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THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV: VOLTAIRE'S COMING OF AGE AS A PHILOSOPHER-HISTORIAN

In 1994, scholars from all over the world met at congresses in Paris, Oxford, Melbourne and other centres of learning to celebrate the tercentenary of Voltaire's birth. Although there is some doubt as to the exact date of his birth, we know that he was baptized in November 1694. It is accordingly fitting now to reflect on Voltaire's achievements as a historian, for he regarded himself first as a dramatist, next as a historian and last as an essayist and a *Conteur,* even if he is fondly remembered nowadays as the author of *Candide.*

Voltaire's documentation for his historical works was impressive. In this respect, *The Age of Louis XIV (1751)* has as sound a basis as could be expected in its day, and its author has been deemed to be the father of modern "scientific" history.[1] What emerges from a study of the sources utilised for *The Age of Louis XIV* is that, although Voltaire scorned erudite working habits, in so far as he excluded documents such as extracts of treatises and gave few references, he clearly took his duty as a historian with a degree of seriousness equalled amongst his French contemporaries only by Montesquieu. He was fully aware that his competence in historiography would be judged first and foremost on the reliability of his evidence and on the degree of accuracy which he would achieve. Although *The Age of Louis XIV* did not occupy him exclusively, he sought for about twenty years or so (1732–1751), to add to the data and material which he had begun to gather as early as the late 1720s. He made effective use of his travels in Europe to interview numerous eyewitnesses and throughout the project his approach to the problem of historical documentation remained positive and systematic. The care with which he researched his subject has won the admiration of many critics over the years; to quote Gustave Lanson, who always managed to hit the nail right on the head: "It is superfluous to state that Voltaire's method is no longer adequate today. But it marks a vital step in the transition from traditionalist history to scientific history" [my translation].[2]

From a study of sources employed for *The Age of Louis XIV,* one may conclude that what constitutes Voltaire's originality is his highly individualistic selection, organisation and presentation of the material which he borrowed for various specific purposes. From a mass of material he sought to extract what would best serve his aims, whether these be historical, literary, propagandist or philosophical. He responded to each case by choosing what would give greatest weight to his arguments, omitting what would weaken them. As with other literary genres, history for Voltaire became a basis for discussing a range of topics

dear to his heart. He did not bring to light a vast amount of new information, but made historical facts more meaningful and more accessible to his readers. In this respect, the "philosophic" spirit has clearly left its mark on his history of Louis XIV's reign. Indeed, as E.H. Carr has observed in *What is History?*, interpretation is the most vital aspect of historiography: "My first answer to the question 'What is history?' is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past."[3] This paper aims to assess briefly Voltaire's main philosophic intentions in *The Age of Louis XIV* and survey the highly personal interpretations which the philosopher-historian offers his readers.

Whilst *The Age of Louis XIV* provides entertainment in its thrilling narrative, where Voltaire displays the full mastery of his vivid and terse style, and in the witty anecdotes of the *raconteur*, it is endowed with far more philosophical qualities than his first attempt at history-writing, the *History of Charles XII* (1731). Voltaire himself declared that history should make man think; to Elie Bertrand he wrote on June 7, 1756 concerning the *Essay on manners*, of which *The Age of Louis XIV* formed an integral part: "I never intended to display my wit in that work but to provide readers who have a lively mind with opportunities to think" [my translation].[4] And to Charles Duclos, who had replaced him as Royal Historiographer, he offered encouragement in April 1745, stressing that the historian had to be a philosopher as well as a chronicler of events: "Take heart! Only philosophers should undertake to write history" (my translation D3102). When David Hume's *History of England* was published, Voltaire praised its impartiality and its philosophical contents and concluded: "The reading public has never been more aware of the fact that philosophers alone ought to write history."[5]

