from that which may be termed the sum of the probabilities resulting from the testimonies of the witnesses, a probability which would remain even though the witnesses were of such a character as to merit no faith at all. This probability arises purely from the concurrence itself. That such a concurrence should spring from chance is as one to infinite; that is, in other words, morally impossible." Lord Mansfield once said, with reference to the credit to be given to certain reporters, "It is objected that these are books of no authority, but if both the reporters were the worst that ever reported, if substantially they report a case in the same way, it is demonstration of the truth of what they report or they could not agree" (*R. v. George*, 1 Cowp. 16).

Generally speaking, the silence of contemporary writers as to a fact throws strong suspicion on its genuineness. But this test is not conclusive, for we may have overpowering evidence *aliunde* of its truth. Lord Macaulay says: "We have read books called histories of England under the reign of George II. in which the rise of Methodism is not even mentioned." And Varnhagen von Ense mentions in his Diary that Humboldt had adduced "three important and perfectly undeniable matters of fact as to which no evidence is to be found where it would be most anticipated. In the archives of Barcelona no trace of the triumphal entry of Columbus into that city; in Marco Polo no allusion to the Chinese Wall; in the archives of Portugal nothing about the voyages of Amerigo Vespucci in the service of that crown." But notwithstanding this, the silence of contemporary authority is one of the notes of falsehood with respect to an alleged historical fact. How do we know that the story of William Tell and his shooting an arrow at an apple on his son's head is untrue? Because we do not find it in contemporary history; and the first mention of it as a Swiss legend occurs in the chronicle of Melchior Russ, registrar at Lucerne, some two hundred years later. But, in addition, we find that the same story is told in Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote in the twelfth century, of a Danish hero; a similar tale was current in Ireland; and in the *Bilkinsaga* it is told of the mythical Egil, the brother of Wieland, the smith. It also occurs in the legendary fables of Holstein, Norway, and other countries; and although it is impossible to trace the origin of the story, it is certain that no

such occurrence happened in Switzerland. It is one of the *enfants trouvés* of historical literature, which can lay no claim to legitimate paternity.

Why do we reject the story of the blind Belisarius begging his bread in the streets of Constantinople? Because Procopius, who was a contemporary historian, and accompanied Belisarius in his Eastern wars, in Africa, and in Italy, says nothing in his account of the life and misfortunes of Justinian's famous general, of his blindness or beggary; because no other contemporary writer mentions them, and because the first hint of them occurs in some Greek verses written by John Tzetzes, a grammarian, about 600 years after the death of Belisarius. Why do we not believe the fable of Pope Joan, whose accouchement is said to have taken place in the midst of a procession at Rome? Because no contemporary author makes mention of such an astounding occurrence, and we find the first allusion to it in the *Chronicon* of Marianus Scotus, who lived two hundred years afterwards. Even that passage is supposed to be an interpolation, and the first author who really tells the story is Stephen de Bourbon in the thirteenth century. A not improbable explanation of it is that one of the Popes, who led an immoral life, had a mistress named Joan, who had such influence over him that she was called *Papesse*, and from this the story had its origin.

Why do intelligent and well-educated men accept as true the miracles of the New Testament, and reject as untrue the legends of the Saints? This is not the place, nor would it be possible within the limits to which I must confine myself, to go into the proofs of the miracles related in the Gospels and the Acts. But briefly and summarily it may be said that we believe them,—1. Because they are recorded by eye-witnesses, who must either have been the dupes of an imposture or the fabricators of a falsehood. 2. They were done openly in the face of enemies who, so far as we know, never denied them. 3. They were done with an adequate motive and cause. 4. They serve to explain the origin of a religion which has lasted for eighteen centuries and won its way in spite of the fiercest opposition. Now, applying these tests to the legends of the Saints, we find that they fail in almost every particular! Hardly any of them rest on the testimony of eye-witnesses. They are almost always isolated acts done in a corner, and not *coram populo*. And the most famous of them, which is an exception to the rule, I mean the cutting out of the roots of the tongues of a number of Christians at Tipasa, who afterwards spoke articulately and distinctly, has been shown by Mr. Twistleton in his able work, *The Tongue not Essential to Speech*, to be no miracle

at all, but perfectly explainable by natural causes. Moreover, the mediæval miracles are for the most part silly, unmeaning, and childish, and they are often recorded by writers who lived long after they are said to have occurred, who breathed an atmosphere of credulity and were utterly destitute of the critical faculty. Such considerations are quite sufficient to justify our unbelief. If it is objected that intelligent Roman Catholics believe them, we answer that they are the disciples of a system which forbids the right of private judgment on questions determined by the authority of the Church; and we may well think it easy for men who believe in the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Infallibility of the Pope, to believe also in the winking of an image of the Virgin, the liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius, and the transportation through the air of a house of the Virgin from Palestine to Loretto. Thus we find a man of the intelligence of Dr. Newman saying: "Crucifixes have bowed the head to the suppliant, and Madonnas have bent their eyes on assembled crowds. St. Januarius's blood liquefies periodically at Naples, and St. Winifred's well is the source of wonders even in an unbelieving country. . . . St. Francis Xavier turned salt water into fresh for five hundred travellers; St. Raymond was transported over the sea on his cloak; St. Andrew shone brightly in the dark I need not continue the catalogue. It is agreed on both sides; the two parties join issue over a fact—that fact is the claim of miracles on the part of the Catholic Church. It is the Protestant's charge, and it is our glory."

I may here in passing allude to the monstrous theory of Strauss that the simple narratives in the four Gospels are mere myths, which grew out of a body of belief which, somehow or other, had taken possession of men's minds in the second century of our era, and are no more real than the legends of Theseus and Hercules. Our common sense revolts against such an absurdity, and if Strauss himself really believed it, it only shows that no credulity can be greater or more childish than the credulity of an infidel.

Why do we believe Thucydides and disbelieve Livy? I shall speak of both of these writers more fully hereafter, but here I may say that we believe Thucydides because he was a contemporary of the events which he relates; he was himself an actor in some of them: he had access to authentic information, both oral and monumental, and we have no reason to distrust his veracity. Of course I do not include the long speeches he puts into the mouths of the characters he introduces, for they are obviously manufactured, or, at all events, dressed up for the occasion, according to a practice very common in

antiquity. We disbelieve a great part of the narrative of Livy for the following reasons. We know that he could have had no trustworthy authority for many of his statements respecting the early history of Rome: some of those statements are intrinsically improbable, if not incredible: he lived centuries later than many of the events which he records, and he had not the critical faculty which enables an historian of the past, by a kind of instinct, to separate the true from the false. To this I must add the essentially Roman prejudice in favour of everything that would tell in favour of the greatness and glory of Rome. Hence his unfair account of the early wars of the Republic, and the injustice with which he has treated Hannibal.

We believe the story of the Anabasis and Retreat of the Ten Thousand, because the historian was the general who commanded the Greeks in that famous expedition; but we reject his fables about dreams, omens, and prophecies, because we know that he was credulous about such things, and they were not matters which came within the scope of his own personal observation.

Our own early historians were as careless as their readers were credulous. King Lear, the son of Bladud, was accepted as an historical personage; and even Milton, in his History of England, admits the fable "of Brutus and his line with the whole progeny of kings to Julius Cæsar," although it is impossible not to see that he has little faith in it. But he says, "certain or uncertain, be that upon the credit of those whom I must follow; so far as keeps aloof from impossible and absurd, attested by ancient writers from books more ancient, I refuse not as the due and proper subject of story." Now, why do we refuse to believe the narrative? Simply because, although it may contain nothing "impossible or absurd," which is Milton's sole rule of exception, we know that the authors could not possibly have had any authentic information about the facts which they record. A child is as competent to write history as a grown-up man, if the statements of preceding authors are merely servilely copied, and no critical examination is made of the sources of their authority and the means they had of ascertaining the truth.

