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# Harding on History

ROBERT K. MURRAY

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ACCORDING to most contemporary observers, the least likely of all Presidents to be remembered for his clarity of thought and pungency of phrase is Warren Gamaliel Harding. In their own professional assessment of presidential success, American historians (if one can rely on Arthur M. Schlesinger's sample) have relegated Harding to the bottom of the pile, considering him little short of a disaster in almost every respect.<sup>1</sup> Certainly no reputable historian thinks of him as a statesman-philosopher or connects him with any serious pronouncement on the purpose and uses of history. George E. Mowry, in analyzing recent Presidents and their views on history, reinforced the existing interpretation: "It is almost certain that Harding's view of consequential time, whether past or future, was limited by the period from one handshake to another. There is no indication in any of his published speeches that he considered critically the future, and his perceptions of the past appear just as cloudy."<sup>2</sup> And again: "The public utterances of Harding . . . indicate that the past was almost as much a *terra incognita* as the future and that American civilization, splendid as it was at the moment, was without dimensions in time, forgetful of its own roots and consequently oblivious of its future."<sup>3</sup>

Recently opened to researchers and resting in the stacks of the Ohio Historical Society Library in Columbus, Ohio are 804 manuscript boxes of Harding's papers which shed new light not only on the mind and character of the twenty-ninth President but also on the turbulent postwar years 1919-1924. Until these are fully examined, no historical scholar interested in the 1920s can adequately deal with the period without serious misgivings or the dangers of distortions. As a source of useful information, this

Mr. Murray is professor of history in the Pennsylvania State University.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Our Presidents: A Rating By 75 Historians," *New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 1962, pp. 12-13, 40.

<sup>2</sup> George E. Mowry, "The Uses of History by Recent Presidents," *Journal of American History*, LIII (June 1966), 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

collection is superior to the Coolidge manuscripts in the Library of Congress.<sup>4</sup>

Among the hundreds of thousands of items is one letter which bears directly on the subject of Harding and history. Late in February 1923 President Kenneth C. M. Sills of Bowdoin College sent Harding an invitation to attend the opening of the college's Institute of Modern History, adding that if Harding could not do so Sills hoped the President would send a letter "emphasizing the importance of a proper understanding of the problems connected with Modern History, both from the standpoint of clear thinking and of patriotism."<sup>5</sup> Harding replied:

March 1, 1923

My dear Doctor Sills:

I wish I had the time and opportunity to make something more than a perfunctory acknowledgment of your invitation of February twenty-four. I am deeply interested in your plans to hold at Bowdoin an Institute of Modern History. I think you are inaugurating a fine piece of work, and wish I could be among those privileged to participate with you; which I am sorry to say is not possible. There is need for a vast deal of this kind of work on the part of educational institutions and learned societies, not only of this country, but of the world. I remember when I was a very young man hearing a political orator, in a particularly fervid period, announce that "the whole history of the past must be changed". A good deal of fun was poked at this proposal, and I was among those who indulged more or less humor in connection with it. Yet, since the World War, I have sometimes wondered whether the orator was so hopelessly wrong as to justify all the hilarity. Certainly our point of view regarding modern history has been shifted greatly by the events of the last decade. To fit into our histories, the story of the years from 1914 down to this time, is requiring the most painstaking, thoughtful and analytical consideration of all the course and processes of modern history. For one thing, it seems very clear to me that henceforward the teaching of history will have to be conducted, if it is conducted wisely, on quite different lines than have marked it in the past. There has been too much disposition among both the writers and students of history to deal with the different nations of the western world, as it were, in separate compartments; to assume that one may study and understand the history of one nation without particularly devoting himself to the relations of that particular nation to the others. Undoubtedly, we shall from this time forward have a much more adequate conception of the essential unity of the whole story of mankind; and a keener realization of the fact that all its factors must

<sup>4</sup> A one-volume life of Harding based on the Harding Papers will be published soon by Professor Dean Albertson of the University of Massachusetts. A projected two-volume life of Harding is in process by Professor Randolph Downes of the University of Toledo. My own study, "Harding Era, 1919-1924," will be published late next year.

<sup>5</sup> Sills to Harding, Feb. 24, 1923, Harding Papers, Box 703, file 4, item 153415.

be weighed and appraised if any of them are to be accurately estimated and understood. I feel strongly that such a broader view history, if it can be planted in the community's mind of the future through the efforts of educators and writers, will contribute greatly to uphold the hands and strengthen the efforts of those who will have to deal with the great problem of human destiny, particularly with that of preserving peace and outlawing war.

It is because I entertain these views, that I am so glad to know of what you are undertaking at Bowdoin. I have felt that the work of the Institute of Politics, at Williams College, has represented one phase of a very useful service in the direction of illuminating current problems; and I feel that your plan for an Institute of Modern History at Bowdoin represents another phase, just as useful and desirable, in behalf of a broader conception of the tremendous task that the race confronts. It is everlastingly true that on the whole the best guide to the future is to be found in a proper understanding of the lessons of the past. If some of its lessons have been misunderstood, as I think we all feel nowadays some of them have been, it is peculiarly necessary in times like these that every effort be made to correct whatever misapprehensions may have arisen. I recall the great interest and even enthusiasm with which I discovered the work of Ferrero on Roman History, because it gave a new means [*sic*] and furnished new applications of so many of the lessons of Old Rome. I venture that in the light of the last decade's tremendous events, there is now the possibility of a reshaping of our attitude toward modern history through such inspirations as you are seeking at Bowdoin, that may ultimately have as great an effect upon our views of modern times as Ferrero's work had upon our attitude toward the story of the Roman Empire.

I do not believe it is a contradiction of what I have already said about the essential unity of all history to add that in our own country it seems to me there is altogether too little knowledge of our national story, too little interest in and serious study of it. One has many times seen the high school student who had completed his studies in an intermediate text book on American History promptly close the volume with the announcement that "he knew about history". I fear that cheerful attitude is not by any means confined to students of high school age. The business of living and of making a living so largely consumes the energies of most people that they find it all too easy to close the volumes which ought to be kept open to them. I am sure that the work you are undertaking at Bowdoin will be an encouragement to such an attitude toward the study and analysis of history; and so I am sending my congratulations on the program you have undertaken.

Most sincerely yours,  
Warren G. Harding<sup>6</sup>

Presidential letters are often difficult to evaluate. How much of this may have been the work of Harding's private secretary, George B. Christian,

<sup>6</sup> Harding to Sills, March 1, 1923, *ibid.*, Box 703, file 4, items 153416-153418. The reference in the letter is to Guglielmo Ferrero, *Greatness and Decline of Rome* (5 vols., New York, 1907-1909).

Jr., or of other close advisers such as Judson C. Welliver, is impossible to say. The fact remains that Harding signed it. As such, it is an unusual document, surprisingly perceptive, broadly conceived, boldly "modern," pedagogically "liberal," and quietly wise. It is even worthy of an ex-professor from Princeton, a sage from Oyster Bay, or a Harvard overseer.