Philosophic history will be taken here in three different, though related, senses: firstly, Voltaire the pragmatist viewed history as a record of man's follies and achievements, from which moral lessons could be drawn for the benefit of contemporary readers and posterity; in this way history becomes didactic, though not always overtly so, and teaches by examples. Secondly, Voltaire endeavoured to explain events by means of various theories of causation, as well as a rigid and static conception of human nature. In *Voltaire Historian*, Brumfitt has provided an excellent definition of this type of "philosophic history": "'Philosophic' history [...] is not merely liberal or anti-clerical propaganda, but is an attempt to understand and interpret human societies and customs in terms of Enlightenment beliefs about the nature of man and the universe."[6] Lastly, one must bear in mind that to Voltaire history becomes, like other genres, a means of propaganda, a way of enlightening others, of attacking his bugbears and of spreading further those humanitarian principles which he held dear, in brief of working for the philosophic cause. Voltaire's commitment

to the crusade against sectarianism, religious dogmatism and social injustices is persistent in the *The Age of Louis XIV* but is held in check by the desire to be as impartial as possible. Voltaire's practice therefore does not always match that ideal of the philosopher-historian's method he saw exemplified by David Hume. Concerning the latter he declared: "The philosopher does not belong to any country nor to any faction [...] Mr Hume in his history appears to be neither a parliamentarian, nor a royalist, nor an Anglican, nor a Presbyterian; one finds in him only an equitable man."[7]

(i) Moral history

Throughout his career as a historian, Voltaire adhered to the precept enunciated by Bolingbroke in *The Letters on the study and use of history,* that history was "philosophy teaching by examples."[8] His first historical work, the *History of Charles XII,* belonged undoubtedly to the humanist tradition, not just because of its vivid narrative and literary approach, but also because of its didacticism. In the *Discourse on the History of Charles XII,* which accompanied the first edition of the *History* (1731), Voltaire proclaimed the usefulness of his work for the edification of future princes: "We flattered ourselves that it might be of some little use to princes, should it ever happen to fall into their hands. No king, surely, can be so incorrigible as, when he reads the *History of Charles XII,* not to be cured of the vain ambition of making conquests."[9] Despite his courage, personal qualities and military genius, Charles XII of Sweden came to a sticky end.

In his narrative, Voltaire followed the rise and fall of this tragic hero who had but one major flaw, the classical *Hamartia,* an inexhaustible ambition to be the new Alexander. Charles's example, adds Voltaire, should deter future princes from military ambition that overrides itself. In Voltaire's scheme of things, history has many traits in common with tragedy; it should stir the tragic emotions of pity and fear, and it should be endowed with a moral fabric comparable to Cornelian and Racinian tragedies combined. It is significant that after the death of Charles XII from a stray bullet, Mégret, one of his generals, exclaims: "Come, gentlemen, the farce is ended, let us go to supper."[10] Voltaire then adopts an overtly moral tone to sum up Charles XII's career and personal qualities: "Thus fell Charles XII, King of Sweden, at the age of thirty-six years and a half, after having experienced all the grandeur of prosperity, and all the hardships of adversity, without being either softened by the one, or the least disturbed by the other [...] From the history of his life, however, succeeding kings may learn that a quiet and happy government is infinitely preferable to so much glory."*11* Voltaire makes it clear in the historical tract that he prefers Peter the Great, the legislator, to Charles XII, the warrior, and in a letter to Schulenbourg of 20 August 1740, he confessed that he deemed superior to both a humane prince who would work for the welfare of his people and choose

peace to war: "In brief, a philosopher on the throne; that's my hero," adding that such a prince existed in Prussia, namely Frederick the Great. How disappointed he was when his hero invaded Silesia in the 1750s!

This pragmatic and utilitarian attitude to history persists in *The Age of Louis XIV* but one notices a shift of emphasis from an attempt to morally edify rulers to a desire to instruct a larger section of humanity. Voltaire's approach becomes more social; a leader's personal qualities, as embodied in Charles XII and Peter the Great, take second place to the "social achievements" of a monarch. In *The Age of Louis XIV*, we move on to a higher plane of social history, with the legislator, Louis XIV, being held responsible for the progress of his nation, progress which is measured against the narrow ideals of the Enlightenment. For Voltaire does not acknowledge that the age of Louis XIV owed a great deal to what had come before it; to him, social and intellectual progress is not the result of an accumulation of knowledge, but is the consequence of a sudden revolution in the customs and the "spirit of men." We have passed from "a particular history" in *Charles XII* to "the history of the human mind in the most enlightened age ever." In a letter to Lord Hervey, Voltaire was keen to stress in the 1740s that Louis XIV "has not achieved all that he could, no doubt, because he was a mere mortal; but he achieved more than any other prince because he was a great man." And he added: "Bear with me, milord, as I attempt to erect to his glory a monument which I dedicate even more to the instruction of the human race" [my translation].[12] If his generation was unwilling to learn from the history of the previous age, the philosopher-historian seemingly found some consolation in the thought that posterity would recognise the achievements of the great king but also learn from his mistakes.