Dates are often of the utmost importance in verifying historical facts, but the dates themselves are sometimes uncertain. In Grecian history the general custom was to reckon by the year of the Olympiad, and therefore it is essential to know the date of the first year of the first Olympiad. Now, how do we ascertain this? If you will look into Clinton's *Fasti Hellenici*, p. 150, you will see that it is taken to correspond with 776 B.C., and this is proved by a curious *consensus* of authorities. The

games were celebrated at intervals of four years, and if we know independently the exact date of an event, and find it placed in the particular year of a particular Olympiad, we can, by reckoning backwards, ascertain accurately the date of the first. For instance, we know, from contemporary or other evidence, that the consulships of C. Pompeius Gallus and Q. Verannius, at Rome, coincided with the first year of the 207th Olympiad, and we know the year of the Christian era of those consulships: this was the year A.D. 49. Now, 206 Olympiads or 824 years had elapsed since the beginning of the first, and this gives the year B.C. 776 as its date.

It is no doubt difficult to invent wholly so-called historical facts, which, if closely compared with known contemporaneous occurrences and ascertained dates, may not be shown to be false. But it is often still more difficult to find the material for such criticism. Oblivion may have swallowed up the records of the past, and then the only tests we can apply are the inherent probability or improbability of the alleged facts, their consistency or inconsistency with themselves, and our knowledge of the means which the writer possessed of being acquainted with their truth. I have already pointed out the untrustworthiness of historical statements first made by authors who lived long after the events which they record. And I have also shown that it is by no means altogether safe to gauge the credibility of a fact by its agreement or disagreement with probability; but as regards the test supplied by the means of comparing historical allegations with other historical facts which have been sufficiently proved, some of the most brilliant triumphs of criticism have been won by applying it. My time is too limited to allow me to adduce more than one or two specimens of this, and I think I cannot do better than cite that splendid example of scholarship and criticism, Bentley's *Dissertation on the Genuineness of the Epistles of Phalaris*. The history of its authorship is this. About the year 1690, Sir William Temple published an essay upon Ancient and Modern Learning, in which he maintained the superiority of the ancients. And in support of his position, "that the oldest books we have are still in their kind the best," he adduced the "Fables of Æsop" and the "Epistles of Phalaris." This attracted attention to the epistles, and a new edition of them was given to the world by the Hon. Charles Boyle; and then Bentley published his *Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris*, the object being to prove that they were spurious. I may mention, in passing, that an amusing parody of the original controversy between the respective champions of ancient and modern learning was written by Swift, called "The Battle of the Books." It may be interesting to point out some of the proofs by which Bentley

for ever destroyed the credit which had been given to these epistles:—

- (1.) He shows that in them Phalaris speaks of borrowing money from the inhabitants of a town in Sicily nearly three centuries before that town was built.
- (2.) Phalaris is represented as giving to the physician a present of cups, called by the name of a Corinthian potter who lived more than a hundred years after Phalaris' death.
- (3.) Phalaris speaks of Zancle and Messene as distinct towns, whereas, in truth, Zancle was merely the ancient name of Messene.
- (4.) In one of his letters, Phalaris addresses Pythagoras as a philosopher, and speaks of his system of philosophy, whereas we know that Pythagoras first called himself a philo-sophos, or lover of wisdom, when Leon of Sicyon asked him what he was. And it is impossible to believe that the term was in vogue, or even known to Phalaris, who, when he wrote the letter, had never seen Pythagoras.
- (5.) Phalaris is very angry with Aristolochus for writing tragedies against him at a time when the word tragedy was utterly unknown.
- (6.) Phalaris writes in Attic Greek, whereas, as a Sicilian, his dialect would have been Doric.

Let me illustrate this kind of criticism by a different example. On the Monte Cavallo—the old Quirinal Hill, at Rome—stand two colossal statues of horses, called “Colossi di Monte Cavallo.” Under one pedestal are, or were, inscribed the words *Opus Phidiæ*, under the other *Opus Praxitelis*. But formerly there were two more elaborate inscriptions, one to the effect that Phidias had here sculptured Bucephalus, the horse of Alexander the Great; and the other that Praxiteles, in competition with Phidias, had sculptured another figure of the same horse, Bucephalus. Now Phidias died somewhere about 432 B.C. Praxiteles flourished in 364 B.C., nearly a century later, and Alexander the Great was not born until 356 B.C. This was too much for even the credulity of a bygone generation, and Pope Urban VIII. effaced the inscriptions, and substituted for them the simple words *Opus Phidiæ* and *Opus Praxitelis*, which had at all events the merit of not being guilty of a palpable anachronism, although each is most probably absolutely untrue. But such an anachronism is not quite so bad as that of the writer in a *feuilleton* of the *Constitutionnel* (supposed to have been Lamartine), who says, “The tombs of great poets inspire great passions. It was at Tasso's tomb that Petrarch nourished his respectful remembrance of *Laura!*”

Now, Petrarch died in 1374, and Tasso published his *Gerusalemme Liberata* in 1581!

This is very different from any argument against the genuineness of a fact founded merely on discrepancies of statement. A curious instance of this occurs in the accounts given of the execution of the Earl of Argyle in 1661. Clarendon says that he was condemned to be hanged, and executed. Burnet and Echard say that he was beheaded. This has been made use of by Paley, in his *Evidences of the Christian Religion*, with reference to the variance in the statements of the Evangelists as to the circumstances of the Crucifixion. No one doubts that Argyle was executed, which is the important fact; and there would be still less reason to doubt the fact of the Crucifixion, however the Evangelists may differ in minute details. It is, of course, a difficulty in the way of those who assert the literal and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, but that is a subject foreign to my purpose, and too large to be dealt with by a passing notice in such an address as this.

It is a strange paradox that the belief of some writers and many readers seems to increase in the inverse ratio of the probabilities of the case. How else can we account for the fact that the more history recedes into the darkness of the past, bold statements are received with unquestioning credulity. Thus Dr. Hales in his work on chronology assures us that the thirty reigns of the Athenian kings and archons from Cecrops to Creon, form "one of the most authentic and correct documents to be found in the whole range of profane chronology,"—the truth being that the reigns of the kings are little better than fabulous; and Bunsen, in his *Egypt's Place in Universal History*, undertakes to reconstruct the authentic chronology of Egypt for a period of nearly 4,000 years before Christ, and "to restore to the ancient history of the world the vital energy of which it has been so long deprived," although his chief authorities, independently of some monumental inscriptions, are Eratosthenes and Manetho, writers who lived more than 3,000 years after the period which they are supposed to authenticate. Now Manetho composed his history from two sources, temple registers and popular legends. I need say nothing about the latter, but what possible ground have we for believing that their priest-kept registers contained true accounts of events that happened thirty or forty centuries before the historian inspected them? Eratosthenes, at the request of Ptolemy, drew up a list of thirty-eight Theban kings, occupying a period of more than a thousand years: and it is sufficient to say with Mr. Grote that he "delivered positive opinions upon a point on which no sufficient data was accessible, and therefore

was not a guide to be followed. History thus written is nothing but clever guess-work, and amounts to no more than plausible conjecture, in which the chances are almost infinite that the narrative is, if not wholly, at least materially wrong. As the speculation of an ingenious mind it may be interesting, but as a record of facts it is worthless."

In his essay on the uncertainty of the history of the first four centuries of Rome, in the *Memoirs of the Academy of Inscriptions*, tome vi. p. 71, M. de Pouilly says:—"History is the narrative of a fact which we derive from those whom we know to have been witnesses of it. It results from this definition that for a history to be authentic its author, or at all events the person on whose narrative it is based, must have lived at the time when the events happened." And the same writer adds, "Tradition is a popular rumour of which the source is not known. It is a chain of which we hold one end, but the other is lost in the abysmal depths of the past."

