2. Society and Civilisation

One of the great difficulties about teaching history to children is that most of them have little sense of time. For them events are immediate and memories are short: the happenings of the previous year are already remote, the childhood of their own parents seems incredible, and the existence of a more distant past is almost inconceivable. People in simple societies perpetuate these attitudes into adult life, but because human curiosity is infinite even though information is non-existent, the past beyond a few known and remembered generations is populated by legendary heroes or by myths of creation and renewal. Such societies have no sense of history, but in its place they have folklore, myth, ritual and magic. History only began, as we have already observed, with the systematic attempts by Herodotus and other Greek scholars to recover evidence of the past. This attempt required both rigorous standards in discriminating between good evidence and bad, and an imagination capable of grasping the significance of change over time. Only a well-informed and inspired imagination can make sense of the past, in the literal meaning of arranging it in a pattern that is sensible or meaningful.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the imaginative component in history because it is an intellectual faculty which is too easily taken for granted or – much worse – forgotten. Without it, the teaching of history is barren, losing its sense of movement in time and becoming a purposeless narrative of facts, sometimes reduced to the ultimate absurdity of a list of dates of reigns and battles divorced from any attempt at meaningful interpretation in a context of chronological development. The genuine historian, in contrast with this sterile approach to the past, is in a real sense a ‘time traveller’, capable of thinking easily in the dimension of time because he possesses the imaginative qualities which enable him to recognise relationships and to interpret information about past events. The scope for such
historical reconstruction has gradually increased as the information available to the historian has grown, but until quite recently there was no reason to think that this body of knowledge could be substantially enlarged beyond the earliest documentary evidence dating back no further than two or three thousand years BC. Beyond that, after all, it was universally held that the Creation occurred by divine fiat around 4000 BC, so that there was effectively only a little gap between the periods of recorded history and the beginning of time – a belief which illustrates neatly the typical foreshortening imposed by ignorance.

Ignorance only began to be dispelled in the nineteenth century, when the intellectually explosive qualities of discoveries in geology and the life sciences wrought havoc with the previously unquestioned time-scales of world history, and when archaeological evidence began to accumulate of human developments stretching back over much greater periods of time than any previously considered or even conceived. The intellectual revolution which followed has been aptly described as ‘the discovery of time’, and has added tremendously to the scope of human history. In some academic circles the notion survives that the only genuine history is that of recorded events, but ever since Professor Gordon Childe set out forcefully a generation ago to tell us What Happened in History by calling on archaeological and anthropological evidence to review the whole development of the human species, this traditional view has declined in favour.¹ We have no difficulty now in recognising that history is as old as mankind, although it is realised that for most of the time-span of the species the only available evidence is of a physical quality and that fully-fledged documentary history is a luxury of the comparatively recent past. With this new vantage-point we are able to see the rise of our own civilisation against a backcloth of long-term human development.

The Beginnings of Civilisation

Man-like species, culminating in our own homo sapiens, have almost certainly existed on this planet for two or three million years, and the recent research of archaeologists in central Africa seems to be steadily pushing back in time the origin of such species. But however much it is extended, this period will remain only a minute fraction of