The notion that "history is nothing but a tableau of human misfortunes" (D5385 — my translation) did not, as is generally believed, emerge from Voltaire's preparation of the *General History* in the 1740s, although it gained greater momentum as a result of his research for what later became the *Essay on manners*. As early as 1735, when he started composing *The Age of Louis XIV*, Voltaire was aware of the "human folly" which had marred the reign of the Sun King. From examples of petty religious squabbles, the moralist set out to draw practical conclusions about the dangers of uncontrolled religious sects within a kingdom. Thus he altered the original structure of the work and increased from two to five the number of chapters devoted to what he called the "history of mad men": that is, the Quietist dispute, the Jansenist-Jesuit quarrel, the persecution of the Calvinists and the controversy surrounding the Chinese who were defended in France by the Jesuits against unjust accusations of atheism. Moreover, whereas *The Age of Louis XIV* was initially planned in 1735 to close with chapters on literature and the arts, in 1751 it finished on a far more sombre note with an undisguised philosophical attack on the general

ignorance which fuelled sectarianism. Such moral lessons are aimed as much at Louis XV and Frederick as at a wider audience. In the article "History" in the *Philosophical Dictionary,* Voltaire remarked: "Examples have a considerable impact on the mind of a prince who reads carefully" but added that history should lead to moral edification in a subtle way: "What would constitute useful history? That which teaches us our duties and our rights without appearing to teach them."[13] And of the lasting reforms achieved by statesmen, Voltaire says in *The Age of Louis XIV*: "Posterity owes them eternal gratitude for the examples they gave, even though such examples have been surpassed. Such lawful glory is their reward."[14]

One may safely conclude that the utilitarian approach to history had strengthened since *Charles XII,* although it had become less overt, whilst the criteria against which Voltaire judged the actions of statesmen had taken on a more social complexion. The moralist sought to enlighten princes and the human race at large by reflecting both on the lasting good done by leaders and on the grave consequences of Man's irrational behaviour. He was at the same time preoccupied with the ideal of the philosopher on the throne. In the thirties and forties, when he was busy adding to the manuscript of *The Age of Louis XIV,* Voltaire still had high hopes of finding his ideal prince either in Louis XIV or in Frederick. He genuinely sought to offer a lesson in the art of kingship to Louis XV. In the end, his portrayal of Louis XIV became less eulogistic; if the Sun King came close to the ideal philosopher-prince in his role as a patron of the arts, as the legislator of his nation and as the main instigator of reforms, he failed in other respects. Much can be learnt from his unworthy actions, such as his extravagance, his unjust wars, and his lack of respect for law and for human life.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Leopold's reward was the loyalty and love of his people: "And he thus tasted the happiness of knowing himself beloved; long after his death I have seen his subjects break into tears at the sound of his name. Dying, he left an example for the greatest kings to follow" (166). By proffering such advice to those who have the authority to effect changes, the moralist transforms history into a basis for action and reforms; it becomes a Study of Man, in accordance with Voltaire's motto: *"Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto* [...] This appears to me to be the only method of writing modern history like a true politician and a true philosopher," he writes in the *New reflections on history.*[15] Or to put it another way, Voltaire could have said of his histories, as he did of his other works: "I write in order to act."

(ii) Theories of causation

When one moves on to the other two senses of philosophic history one can measure the headway Voltaire has made since the *History of Charles XII.* Throughout *The Age of Louis XIV,* albeit to a lesser extent than in the *Essay on*

manners, history provides food for thought for the philosopher who is not content to compile data as such predecessors as Larrey, Limiers, Reboulet, Hénault and La Mothe La Hode had done. Voltaire's alert and ever active intelligence endeavours to see patterns emerging from historical events, as he sets out to interpret and explain these in a number of ways. In the History of Charles XII his theories of causation are confused and ill-defined Generally, he comes down to the human level and explains events in terms of the leadership qualities of the protagonists, Charles XII and Peter the Great. Every so often, he refers to chance, destiny or fate, depending on the degree of his determinism.