To show the danger of trusting to tradition, I may take as an illustration the amusing game called "Russian Scandal," where a party being seated together in a row, a person at one end whispers some story into the ear of his neighbour, who repeats it in the same manner to the one next to him, and so on until it comes to the last, who tells aloud what he has heard. It will be generally found that the story thus transmitted varies essentially from the story as originally told, and the experience of every one as to the gossip of society teaches the same lesson. Laplace, in his *Essai Philosophique sur les Probabilités*, has made this the subject of a mathematical calculation. He says, "Suppose a fact to be transmitted through twenty persons; the first communicating it to the second, the second to the third, &c., and let the probability of each testimony be expressed by nine-tenths (that is, suppose that of ten reports made by each witness nine only are true), then at every time the story passes from one witness to another the evidence is reduced to nine-tenths of what it was before. Thus, after it has passed through the whole twenty, the evidence will be found to be less than one-eighth."

But belief by no means depends upon actual testimony. We believe in the results of mathematical inquiry by reasoning. We believe in the existence of a Creator by arguments drawn from design and other considerations. We may or may not believe that the planets are inhabited from arguments drawn from analogy. We believe many other facts from their inherent probability, and so on. But in many such cases it would be more proper to speak of our persuasion than our belief, by

which I mean, that our minds stop short of full conviction ; but on weighing the evidence or arguments on both sides in opposite scales, we see that the balance inclines one way more than the other, and therefore we are disposed to think that such and such a proposition is true. This applies to many of the disputed facts of history. In his *Grammar of Assent*, in order to show that certitude is the result of arguments which, taken in the letter, and not in their full implicit sense, are but probabilities, Newman takes the case of the following propositions :—

- (1.) That we are absolutely certain that Great Britain is an island. But how do we know this? Those who have actually circumnavigated the country have a right to be certain ; but which of us has done this, and which of us has even met with any one who tells us that he has done it? Newman shows by the common arguments that there would be a manifest *reductio ad absurdum* attached to the notion that we can be deceived on such a point as this, but at the same time that we are satisfied with proof which is not of the highest kind possible.
- (2.) He takes the question of the authorship of the *Æneid*, the plays attributed to Terence, and the so-called histories of Livy and of Tacitus, which the Abbé Hardouin maintained were the forgeries of the monks of the thirteenth century. We must not forget that our knowledge of the ancient classics comes entirely from mediæval copies of them made by monks from manuscripts which now no longer exist. How do we know that some of these so-called copies were not actual forgeries? * The strongest argument against such a supposition is our disbelief in the ability of mediæval monks to produce such works ; and Newman says, justly enough, that an instinctive sense of this and a faith in testimony are the sufficient but undeveloped argument on which to ground our certitude. To faith in testimony we must add the absence of dissentient claims, and this will be found to be one of the most cogent reasons for our belief.
- (3.) Newman asks, What are my grounds for thinking that I, in my particular case, shall die? What is the distinct evidence on which I allow myself to be certain? Death to me is a future event. How do I know that, because all past generations have died, the same

* "To forge and counterfeit books and father them upon great names has been a practice almost as old as letters."—Bentley's *Dissertation on Phalaris*.

law must hold with regard to myself or others? He says, that the strongest proof I have for my inevitable mortality is the *reductio ad absurdum*; but I think that here he is mistaken that there is *reductio ad absurdum*, in the proper sense of the term, in the belief that I shall never die, although we may admit, with Newman, that there is a surplusage of belief over proof when I determine that I individually must die.

In that very clever and amusing *jeu d'esprit* by Archbishop Whately, *Historic Doubts relative to Napoleon Buona-partie*, he has shown that logically we are not justified in believing that such a person as the first Emperor of the French ever existed. To state such a proposition seems to carry with it its own refutation, but the mock-serious argument of the Archbishop is sustained with wonderful skill and ability. His object, of course, was to show that the kind of reasoning by which infidels attempt to shake our faith in the narrative of Scripture *ought* equally to shake our belief in the existence of the first Napoleon.

I will now say a few words about the father of history, Herodotus, and briefly compare him with Thucydides.

In his *Literature of Greece*, Colonel Mure calls Herodotus "an essentially honest and veracious historian," and says that, "rigid, in fact, as has been the scrutiny to which his text has been subjected, no distinct case of wilful misstatement or perversion of fact has been substantiated against him." Now what were the materials which Herodotus had for composing his history? They were (1.) previous histories; (2.) monumental records preserved in national repositories and religious sanctuaries or places of public resort. He himself quotes only one older historian, Hecataeus of Miletus, but several others had written before him, such as Œgeon of Samos, Bion, and Deïochus of Proconnesus, Endemus of Paros, Charon of Lampsacus and Pherecydes of Leros. We do not, however, know that Herodotus really had access to copies of their manuscripts, which would have been written on *papyri*, and must have been few and costly. He was a great traveller and a diligent inquirer, and obtained a considerable part of his information from what he saw with his own eyes, and heard from persons acquainted with the facts. He tells us that he sifted and compared conflicting statements, and he often rejected stories which he did not think he had warrant for believing. But it is curious that in some cases his scepticism is now known to have been wrong. Thus he disbelieves the story of the circumnavigation of Africa by the Phœnicians in the seventh century

before our era, on account of the marvel related by the voyagers, that as they sailed "they had the sun on their right," which is the strongest possible confirmation of the truth of the account. He cautiously doubts the existence of an amber-yielding district on the Northern Sea, and of any islands called Cassiterides, from which tin was said to be brought. But we know that amber is found on the shores of the Baltic, and that the Cassiterides were our own Scilly Islands. Some of his statements, which were formerly regarded as impossible or incredible marvels, have, by the progress of later discovery, been proved to be true. Such are his accounts of a race of men dwelling upon scaffoldings in Lake Prasias and living upon fish (v. 16), in fact, Lacustrians; of a breed of sheep in Arabia with such long tails that they were supported on trucks to preserve them from injury (iii. 13), as is the case in North Africa, and, I believe, in some parts of Spain at the present day. And to show that he is by no means the *gobemouche* that he is sometimes represented, I may instance what he says of the Arimaspians, a one-eyed race, who stole gold from the griffins, whom Milton thus mentions:—

"As when a gryphon in the wilderness,
With winged course o'er hill or moory dale,
Pursues the Arimaspians, who by stealth,
And from his wakeful custody purloined
The guarded gold."

Herodotus says that he cannot persuade himself to believe the story, giving the sensible reason that there cannot be a race of men with one eye, who in all things else resemble the rest of mankind.

The value of Thucydides as a historian depends first on our faith in his honesty, and secondly on the fact that he had access to contemporary testimony both oral and monumental. He was born about twenty-five years before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war, and he took part in some of its events; but he most chiefly relied for information on the statements of others who had themselves been actors in the scenes that they described. He sometimes quotes inscriptions on monuments (i. 132-134), and letters, and despatches (iv. 50; vii. 8; viii. 50), of which he had no doubt seen the originals or copies. He clearly was a man of sound judgment and great intelligence. Upon the whole we have as good reason for believing the history of Thucydides as we have for believing any other profane author; but, as I have before observed, we are not to suppose that the long speeches which he puts into the mouths of Pericles and others were spoken as he reports them. They are rather forms of stating the arguments on both sides, such as Thucydides understood them.

Until a comparatively recent period the history of Rome, as told by Livy, was implicitly believed; and as much credit was given to his account of the regal government of Rome as to the annals of the empire by Tacitus, a contemporary writer. Machiavel, in his *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*, accepts the story of the twelve kings as not less real than the story of the lives of the twelve Cæsars.

The first scholar who seems to have questioned the truth of the old narrative about Rome was Cluverius (a Latinized name for Philip Cluver, who was born in Dantzic in 1580). He published, in 1624, a book called *Italia Antiqua*, in which he expressed his opinion that Roman history before the capture of the city by the Gauls was all uncertain; and he rejected the account of Trojan settlement, in Latium, the Alban dynasty, and the story of the foundation of Rome by Romulus. Others followed in the same track; I may mention Bochart, and Perizonius, and Pouilly, until at last the subject received an exhaustive examination in the remarkable work of Beaufort, a French Protestant refugee, who published at Utrecht, in 1738, his *Dissertation sur l'Incertitude des Cinq Premiers Siècles de l'Histoire Romaine*.

