

Presentation of the past

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The Shaping of Modern Psychology. By L.S. Hearnshaw. Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1987. Pp. 408. £19.95, \$49.95.

It is odd to find a psychologist, however courageous, attempting to write a general history of the subject, especially a work that spans "the dawn of civilization to the present day". Not only is there now so much — too much, perhaps — to be included, but the task itself can hardly be approached with the innocence of earlier days. The historians, motivated not merely by professional jealousy but real misgivings about our past efforts, insist that history is too serious a matter to be entrusted to anyone but themselves.

Their charges against the scientist-historian are various. One is 'internalism', the persisting treatment of science as though (as Engels put it) it had fallen from the skies, a self-contained activity quite isolated from any wider social context. Another is 'Whiggism', where the past is portrayed as a hesitant yet inevitable progress towards its culmination in our times and our ways. A further charge (there are others) seems to be most dominant in recent years: 'presentism'. Although this is often taken as a synonym of Whiggism, it is, as I understand it, distinct and perhaps defensible. In this case, the past is drawn upon selectively to provide a context for the discussion of current issues. On a limited scale, this is surely what all scientists do in the literature review preceding their research reports. One might question whether presentism, so construed, counts as history at all; but, if adopted explicitly, I cannot see that it must lead to *bad* history.

Professor Hearnshaw is a psychologist who many years ago, and before most others, specialized in the history of his subject. His book, *A Short History of British Psychology, 1840–1940* (Methuen, 1964), was well received by historians and psychologists alike, and his recent biography of Cyril Burt (Hodder & Stoughton, 1979) is regarded as the official verdict on Burt's unfortunate genius for inventing IQ data and even research associates. Despite the opportunities, however, there are few hints of scandal in his new book. Even judged on its own terms as a "synopsis" of the develop-

ment of modern psychology, the scope is impressive, not only in time (in the order of tens of thousands of years) but also diversity. For example, there are authoritative treatments of theories of mind in Eastern religions and of Soviet psychology, and an insightful evaluation of Freud's contribution. The author also



Classification in mind — a thirteenth-century attempt to relate Aristotle's division of the rational soul to the cerebral ventricles.

dwells, to good effect, on the tensions within psychology which arise from its links with both the natural and the moral sciences, including history itself.

Hearnshaw's approach, however, is more questionable. He shows little respect for the recent controversies and criticism within the history of science, and despite the extensive use of primary sources there is surprisingly little reference to the historical work of his fellow psychologists or to their current concerns. He does not even seem to feel any obligation to appease the historians for embarking upon yet another presentist and largely internalist history. In fact, what is most striking is the way in which Hearnshaw shamelessly turns the historians' criticism of scientists' history on its head. As he explains at the outset, the central purpose of his history is to lay to rest the spectre, raised by the historians, that psychology

might, after all, be just one darned thing after another. His argument is blunt: psychology is progressive because a serious Whig history can indeed be written:

A study of the history of psychology refutes the contention that the subject has not progressed. ... If today psychologists shiver in a 'winter of discontent' ... it must be because they have forgotten their history, have lost touch with the inspiration it provides, and are out of tune with the slow march of time [pp. 5–6].

Not surprisingly, there is much talk of psychology's "true task" and "ascent", and plenty of pioneers and father-figures: Plato, the father of cognitive psychology; Augustine, the first, great introspective psychologist; Hobbes, the ancestor of "one strand" of modern psychology. However, although Professor Hearnshaw takes pride in psychology's eventual arrival as a lively scientific discipline, he is neither complacent nor unaware of its lack of cohesion. He is critical, for example, of the confusion and one-sidedness of the 'cognitive revolution' and its resort to the computer metaphor:

A machine cannot think, any more than a book can remember. The meaning of the words on a printed page are bestowed by minds; they have only a delegated intentionality. ... Computer bewitchment threatens to eclipse an appreciation of the biological and historical depths of human nature [p. 272].

Professor Hearnshaw is not, therefore, engaged in a glorification of the *status quo*. But his is a Whig history nevertheless, for he portrays the past as an extended preparation for what he sees as our future task: the unification of psychology.

This is a scholarly and thoughtful book. Yet, as a new history, there is something strikingly unmodern about its approach, a lack of a sense of the profound reflexivity of the human sciences. Certainly, there is a recognition of the importance of history in psychology, an appreciation that many apparent universal laws of human nature may, in fact, be specific to particular social conditions. But Hearnshaw neglects the crucial twist. Psychology is now itself a part of our culture, and hence an influence upon the way we conduct our affairs. Hearnshaw's use of history is fine for its avowed aim, to exhort and rally the troops. But its recurrent appeal to an abstract and reified 'past' leads to just the kind of history which obscures rather than clarifies the human nature of our science. □

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