The conflicting theories of causation in *The Age of Louis XIV* may not be entirely satisfactory and remain haphazard, but here analysis plays a far greater role. The philosopher is torn in the main between the role of great men in history and the part played by fate or accident, although Voltaire's increasing determinism can already be observed here. That he attributes most of the credit for the artistic, social and political innovations of the age to Louis XIV himself is typical of his approach to the writing of social history. He does not see the great man as the product of his environment but rather as the agent of change who seemingly owes little to what has gone before. It is significant that the theory of the four great ages in the history of Man, expounded in the introduction to *The Age of Louis XIV,* revolves around a series of individuals: Philip and Alexander; Caesar and Augustus; the Medicis and Francis I; and Louis XIV. One can argue that Voltaire never ceases to be an optimist in his histories, since he believes that the individual can control his environment.

Thus we are told that the French nation was "moulded to a great extent by Louis XIV" (Pollack, 338), and that "Louis XIV did more good for his country than twenty of his predecessors together" (Pollack, 334). The "Great Men" theory is based on the notion that an absolute monarch, a legislator, statesman or great general, with the necessary will-power and personal talent, can radically alter the course of history. This is borne out in *The Age of Louis XIV* not just by the part played by the Sun King himself, but also by Voltaire's references to the genius of Condé, Turenne and Marlborough, and to the foresight of Colbert. This theory brings history close to the concept of Cornelian tragedy and is in essence humanistic. The outcome of events depends on the character of the men involved; the failure of James II and the success of William III in Ireland after the battle of the Boyne are put down to the differences in their nature:

> The respective characters of William and James were enough. Those who choose to see the causes of events in the conduct of men will observe that William granted a general pardon after his victory, while the defeated James in passing through the little town of Galway had several citizens hanged for having wished to close the gates against him. Of two men who behaved in such ways it was not difficult to see which of them was bound to succeed. (Pollack, 144)

It is in his discussion of the share of human responsibility that Voltaire's conception of human nature is most discernible. As J.B. Black has noted in *The Art of History,* Voltaire and the Enlightenment judged the past by the present and applied their values to all people of all ages.[16] In the *Essay on manners,* the historian was to conclude in an almost Newtonian fashion that human nature was alike from one end of the world to another. Moreover, Voltaire was a product of his own society who found it hard to overcome the ideology to which he pledged allegiance and his middle-class values. Few would challenge Friedrich Meinecke's evaluation in *Historism* of Voltaire's sense of history as "narrow, defective, and limited by the mechanistic concepts of contemporary philosophy and by the selfish demands of French bourgeois society."[17] Both these aspects restrict Voltaire's historical vision and have a major impact on his concept and execution of social and philosophic history, for they have a major bearing on the search for explanations to social, political and historical events.

In addition, such an unchanging view of human nature partly accounts for Voltaire's cyclical view of history. If history repeats itself, it is not merely by accident, but because Man is essentially the same in all ages. Hence similar actions and follies are bound to recur with remarkable frequency, especially as Man never learns from his mistakes. This notion is central to the *Essay on manners* but also permeates *The Age of Louis XIV,* where Voltaire draws attention to parallels in history, where for instance the unjustified attack on Holland by her enemies in 1670 recalls the League formed against Louis XII by Spain and Austria (Pollack, 92). This technique is particularly useful to the propagandist who seeks to underline the disastrous consequences of military conflicts through the ages.