Beaufort is entitled to the honour of ranking as the pioneer of a new school of criticism; but it was not until the publication of Niebuhr's *History of Rome*, in 1811-12, that the subject attracted the attention it deserved. This work may be said to have revolutionized the world of thought in relation to Roman history. Its destructive power is irresistible, but its constructive power is very different. I will not say that Niebuhr endeavoured to evolve a history of Rome out of his own consciousness—like the famous story of the camel evolved by one of his countrymen—but he certainly trusted a great deal too much to sagacity of conjecture, which he dignified by the title of "discovery." He even goes so far as to liken his faculty in that respect to the power of divination—the *μαντεία* of the Greeks (vol. iii. p. 318). But it is one thing for a Cuvier or an Owen to build up the form of an animal from a single bone, and another for a historian to presume to construct a narrative of the distant past from a few isolated hints, or even isolated facts. In the animal form there is a correlation of parts, and a law of typical conformity, which enables the anatomist to ascend with almost unerring certainty from bone to limb, and from limb to body, and to clothe the body with its proper integuments, until we can see by the eye of imagination the very form that has ceased to exist upon the earth for perhaps millions of years. But such an induction is not possible in the case of human affairs and human actions; *varium et mutabile semper*

would be their appropriate motto, and the events that actually happen often verify the saying that truth is stranger than fiction.

There is an old Scotch proverb, "Give a romancer a hair and he will make a tether of it," and this applies to a certain school of writers of history. Out of a scrap of prose or a line of verse, or a broken fragment of an inscription, they will, by the aid of an active imagination, construct whole pages of narrative. The character of a people and the state of its society will be inferred from a few lines which may, when they were written, have been quite untrue, or mere satire, or a gross exaggeration. The historian in modern times who has been most conspicuous for the use of such materials is Lord Macaulay. The result is, that not consciously but inevitably truth is sacrificed to effect. I will mention two instances of this—his account of the Highlands, and his account of the state of the English clergy in the seventeenth century.

It is not pleasant to detract from the merit of a work of such brilliancy as Lord Macaulay's History, but it is impossible not to see that he has been misled into many great mistakes. I speak not now of his almost bitter hatred of the Duke of Marlborough, which induces him to paint his character in the blackest colours, and his almost idolatrous admiration of William III., which induces him to palliate all his faults, even that of faithlessness to his wife; but I allude to specific facts, in which the historian has been shown to be utterly wrong, and I would recommend those who doubt it to read the *New Examen*, by Mr. Paget (London, 1861), in which the author has, with admirable acumen, instituted "an inquiry into the evidence relating to certain passages in Lord Macaulay's History." He has shown, I think satisfactorily, that Lord Macaulay has been inaccurate and unjust in his account of the execution by Claverhouse, of Brown, the so-called Christian carrier; that he has confounded William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, with a George Penn, in describing a disreputable transaction relative to the maids of Taunton; and that he is mistaken in several other matters of fact.

I have often thought how strangely history would have to be rewritten, if we could summon from the world of spirits those who were the chief actors in many of the events which it records, and obtain from them a true version of such events. How many motives would then be disclosed of which we now know nothing! How many inferences would be shown to be erroneous! How many facts would be altered in their complexion! And yet, in fairness, I ought to mention, how seldom it has happened that popular verdicts, with respect to the

characters and events of history, have been proved to be wrong by subsequent researches. I may instance the attempts that have been made of late years to whitewash the characters of Tiberius, Henry VIII., and Robespierre, all of which seem to have signally failed.

Amongst other questions we should like to be able to put to satisfy our curiosity, I may select almost at random the following.

Who were the Pelasgians and whence came the Etrurians?

Was there a real war of Troy, and what were the facts?

Did Demosthenes receive any part of the money given up by Harpalus when he was arrested at Athens?

Who was the real founder of Rome?

What was the origin of the story that the Laws of the Twelve Tables were the result of a mission sent from Rome into Greece in the fifth century before Christ?

What authority had Suetonius for nine-tenths of the gossiping anecdotes contained in his *Lives of the Twelve Cæsars*?

Was St. Peter ever Bishop of Rome? Beyond mere tradition there is no evidence that the Apostle ever even visited that city, much less that he was Bishop of it. Let those who assert the contrary refute, if they can, the facts and arguments of Barrow, in his "*Treatise on the Pope's Supremacy.*" And yet, how much of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church depends upon the assumption that St. Peter was the first bishop of Rome, and that the Popes are his legitimate successors!

Was Petrarch's Laura a living creature of flesh and blood or a mere poetical myth?

What was the real character of Richard III., and is it true that he was accessory to the murder of the Princes in the Tower, if murdered they were?

Horace Walpole concludes his ingenious essay called "*Historic Doubts in the Life and Reign of King Richard III.*" in the following words:—"We must leave this whole story dark, though not near so dark as we found it; and it is, perhaps, as wise to be uncertain in one portion of our history as to believe so much as is believed in all histories, though very probably as falsely delivered to us, as the period which we have here been examining."

What were the real facts of the Gowrie conspiracy in Scotland?

Did Mary Queen of Scots really write the letters to Bothwell which were produced from a silver casket before the Commissioners at Westminster, and which, if genuine, establish the fact of her being accessory to the murder of Darnley?

Was Anne Boleyn guilty of the charges brought against her by Henry VIII.? Mr. Froude has laboured to prove that she was, but his arguments are very far from convincing.

What was the real cause why James I. spared the life of the Earl of Southampton, after his conviction of the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury?

Who was the man in the Iron Mask? Who wrote the letters of Junius?

It is extraordinary how few of the anecdotes which pass current in literature will bear the test of critical inquiry, and the result of a careful investigation of the evidence is apt to dispose the mind to general scepticism on such subjects. Let me mention a few instances which will serve to enliven what otherwise, I fear, has been rather a dull discourse.

The first I shall mention is not an anecdote, but a so-called historical fact.

We find it stated in Lempriere's Classical Dictionary that the army which Xerxes led into Greece consisted of upwards of five million souls, and he says that "the multitude which the fidelity of historians has not exaggerated was stopped at Thermopylæ by 300 Spartans under King Leonidas." The thing is simply impossible, and therefore incredible, unless we adopt the maxim of Tertullian, and say, *Credo quia impossibile est.*

The story of Canute commanding the waves to advance no farther first appears in Henry of Huntingdon, who wrote a century after the Danish king. The legend of Fair Rosamond is treated by Hume as fabulous; and the greatest suspicion rests on the account of St. Pierre and his companions delivering up the keys of Calais to Edward III., with halters round their necks, and having their lives spared at the intercession of the Queen. The popular story of the origin of the Order of the Garter, as owing to the accident that happened to the Countess of Salisbury when dancing at the court of Edward III., is first mentioned by Polydore Virgil, who wrote 200 years later. In his Lives of the Judges, Mr. Foss has shown that the story of the re-appointment of Sir William Gascoigne as Chief Justice, by Henry V., who, when Prince of Wales, had been committed by him to prison for an assault, is the reverse of true, for it seems that Henry V. actually deprived him of the office of Chief Justice a few days after his accession to the throne. The interesting story that Cromwell, Hampden, and Hazelrig had actually embarked for New England in 1638, prepared to abandon the country for ever, when they were stopped by an Order in Council, has been proved to have no foundation in fact.

The celebrated phrase attributed to Francis I. after the

battle of Pavia, *Tout est perdu fors l'honneur*, turns out to have been *l'honneur et la vie qui est sauvé*, which deprives it of all its point. As to the story of the chivalrous interchange of courtesies between the English and French guards at the battle of Fontenoy, "Monsieur, bid your men fire." "No, sir, we never fire first,"—Carlyle says, in his *Life of Frederick the Great* (vol. iv. p. 119), "It is almost a pity to disturb an elegant historical passage of this kind circulating round the world in some glory for a century past; but there has a small irrefragable document come to me which modifies it a good deal, and reduces matters to the business form." This document is a letter from Lord Charles Hay, lieutenant-colonel of the Guards, written or dictated about three weeks after the battle, and giving an account of what happened. In this no mention is made of the occurrence, and we may confidently believe with Carlyle, that "the French mess-rooms (with their eloquent talent that way) had rounded off the thing into the current epigrammatic redaction."

We all know how French historians, including M. Thiers, repeat the story of *Le Vengeur* refusing to strike her flag in the action of the 1st of June, 1794, and going down into the depths of the ocean while her crew shouted *Vive la République!* This has been shown by Admiral Griffiths, who was living in 1838, one of the few survivors of the engagement, and who wrote a letter on the subject, to be as he calls it "a ridiculous piece of nonsense." When the *Vengeur* sank, the action had ceased for some time. She had been taken possession of by the boats of the *Culloden*; and as to the crew, Admiral Griffiths says, "never were men in distress more ready to save themselves." There was "not one shout beyond that of horror and despair." And yet the lie will live in the annals of French heroism, and will perhaps be believed to the end of time.—See *Carlyle's Essays*, vol. v. pp. 356–359.

Before I conclude I will, with reference to the special objects of this Institute, state in as terse a form as possible the reasons why we are justified in believing on historical grounds the truth of the narratives in the New Testament, excluding all consideration of its doctrines:—

- (1.) The contemporary nature of the testimony.
- (2.) The artlessness and *apparent* truthfulness of the writers.
- (3.) The substantial agreement, together with the circumstantial variety of the statements, of four different contemporary eye-witnesses.
- (4.) The undesigned coincidences which exist between the Gospels and Acts on the one hand and the Epistles on the other.

- (5.) The absence of any conceivable motive for fraud or falsehood.
- (6.) The difficulty, if not the absurdity, of supposing that the teachers of the purest morality should be engaged in the immoral work of propagating an imposture and forging documents.
- (7.) The utter absence of any contradiction to their statements during the first four centuries.
- (8.) The frequent reference to the words of the four Evangelists by writers who lived in the first two centuries, showing that their narratives were then current and well known.
- (9.) The adequacy of the cause for miraculous interposition, if we believe in a benevolent Creator and in the immortality of the soul.
- (10.) The sufficiency of the accounts to explain the phenomenon of Christianity as a religion which now exists in the world, whereas no other theory has or can explain it.

If these be not sufficient grounds for believing the truth of the accounts that have come down to us, I know not any historical fact which we are justified in believing.

The CHAIRMAN.—I am sure I may offer to Mr. Forsyth the thanks of the meeting for the very interesting and learned paper which he has read. We shall now be happy to hear the remarks which any one present may have to offer upon the subject of the paper.

The Rev. G. CURREY, D.D.—Perhaps I may be allowed to offer some opinions at which I have arrived, for I have had the opportunity of reading the paper before I came here, which of course places me in a better position for commenting upon it than if I had merely heard it read for the first time in this room. I will not waste the time of the meeting by expressing my opinion on the general merits of the paper, or by pointing out those parts of it which I think are deserving of praise. In such a meeting as this, it should rather be the part of those who speak to see if there be anything which may strike them as defective, in order to give the author, in replying, an opportunity of supplying any such defects, or of showing to objectors that they really have no existence. I would say, then, that my first impression on reading this paper was rather a melancholy one; for it seemed to tell me very much that I was not to believe, and to leave very little which I was justified in believing. That is the main point which I have to bring forward, and I shall be very glad if the author in his reply will show that I was wrong in entertaining this impression. I am thankful to see that he has not failed to explain the grounds upon which the evidence for Holy Scripture rests. On that point we can have no difference of

opinion, but shall all acknowledge the clear and distinct manner in which the author has set forth our belief in the historical facts detailed in our Scripture history. (Cheers.) But, apart from this, I must say that there is left but little for us to believe, nor does it appear to me that the rules of evidence, as applicable to the credibility of history, have been as clearly drawn up in this paper as I might have desired. I should have preferred seeing them in a more distinct and clear, and perhaps tabulated form, in order that I might apply those rules to any particular case, or to any particular historian, in order to ascertain the credibility of the fact which I was considering, or of the historian whom I was examining. There appears to be in that respect, a want of clearness, owing, probably, to the scantiness of information adducible on the numerous topics introduced by way of illustration. One of the reasons which leaves this impression on my mind is, that the greater part of the paper is occupied in showing what we should *not* believe, and because there is a certain confusion between the leading facts of history, and smaller incidents contained in anecdotes, sometimes of a slight though interesting character. The laws of evidence indeed may be unalterable, but there is a difference in their application to anecdotes and to the more important facts of history. Many of these anecdotes, we are told, are not to be believed in at all, and it seems to me that in a paper in which we hope to find rules laid down to point out what we should believe, too much space has been given up to the introduction of trivial anecdotes which we are not to believe. We know that, as time goes on, small anecdotes, worthy of our attention as amusing or beautiful stories, but not to be accepted as claimants to the dignity of history, gather round great acts. Several of the anecdotes which have been given to-night seem to me to be of this kind, and appear to have been brought forward in order to be rejected. They are simply illustrations of what few will deny, that much of history, commonly so-called, is not to be received without question. I would separate anecdotes from the consideration of a subject of this kind. They are too apt to become like the fringe described in that well-known story, the "Tale of a Tub," where a coat is represented as being decorated with such a quantity of fringe, that the original material is altogether hidden by the superfluous mass of adornment. You will remember how one of the brothers carefully took off the fringe without injuring the coat, but the other tore it off with so much vehemence that he rent the coat as well. In the same way, when we are disposing of anecdotes, we should take care not to lose sight of the historical truth which lies underneath. With regard to the story of William Tell's shooting at an apple placed upon his son's head, I reject it, not simply because it appeared for the first time many years after the occurrence itself was alleged to have taken place, but also because, as Mr. Forsyth has pointed out, it appears in connection with other persons and other countries. But while I reject the story of the apple, it does not follow that I reject the story of the fact that William Tell arose as an heroic defender of liberty to rescue his country from the oppression of a foreign yoke; this is the great historical fact that

lies underneath the story of the apple, and the rejection of the anecdote need not affect the historical fact. It is of great importance that we should put aside those parts of history which form merely the adornments of its earlier days. We know that former ages were far less critical than the present, and that anecdotes then formed a considerable part of history. But we can dispense with many of these anecdotes without losing the substantial facts. I would, therefore, lay stress upon the difference between anecdote and history. Mr. Forsyth has introduced into his paper certain passages from Dr. Newman's *Grammar of Assent*; but, with regard to them, it seems to me that we ought to draw a distinction between assent to the statements of history and to propositions relating to natural phenomena; the grounds, for instance, on which we believe that the sun will rise to-morrow, or on which we believe we shall die. I do not consider that such questions bear very much on the laws of evidence as applicable to the credibility of history, and I cannot but think that the introduction of these passages from Dr. Newman's *Grammar of Assent* tends to confuse our apprehension of the laws of evidence with regard to history. These laws need to be clearly stated. The first ground of our belief in history must be, the evidence of contemporaries, as stated by Sir George Cornwall Lewis in a passage which Mr. Forsyth has quoted,—a forcible passage, no doubt, but making rather too much of an obvious truth. There is no great discovery in the fact that we must rely on contemporary information for our historical facts; but if we say that we are to believe nothing but the evidence of contemporaries, we shall destroy history altogether. We must believe those things which, although not stated by contemporaries, are stated by persons who had information which can be traced up to contemporary sources. And then the question arises, what ground is there for believing that the historian in a particular case had the means of obtaining such information? We believe, for instance, the statements of Hume in his *History of England*; for we know that he had many documentary sources of information, which he made use of.