However, the share of human responsibility and the role of the great man do not provide all the answers, according to Voltaire, who further blurs the issue as he becomes more pessimistic in the late 1740s by frequent references to chance or to fate. This determinism may be perceived as a source of makeshift explanations whenever Voltaire cannot provide a rational one. Besides, by insisting on the vicissitudes of life and on the unpredictability of history, he puts himself in a position to capitalise on potentially dramatic events. History thus becomes more thrilling, since the narrator exploits the element of surprise. But as a theory of causation, chance is far from satisfactory and is unworthy of the kind of rationalistic history that Voltaire proposed to write. One may deplore the fact that as a consequence of this, history is reduced to the level of the *Contes.* Of the battle of Hochstedt (1705), Voltaire writes: "After the first charge, the power of chance over the results of battles was again demonstrated. Both armies, French and German, seized with panic, took flight at the same time, and for several minutes Marshal Villars found himself left practically alone on the battlefield" (Pollack, 197). The same action at two moments in time, he remarks,

can have vastly different outcomes depending on the particular circumstances but also because of the role of chance: both Charles I and Louis XIV abandoned their prime ministers, but Charles I was executed and Louis XIV eventually won the support of the nation (48). This vague notion of chance or destiny replaces in Voltaire's histories the role played by Providence in Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1681). One notes Voltaire's growing determinism in a moving tableau of the recurrent woes of the Stuarts which demonstrates fully Voltaire's ability to endow history with pathos and heralds the more sombre passages of *Candide*: "There are those who believe in a fatality which nothing can avert, and such a belief is strengthened by this continuous series of misfortunes which has dogged the House of Stuart for more than three hundred years" (147).

The unpredictability of history is further illustrated in *The Age of Louis XIV* by Voltaire's reliance on the "small causes" theory, the view that important revolutions in the affairs of men often result from insignificant events. The best example of the theory was provided by Pascal who reflected on the impact which the length of Cleopatra's nose had on the course of history. The disparity between causes and effects is brought out in *The Age of Louis XIV* in a number of entertaining anecdotes. The most amusing of these is perhaps his account of the fall from grace of the Duke of Marlborough, which he attributes to a quarrel between Queen Anne and the Duchess of Marlborough over pairs of gloves: "Some pairs of gloves of curious workmanship refused by her to the queen, a bowl of water contemptuously let fall on Lady Masham's dress in the queen's presence — such trifles changed the face of Europe" (238). Quite rightly in the pirate edition of 1752, La Beaumelle took him to task for ignoring the serious facets of Marlborough's decline, in particular the intrigues of the Tories.[18] But Voltaire stuck to his story, having interviewed the duchess in person during his stay in England. He put far too much faith in oral testimonies on that occasion.

All in all, Voltaire's theories of causation are not properly worked out in *The Age of Louis XIV.* He responds spontaneously to each case in hand, and what he cannot explain rationally, he ascribes to forces beyond Man's control. Yet, whilst he never achieves the success and consistency of Montesquieu, and whilst his theories are not as fully-fledged as they became in the *Essay on manners,* he does at least show awareness of the complexities involved in interpreting history. More than his predecessors, he attempts to combine description, narration and analysis. In *The Intellectual development of Voltaire,* Wade is justified in claiming that the historian was not "lacking in notions concerning the fundamental aspects of history, such as the purpose and nature of history, causation, determinism, progress, and decline."[19] What is missing is a more consistent philosophy of history, but then Voltaire was always opposed to system-building as such. In any event, most historians would agree that it is

the nature of history that it cannot be fully explained by one theory alone and that historical events cannot always be accounted for rationally.

(iii) Propagandist history

Last but not least, let us now try and ascertain briefly the extent to which *The Age of Louis XIV* reveals Voltaire's commitment to the cause of the Enlightenment. As one would expect, the *philosophe* played down as much as he possibly could the propagandist elements in his work. At the time of the publication of the first edition in 1751, he went to a great deal of trouble to convince the reading public at large and, more especially, the French authorities, that he was guided in all things by respect for the truth. In his Correspondence, he repeatedly stressed that patriotism had inspired him to write *The Age of Louis XIV.* To Frederick he declared: "My voice and my quill were devoted to my fatherland, as they are to your wishes" (D5085 — my translation). After the first edition of 1751, Voltaire tried to rally support from such influential men as Hénault and Malesherbes, in the hope that the French authorities would turn a blind eye to the publication of the work in France; hence his insistence on the fact that changes to the second edition of 1753 were "dictated by love of the truth and of the fatherland" (D4771 — my translation). Nor did Voltaire see any conflict between this professed patriotism and respect for the truth. Yet such a conflict was inevitable, for the philosopher had a duty to underline the darker side, as well as the glorious achievements, of the age of Louis XIV. To Richelieu he admitted in August 1751 that as a historian he was called upon to judge the practices of the Church and the behaviour of religious sects: "I have set myself up, by my sole authority, as the judge of kings, generals, Parlements, the Church and the sects that divide it" (D4561 — my translation). But in assessing Man's past conduct, Voltaire makes it clear that history should strike the right balance between flattery and satire: "One knows that history should be neither a panegyric, nor a satire, nor a political pamphlet, nor a sermon, nor a novel," he wrote in the *Defence of Louis XIV.*[20]