MR. FORSYTH.—Hume is full of errors.

DR. CURREY.—I am not saying that I believe everything he said; but I say that we accept his statements as historical because we know there were many documents open to him, which he carefully examined, and therefore, on the whole, he produced a true history, though he lived long after the times of which he wrote. Errors he may have made either from carelessness or prejudice. The critic may examine and discover these, but he does not reject the whole history because it was not written by a contemporary. That is the method we pursue, I suppose, in any history. We first examine what were the sources of information which the historian had at his command. In modern history this is not very difficult, but in more remote times it is not always easy to ascertain what sources of information were open to an historian. There must have been many with which we are not acquainted, and which are not in our possession. This is clearly shown in the case of

Herodotus, who gives us a history of the Egyptian kings, going back to a remote antiquity ; and the great value of his history is that he accurately reported what he saw and heard, after making diligent inquiry. He reported the history of Egypt from the priest-kept registers which were to a great extent supplied to him when he travelled in Egypt ; and it is a remarkable fact that those registers have been confirmed in the most striking manner by the discovery of monuments, whose inscriptions we have of late years been enabled to decipher. There are many differences, but, on the whole, the general history of the kings of Egypt, particularly of the later ones, has been confirmed, and we can from Herodotus illustrate the difference between anecdote and history. Take, for instance, the Saitic dynasty which began with Psammetichus. Herodotus gives us a list of kings confirmed in a very striking manner by the monuments, and we feel quite certain that the list is correct, being derived from the records of the priests ; but while he gives us this list correctly, he fills up his history with anecdotes utterly incredible ; so that when we speak of Herodotus as being accurate and careful, we admit that he was accurate in relating what he saw, and careful in recording what he heard ; but, at the same time, we are bound to confess that he accepted almost anything he was told with reference to history. Take the case of Psammetichus himself : Herodotus gives a very true account of him as the first of a dynasty which succeeded to the sole government of Egypt after it had been divided among a number of (Herodotus says twelve) independent princes. But he gives us a very curious account how it arose from an oracle that any one who offered a libation from a brazen bowl should be king. At that time they had golden bowls ; but on a certain occasion a bowl being wanted, and none forthcoming, Psammetichus used a brazen helmet. He was suspected and driven into banishment, whereupon he rose up in revenge, overthrew the twelve princes, and so fulfilled the oracle. Now we have monumental records which confirm the fact of Psammetichus having succeeded to the throne, after Egypt had been governed by many princes ; but when we come to the story about the oracle and its fulfilment, which Herodotus either received from the priests, or invented for himself, we have no record of it at all, we have only the account of Psammetichus succeeding to the throne of Egypt, and of the princes being tributaries to the great Assyrian monarchy. There were thirty subordinates when Psammetichus threw off the yoke. So there we have a simple historical fact, and around it is a fabulous narrative. That is quite characteristic of Herodotus, whose leading facts are borne out by records, but who surrounds each fact with poetical and legendary accounts, which he accepted without much reflection. What I would maintain is this : that in determining the basis of history, we must be content with less precise evidence than in the case of natural phenomena, or in establishing occurrences of the day. We have not, and cannot have, a series of events precisely similar to each other, which would determine a truth by the law of induction, and we must often be content with the testimony of persons far removed from the times at which they

wrote. Our first step then must be to examine the genuineness of the books which profess to give us an account of what happened—in times past. But the presence in ancient histories of much which we are unable to accept, does not necessarily invalidate the whole. Often under very fable lies a substantial truth, as in the history of the Egyptian Psammetichus. It is the province of the student of history to exercise his faculty of discrimination, to separate the substantial facts from the accidental and sometimes fabulous anecdotes by which they are accompanied, and to be careful to weigh the relative importance of different parts of a narrative. It may be doubtful whether Wellington at Waterloo used the words, "Up guards and at them"; but there is no doubt that the battle of Waterloo was fought and was decided by a final charge of the British Guards. Anecdote sometimes is purely ornamental, sometimes it illustrates in a semi-poetical form the historical fact to which it is attached. The historian must distinguish between these two classes of anecdotes, and be upon his guard against viewing every part of a narrative as of equal consequence, and so confounding anecdote with history.—Were certain books really written by the historians whose names they bear? This generally depends on the recognition of those works by a series of writers from a very early time. We must then examine as to whether it was probable that the historian had access to information which might be derived from contemporary sources. After this we must examine the character of the historian, and see whether he was likely to be honest, or whether there were any motives to induce him to disguise the facts; and then we must see whether he had the faculty of really understanding and interpreting the documents which he examined. The laws of evidence, therefore, require us to see first, what sources were open to the historian; secondly, whether he was capable of making proper use of these sources; thirdly, whether his character was such as to lead us to suppose that he would use them with ability and honesty, and on this point we must judge in a great measure from the internal evidence supplied by the books themselves. Then, fourthly, we must examine the facts themselves, and see if they are such as seem to be consistent with what followed upon them. Do they give a good account of institutions that rise up in consequence, and are they consistent among themselves? Fifthly, we must see, if possible, whether there is any concurrent testimony. These seem to me to be the leading points which affect the laws of evidence with reference to history. (Cheers.)

The Right Hon. STEPHEN CAVE, M.P.—I have not had the same advantage which the Master of the Charterhouse had, in seeing the paper before I came here; but still I should like to make a few observations on the subject. I think that a great deal of what has fallen from Dr. Currey is true criticism, but I also think that he has rather underrated the value of anecdote in history. (Cheers.) The fact is, if you go back to the Old Testament, the oldest of all histories, you find it is made up of anecdote; and history generally, as accepted by the bulk of the people, is one mass of anecdotes, some of which are most valuable. That, I think, is a point which Mr. Forsyth intended to bring out in his paper; at all events, it struck me. We

know perfectly well that what he wanted to show was that many anecdotes currently believed in cannot be true, while many others which appear to be impossible, and which bear much upon history, are really true. In other words, he says:—"Oh, infidel, great is thy faith! You believe things which are in themselves absolutely incredible; but you reject those things which are really capable of proof!" Lepsius, the Prussian, who wrote on Egypt and the Holy Land, says, in speaking of the Israelites on their journey to Palestine, that they lived upon manna, which he describes, not as "angels' food," but as a natural exudation from the tamarisk. Fancy the absurdity of supposing that two millions of people could have existed upon the exudation of the tamarisk, which would not have served one half of them for one day's luncheon. (Laughter.) This shows how credulous a sceptic may be on certain points. Then you may find anecdotes, which apparently at first sight are very incredible, and yet, on examination, are capable of almost perfect proof. Anybody would suppose that the house of Simon the tanner in Jaffa would have perished out of the memory of man; and yet, as Dean Stanley says, there is hardly any tradition which is so perfectly authenticated as that which points out the site of Simon's house. A tanner requires fresh water for carrying on his trade, and there is only one well of fresh water in Jaffa, and that is in the courtyard of the house which is pointed out as the house of Simon the tanner, which must necessarily have stood there, unless, indeed, an earthquake had altered the face of the neighbourhood. Then, there are many traditions which we know are not true; take, for instance, the traditions with regard to our Saviour, and His appearance, and many circumstances which took place soon after His death. We reject altogether the miracles which He is said to have performed as a child, such as making clay birds and bidding them fly. We reject these things because they are childish, and there is no object in them. Again we have had handed down to us the idea of our Saviour's face and of His appearance, derived very much from a bas-relief which was supposed to have been sculptured in very early times,—at the time of His death, indeed,—and sent to Tiberius by Pontius Pilate, but, falling into the hands of Saladin, it came into Europe after many vicissitudes. It was carved on an emerald. I have also seen a bronze medal with a similar profile, of which nearly the same story is told. But we know that for many centuries after His death there was no likeness of Him at all, and that His disciples rather avoided touching on His crucifixion, which they considered a very degrading punishment; and in all the catacombs and the famous mosaics at Ravenna you find allegorical representations, but no portrait of our Lord as an individual until 300 years after His death, and then it first occurs in the catacomb of St. Calixtus at Rome. We find that there is no proof whatever of the monkish traditions with regard to the early ages after the life of our Saviour. Again, take the case of Herodotus: we acknowledge that he was an historian who intended to speak the truth so far as he knew it, notwithstanding that he is called "the father of lies." He no doubt recorded an immense number of lies; but he said, "I do not say these things