When looking at *The Age of Louis XIV* as propagandist history, one should take such pronouncements with a pinch of salt, for he was not likely to publicise his polemical aims in view of the hostile reactions of the authorities to the publication of the first two chapters of the work and their condemnation in the *Recueil de pièces fugitives* of 1739. As with other genres, history served the philosophic cause in an indirect rather than a overt manner, and one has to be conscious of Voltaire's hidden motives in the work.

Briefly, one must first turn to the question of whether one of his aims was to use the age of Louis XIV as the basis for an attack on the government of Louis XV, since this has often been seen as a central idea behind *The Age of Louis XIV*

when it was first conceived by Voltaire in the 1720s. In *Louis XIV and the age of the Enlighhtenment,* N.R. Johnson has echoed the sentiment of many critics when he remarked: "The desire to encourage Louis XV to imitate his predecessor is not absent from the *Siècle.*"[21] It is true that Voltaire hit upon the idea of composing the work in England when he was preparing for publication the *Letters concerning the English nation* (c.1730) where he praised the political freedom enjoyed by the English and deplored the repressiveness of the French system. Accordingly, a comparison between the two works is to some extent justified. Yet any parallel of the two ages in the Correspondence is expressed mainly in terms of the splendid literary achievements of the reign of Louis XIV as opposed to the sterility of Louis XV's. At the outset, at least, Voltaire was mainly concerned with paying tribute to the golden era of classicism to which he belonged by his taste and background. Later in the 1750s, his polemical intentions and the campaign for greater liberalism and reforms gathered momentum. Rather than see his intention as being to attack the government of Louis XV, one should perhaps conclude that he is intent on reminding the monarch of the protection offered by his predecessor to artists and of the other positive achievements of the Sun King.

In lamenting the artistic desert which he saw as prevailing in his day, Voltaire appears to have suffered from an interesting inferiority complex. Yet, he was more than willing to advocate the superiority of the eighteenth century in philosophy: "I see the age of Louis XIV as the age of genius and the present age as the one which reflects on genius," he concluded in the *Defence of Louis XIV.*[22] Philosophic progress in the great age was arrested by ignorance and trivial religious disputes. This gives Voltaire an opportunity to put in an unreserved plea for the vital contribution made by philosophers such as himself to society, and to preach the cause of the Enlightenment:

> Slow in influencing the learned, reason was scarcely yet able to guide scholars, still less ordinary citizens. It must first be established in the minds of leaders, then gradually it descends and, at length, rules the people who are unaware of its existence, but who, perceiving the moderation of their superiors, learn how to imitate them. It is one of the great works of time, and the time had not yet come. (415)

By implication, that time had come in Voltaire's day. In the passage quoted above, added in 1756 when Voltaire's commitment to the crusade was much greater, history can be seen to lead to open propaganda for the philosophic set. On several occasions, Voltaire draws attention to the role played by the thinking elite in society: "It has been said that the peoples would be happy could they have philosophers for kings, but it is also true to say that kings are much the happier when many of their subjects are philosophers" (356).

Taken in conjunction with the emphasis on "the history of human folly" in the last five chapters of *The Age of Louis XIV* (xxxv–xxxix), such statements indicate Voltaire's total commitment to the philosophic ideals of the Enlightenment. Material gleaned from sources is often manipulated according to the case in hand, and Voltaire's bias against representatives of the Church in history, such as Richelieu, Mazarin and Le Tellier, shows through. However, despite his firm stance against intolerance and fanaticism, Voltaire is capable of achieving a commendable degree of objectivity when it comes to giving the essential facts. Brumfitt rightly judges the last five chapters of *The Age of Louis XIV* to be "amongst the best examples of Voltaire's historical writing." The critic concludes that the historian "is determined to appear as unprejudiced as possible, and these chapters show a far greater concern for impartial and measured comment than do his judgements on many other subjects."[23] This ubiquitous aspect of Voltaire historian is precisely what makes his historical works both perplexing and fascinating to study.

In terms of "philosophic history" and of "social history," Voltaire has achieved much since the *History of Charles XII*. In *The Age of Louis XIV* he moves away from a narrative of the exploits of outstanding individuals to a more analytical approach to the intellectual and cultural progress of the French nation under the Sun King. In *Charles XII*, Voltaire rarely comments on the *mores* of the Nordic peoples., but in *The Age of Louis XIV*, he equates social history with the "history of the human spirit," with literary and cultural history. He repeatedly declared that he was less concerned with compiling historical data than with underlining and explaining major revolutions in customs. Unfortunately, he did not in effect see history as a "progressive science," in Lord Acton's words, since he did not present cultural progress as an accumulation of knowledge going from the Middle-Ages beyond the eighteenth century. The absence of a broader perspective and of an evolutionary view of history is a major weakness in *The Age of Louis XIV*, as is Voltaire's lack of historical relativism.

For all that, Voltaire made a genuine attempt to seek explanations for events of social, political and economic significance. Regrettably, instead of showing how events emerged from the spirit of the times, the historian was content to deduce his notion of the spirit of the times from events, an unsatisfactory outcome to a brave attempt to produce rationalistic social history. The balance between description and analysis in*The Age of Louis XIV* is much more even than in other historical works of the period. Voltaire's vision of history may be static and his concept of human nature far too inflexible at times, but his interpretation of the past is a highly personal one. If we take Brumfitt's definition of the "philosophy of history" as "lessons which history teaches the *philosophe*,"[24] then *The Age of Louis XIV* marks a tangible advance in historiography. It can be seen as a stepping-stone towards the next major landmark in the career of the

philosopher-historian, the *Essay on manners* (1756), where he achieves the right balance between the precise, experimental and comparative method of sociology in its infancy and philosophical explanations. In the *History of Charles XII* (1731), Voltaire was learning his trade; in *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751), he came of age as a philosopher-historian; in the *Essay on manners* (1756), he was to become the leading social historian and philosopher-historian of his generation.

Notes

1. Ch. Rihs, *Recherches sur les origines du matérialisme historique* (Genève 1962), 119.

2. *Voltaire* (Paris 1906), 151.

3. *What is history?* (Harmondsworth 1971), 30.

4. Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents* [hereafter in the text as D], ed. Th. Besterman, in *The Complete Works of Voltaire* (Genève, Oxford 1968–1977), D6924.

5. *Voltaire*, "Articles extracted from *La Gazette littéraire de l'Europe,*" in the *Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. L. Moland (Paris 1877–1885), xxv.169 — my translation.

6. Oxford 1970, 16.

7. Voltaire, "Articles extracted from *La Gazette littéraire de l'Europe,*" xxv.170.

8. *Works* (Philadelphia 1941), ii.177.

9. *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, translated by W.F. Fleming (Paris n.d.), xx.8.

10. *Ibid.*, xxi.46.

11. *Ibid.*, xxi.47-48.

12. Voltaire, *Oeuvres Historiques*, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris 1957), 608–611.

13. *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, tr. Fleming, x.74.

14. Voltaire, *The Age of Louis XIV*, translated by M. Pollack (London n.d.), 320. All subsequent references will be inserted into the text.

15. *The Complete Works of Voltaire,* tr. Fleming, xxvii.268.

16 London 1926, 3.

17. London 1972, 88-89.

18. *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (Frankfurt 1753), ii.195.

19. Princeton 1969, 490.

20. Voltaire, *Oeuvres Historiques,* 1293 — my translation.

21. *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* 172 (1978), 320–321.

22. Voltaire, *Oeuvres Historiques,* 1294 — my translation.

23. *op. cit.,* 57–58.

24. Voltaire, *La Philosophie de l'histoire,* ed. J.H. Brumfitt, in *The Complete Works of Voltaire* 59 (Oxford 1969), 13.