are true : I did not see them : I simply say what the priests told me." We find something of the same sort in quite modern history. Most of you have read the book of Huc and Gabet, the Jesuit travellers, who went through China and Thibet into Russia. They accurately record what they saw, but they also speak of things which we consider impossible, though in those cases they carefully abstain from saying that they saw what they describe. But, unfortunately, they went from Paris before their work was published, and gave their manuscript into the hands of a publisher who thought he would give the public something sensational, so that they would be the more likely to buy the book. In one remarkable instance in which the travellers were referring to the sacred tree of Thibet, they were made to say that they saw the sacred verses growing upon the leaves and upon the bark of the tree, and, of course, every one was ready to say, "These men are deceivers." It turned out, however, that nobody was more astonished at the story than the authors themselves, who had merely given it as a story which they had heard from the priests, but whose publisher had omitted that important qualification. This shows how difficult it is, after the lapse of a number of years, to find out what is the truth of the historian, and how far he has been misrepresented, or how far he has been misled. Nobody knows who wrote *Ossian*, and it is doubtful whether Rowley's poems were written by Chatterton, or by some one else. On the last page of this paper Mr. Forsyth has laid down a great many canons for the belief or disbelief of history, and I think he has laid them down in a satisfactory way ; but if we are to take the testimony of contemporary writers, I would ask every one to take the history of the last ten years, as written by the *Standard*, and as written by the *Daily News* ; and I maintain that nothing which Lord Macaulay has said about the Duke of Marlborough or William III. would differ from any other author more than the writers in these two newspapers differ from each other, and yet, for want of anything better, we must take them as the historians of the present day, for future times. What I desire to show is that the reception of anecdote in certain cases goes a great way to prove what is the belief of the people with regard to the history of their times, but I admit it does not follow from this acceptance that that history is true. There is an instance in the time of Pope Leo X. : some people went from Spain to that Pope, and told him that they had found a new saint, and had got his grave-stone, on which was inscribed his name, St. Viar, and they wished him to be canonized, as it was quite proper that he should be added to the calendar. Pope Leo, who was much more learned than most of the men of his age, had never heard of St. Viar, and doubted the whole case exceedingly ; but he sent competent people into Spain to investigate the matter, and obtain information. I dare say you all remember the case of "Bill Stumps, his X mark," in *Pickwick*. (Laughter.) Well, the case of St. Viar turned out to be something like it. They found on a large stone the letters "S VIAR," and they saw at once that it was a piece of an old Roman mile-stone, which had been signed by somebody who held the post of Prefectus Viarum, but all the letters had

been worn or broken away except five. (Laughter.) Would anybody who accepted that anecdote as historical be a good judge of the truth of the history of those times? I think not. I believe it was Walpole who said: "Do not read me history, because that must be false," and there is a certain amount of truth in that. You cannot go back to the time when some histories were written and find the crass ignorance which then prevailed, without feeling a considerable doubt as to what was accepted as history in those days, without even taking into account the personal danger incurred by those who ventured to take a view opposed to that of the government of the day. Perhaps the most reliable evidence in former days is derived from the drama, especially from comedy—from Aristophanes down to our own day; plays, which are subjected to contemporary criticism of all parties, are most valuable adjuncts to tests of contemporary history. I think we ought all to feel very much obliged to Mr. Forsyth for his paper, and also to Dr. Currey for the able speech which the paper has called forth from him.

The CHAIRMAN.—I hope we shall have the advantage of hearing many speakers this evening. We have already had some valuable remarks on historic anecdote; but we must not forget that the subject of the evening is upon the rules of evidence.

The Rev. Prebendary C. A. Row.—I think the meeting is in considerable danger of missing the subject of discussion, which is the rules of evidence that are to be applied to the credibility of history. I think Mr. Forsyth has pointed out with sufficient distinctness, first, that history must be founded on contemporary testimony; and secondly, that all those things which are now called history, but concerning which we have no knowledge that they were founded on contemporary history, must fall to the ground. In a paper which I read myself, on the same subject, some twelve months ago,* I confess that I failed on one point, and I do not think Mr. Forsyth has supplied the defect. I failed from not knowing how to lay down a canon as to how far the principle of historical conjecture may be legitimately applied in the reproduction of history. I satisfied myself that there is a vast amount of conjecture which has been introduced into history without warrant, and has been propounded as representing real and positive facts. Dr. Currey mistook me on that occasion as absolutely denying that the principle of conjecture is applicable to historical inquiry; but that was far from my view. My point was, how far may we go in that direction? And it is a point of the deepest interest, because it is on that ground that all the sceptical criticism of the Old and New Testament is based. I have just been reading, with much interest, the last published work of Renan; it is, really, a history of Christianity from the year 60 to the year 75, and contains a number of facts, which the author has managed to unite by a considerable amount of historical conjecture. But this is the point which presents itself to my mind,—How can I dis-

* Vol. vii. p. 287.

tinguish facts from fictions, and how far is the conjecture valid.* Let me take an example which will show that historical conjecture is valid within certain limits. Whoever has read the first epistle of Clement knows that it contains an obscure passage referring to the death of Peter and Paul, and ascribing it to envy. I candidly confess that I never could conceive what the writer referred to. But Renan has gone over the ground, and I think he has dispelled the doubt as to what was meant: there was an enormous amount of Jewish influence at the court of Nero; the empress was a Jewess, and many others at the court were Jews. He has shown the danger which the Christians were under of being accused of seeking to overturn the established worship; but he points out that those charges would have fallen with equal weight upon the Jews. Why, then, did Nero persecute the Christians and not the Jews? Renan has solved that question by showing that the Jewish influence at the court caused the accusations to fall only on the Christians, and that the Jews were actuated by feelings of envy. I think that is a very fair instance of what may be called legitimate historical reconstruction. There are many other cases to be found in Renan's book, but I cannot deny that that principle of historical reconstruction is also employed to establish several points which are of the greatest danger to us. All this is done by Renan with the greatest degree of plausibility, and I should have been glad had Mr. Forsyth done something to aid us in judging as to when we may rely upon these historical conjectures, and under what circumstances we must reject them.—It is astonishing to find what a large amount of history is sometimes reconstructed from a very small quantity of isolated facts.—On one point, however, it is satisfactory to find that Renan has set himself in opposition to the German critics, by denying that it is possible to write history on *à priori* principles. This is a most important point, because, as you are aware, all the great German critics construct history upon *à priori* principles, and it is a very satisfactory thing to see that Renan emphatically denounces this method. He admits that eight of the epistles of St. Paul were written by him; two more he is in doubt about, but the others are authentic, and were certainly written before the year 70. This is a great concession from such a writer as Renan, who, while he fully admits that it is impossible to reconstruct history on *à priori* principles, and that the Germans who have attempted it have only reproduced the subjective creations of their own minds, I regret has not carried that principle out throughout his own work. It is of great importance to get some light on this point, namely, as to how far in the dark periods of history one may be entitled to go upon historical conjecture, and how far historical conjecture is valid. Many modern historians have dealt largely with that principle in applying it to secular history; but in writing ecclesiastical history it is enormously prevalent, and we are much in the dark as to what was the real nature of

* In the Annual Address for 1874, Dr. Thornton has commented upon this mode of dealing with history.—ED.

the ecclesiastical history of the first three centuries. It has been written through the spectacles of narrow views, and we have as many ecclesiastical histories as there are narrow views. We want a thoroughly critical analysis of the evidence on which a great deal of what is called the history of that time rests. We have much evidence that we can trace to distinctly conjectural sources, and we ought to be careful in ascertaining how far the evidence rests upon direct historical testimony. Dr. Currey is fearful lest a large portion of so-called history should be consigned to the grave; but it is better to do this than to set up myths and call them history.

The Rev. J. SINCLAIR.—It is difficult to speak upon such a subject as that before us with precision and scientific accuracy. What we want is some test whereby we can determine the truth or falsehood of some events alleged to have taken place in the past. That is the desideratum, and my impression on listening to this paper is, that it contains an answer to that question, but that it does not put the answer in a sufficiently definite form. This may seem a bold statement to make, but I hope the author of the paper will excuse it, as I am simply expressing the feeling produced on my mind by the paper. There is one point which has been distinctly enunciated, both in the paper, and more or less in all the comments upon it, and that is, that the proper evidence on which to believe a statement with respect to anything alleged to have taken place in the past, is the testimony of witnesses who are competent, from their ability, their opportunity, and their honesty, to bear witness to the point. So far we have got something positive and satisfactory, but we require a great deal more than that, in order to test the accuracy of an historical statement. In the first place, we want evidence as to the moral and intellectual competence of the witnesses. We are not personally acquainted with them: none of us have had an intimacy with Thucydides, with Herodotus, with Livy, or with any other of the old historians. We want some evidence of the old historians; we want some evidence of their intellectual and moral capability of testifying as to those matters of fact with which they have dealt, and anything which can be discovered as to the characters of such men, and which throws light on their mental or moral character, assists us in judging how much credit we may attach to their testimony. This only indicates the direction in which the historical student has to look for the grounds of rational belief. Another question is suggested to the mind of one who stands in this attitude, and that is: How do we know that these statements were actually made by the person whose name is attached to them? How do we know that they are the genuine statements of Herodotus or Livy, or any one else, when we had not the privilege of seeing them make the statement? We must look for evidence in confirmation of this, and that points to another line of inquiry. Anything which tends to prove that a book was actually written by the particular person whose name is affixed to it, helps us in forming a rational judgment as to the trustworthiness of that history; there has not been much allusion to these

matters in the paper. But I come to some things of great importance which have been stated with considerable clearness. As confirmatory of such statements as may constitute the body of a particular author, Mr. Forsyth has said that the consistent and concurrent testimony of independent witnesses adds very much to the claim of such testimony upon our belief; and I would add to this unquestionably correct canon, that if it is known that those witnesses are not only independent, but of an opposite bias, there is much greater reason for giving credit to their statements. For example, if we should discover some statement with respect to a matter of fact made both in the *Standard* and in the *Daily News*, the fact being one in regard to which they had some inducement to take an opposite view, nothing could be more conclusive than that such evidence related to an absolute fact. Another thing mentioned is the recognition of such statements in contemporary authors, besides those who have actually advanced or expressly made them. The allusion of a contemporary author to a statement as embodying a fact, is a very great confirmation of that fact, upon whosoever authority it was originally made; and sometimes the more delicate and indirect the allusion, the greater is the evidence it affords of the historical truth of the statement. These are the primary and essential grounds of historical truth—conditions which our intellect and reason must demand as the grounds of belief in any statement with respect to the past. My only complaint with regard to the paper is, that it does not distinguish, with sufficient clearness, between the primary evidences and those which are indirect and secondary. Reference has been made, with great propriety, to the truth-likeness of a statement; its consistency with general experience, and with known and admitted facts, whether ascertained by our own experience, or sifted and tested and established by others. Then, the moral tone of the authors; the consistency of the statements with the characters of the persons by whom they were made; and the apparent motive with which they were made: these things, taken together, constitute a very formidable body of internal evidence, which, in the absence of external evidence, have almost conclusive weight in the mind of any intelligent inquirer. That of which I complain in the paper is that it has not, with sufficient precision and definiteness, and not in sufficiently logical order, stated these canons of historical credibility, if I may so call them, and thus put the matter before us in a way which we could remember, so as to be able afterwards to make proper use of the conclusions to which the arguments of the paper really lead. One word with regard to the question of the last speaker, as to the use of historical conjecture. It seems to me that the past and present make, in combination, what you may call historical phenomena,—facts about which the mind is naturally curious and desirous of explanation. Now, according to my view, it is just as legitimate for the student of history to form a theory by which these phenomena or facts may be accounted for, as it is for the student of natural science to form a theory which accounts for the phenomena of nature. Such theories are called provisional, or working theories, and, as such, they are of great value; and, if we

keep their true use and value in view, theories of conjecture are just as valuable with regard to civil or political truth, as they are with respect to science. (Cheers.)

Mr. FOSSYTH.—I will detain you with very few remarks in reply. With reference to what was said by Dr. Currey, who complains that I have devoted too much attention to historical anecdotes, if he looks at the paper again, he will find that there is but one page of anecdotes, and there are twenty-one pages devoted to the rest of the subject. I have to thank my right hon. friend, Mr. Cave, for his defence of the use of anecdotes in history. You will find that many so-called historical facts to which we attach importance, are simply anecdotes. Let me mention one case,—that of the Treaty of Utrecht; it is said that that treaty was made by the Tories because Mrs. Masham spilt a cup of tea on Queen Anne's gown, whereupon Queen Anne, in a pet, quarrelled with the Whigs, and went to the Tories, which led to the Treaty of Utrecht, and changed the face of Europe. It is objected that I did not in my paper lay down, in a tabulated form, the canons of historical criticism. I did not do so, because nothing is so dull and repulsive as such a tabulation. It is all very well for the blue-book of a statistician; but in the paper I thought it out of place. I am happy to say that every single rule which has been suggested by Dr. Currey and Mr. Sinclair, will be found implied, and even stated and illustrated, in the paper. Not one single rule has been suggested which is not to be found in the paper. Only one other remark; Dr. Currey has said that my paper has supplied him with nothing to go upon. I am very sorry for it; but I do not think it is so useful to tell people what they are to believe, and to make them as credulous as possible with regard to the history of the past, as to caution them with reference to the kind of evidence they ought to rely upon, and with regard to what they ought to believe. We have lately had a most humiliating spectacle in England of the credulity of mankind. I would not have alluded to it for one moment if the trial* had still been going on, but to me nothing has been more humiliating as regards the British public, than to find that for a period of two years and a half it has been possible to keep up a gross and gigantic imposture, when the whole question was a question of evidence and perfectly germane to the subject. Minds which are accustomed to deal with and to weigh evidence—conflicting evidence—in evenly-balanced scales, could have had no doubt as to the result. In every case that can be mentioned, or in almost every case, there are arguments for, and arguments against. As Dr. Johnson said, there are arguments for a *plenum* in nature, and arguments for a *vacuum* in nature, but there must be either the one or the other. Let us illustrate this by the case in question. A man is said to have perished eighteen years ago. After twelve years have elapsed, a man comes forth and says:—"I am that man, and have risen, as it were,

* The Tichborne Trial.

from the grave. I am one of eight men who were saved from the ship that was lost. Those eight men, including myself, were taken on board another vessel, where there were twenty-three men, and these twenty-three men took us to the port of Melbourne, where we were all landed safe and sound. I now come forward to claim the estates." But not one single living soul ever heard of any one of those men, or ever had a line from them, and from that hour to this there has been a dead, unbroken silence with regard to these thirty-one men. Now I say that any man who could believe that story, because this claimant remembered a number of trifles, has just that want of the proper knowledge of the principles of evidence which belong to a man of a very low condition of intellect. The habit of testing evidence, and of being sceptical, is rather more important than the habit of swallowing evidence without examination. (Cheers.)

The Meeting was then adjourned.
