

Charles M. Andrews: Philosopher of History

PHILIP A. MUTH, Oklahoma City University

It hardly seems possible that any student of early American history could be unaware of the name Charles McLean Andrews. The author of numerous books and articles, he is best known for two monumental achievements, his four-volume *magnum opus*, entitled *The Colonial Period of American History*, and his three volumes of guides to materials for early American history in British archives. What are not so well known, however, are his contributions to the *philosophy* of history.

In 1924 Andrews addressed the American Historical Association on the topic, "These Forty Years" (Andrews, 1925). By a happy coincidence, the years 1884-1924 had seen the birth and maturing both of the Association and of Charles M. Andrews, the historian. Thus, the changes which he described were actually experienced by him in his own career. The speech, however, was no mere series of recollections. It clearly set forth Andrews' criticisms of earlier historians and his ideas as to what history is, why it is studied, and how it should be written.

In this address, Andrews (1925) pointed out that the great majority of historians before the mid-nineteenth century had written very little which was any longer considered of value. Like the sciences, the study and writing of history was but crudely developed in the early period, and the early historians had merit only as pioneers of the more sophisticated discipline which followed. Andrews criticized their purpose, "to entertain with rich dramatic narrative" or "to show political progress or defend party or program." He belittled their use of sources as "gossip and love of anecdote, the outpourings of diarists and letterwriters none too scrupulous of veracity, and the unverified assertions of the oldest inhabitants and other participators in the events of their time. . .". He condemned their synthesis, saying, "They were credulous, careless, and childish, blinded by their partialities and hatreds. They generalized from single instances and fabricated motives often the most general or most gross to explain situations and events. They had no conception of evolution and took little or no account of changes in standards and ideals, of shifts in moral and ethical viewpoints." He also found fault with their style, being critical both of the highly narrative and of the biographical approaches which had been so popular. *In short, he damned them as being unscientific.*

Obviously dissatisfied with things as they had been, Andrews then described the developments which had led to what he considered a more enlightened system. He spoke of Darwin's theory of evolution and of the "Germ Theory" of Green and of Freeman, which had given rise to the idea of unity and continuity in American history. He welcomed Buckle's scientific approach to history and Ernst Bernheim's treatise on the historical method, the first such work available to the American student. He praised the seminar, the monograph, and the learned journals by which scholars could share their findings for correction or verification on the one hand and for synthesis on the other. He pointed to the increased interest in accurate source materials indicated by the publication of Justin Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History* in 1886. Each of these developments was for Andrews a breakthrough of inestimable value, and each was an integral part of his own approach to history.

Andrews came by his interest in the unity and continuity in history quite naturally. He was born in Wethersfield, Connecticut, one of the oldest and most historic of New England towns, and he traced his family line back on both sides for seven generations of unadulterated Puritan stock. At John Hopkins he was exposed to the "Germ Theory" of history by Herbert Baxter Adams. This theory maintained (1) that the develop-

ment of institutions is the basic "stuff" of history and (2) that the initial "germ" of all institutions is to be found in European and especially in German history. While Andrews did not accept the whole theory, he was considerably influenced by it and studied European history thoroughly, writing no less than four books about it before turning to the colonial history for which he was to be primarily known. Even here Andrews' most conspicuous contribution was his insistence that the American colonies must be examined as a part of a greater whole which includes both England and the rest of her empire.

For Andrews the concept of unity and continuity in history was a concept of flux and not one of *stasis*. That which gives continuity is not changelessness but the evolutionary nature of change. "Human history," he wrote, "is made up of a constant series of adjustments on the part of man to meet continuous and reoccurring changes in the conditions that surround him and in the thoughts that impel him to action." He went on to say that the refusal to recognize these laws of impermanence or to see the need for readjustments to meet new conditions is precisely what leads to conflicts in history. Change, he concluded, is inevitable, but because it comes as adjustments and not as a new creation, there is always an element of unity.

Because he saw this continuity, Andrews insisted that the American colonial period could be understood only by dealing with the English roots which inevitably formed the foundations of American institutions. His concept of controlled change also led him to conclude that the task of the historian is "to discover the character of these processes and the nature of the laws and forces at work bringing them about, to come to some agreement as to the extent to which the individual is capable of guiding and directing these forces, and to determine the measure of human freedom involved." In this way, the historian is able "to infer in some particulars, at least as through a glass darkly, the relation of these adjustments and laws to human conduct in the future and to predict in a large and general way the trend of history and the tendencies that are to govern the future movements of human society."

Believing as he did that history is a science, Andrews was convinced that "history is not a narrative to be written but a problem to be solved—a single great problem made up of thousands of lesser ones. . . ." As in any science, "history must be true . . . and the truth of history should be the only end sought." It must be undertaken for its own sake "and not primarily for the sake of benefiting society." Andrews believed, therefore, that the historian must be an unbiased observer. He must not "posture himself as a moralist or deem it any part of his task . . . to provide his readers with ethical or moral judgements . . .". The propagandist presents his readers with ready-made conclusions; the historian presents the truth, to which the reader may react as he will.

The applications of the scientific method, as understood by Andrews, are many and far-reaching. In the first place, the question of source materials becomes paramount. The historian can no more write history without reliable source materials than the scientist can work without his laboratory. As already noted, Andrews was very critical of diaries, letters, and personal recollections. To him, such sources were hearsay and were no more acceptable before the bench of history than before a court of law. Instead, he insisted upon using as many primary sources as possible, such as charters, rolls, legislative and executive acts, judicial proceedings, and registered logbooks. Even these, however, must be carefully analyzed and examined by means of the most sophisticated techniques of higher and lower criticism. Such a methodology is demanding, but Andrews used it with success, as indicated by the comment of one reviewer (Wrong, 1930). "The name of Professor Charles M. Andrews . . . is a guarantee of deep and accurate research." Furthermore, he

sought to ensure that such sources would be readily available to others, and for nearly fifteen years he served on the public archives commission of the American Historical Association, in addition to compiling three volumes of guides to materials for early American history in British archives.

The use of proper source material, however, is not enough. There remains the task of putting the data together into some sort of usable whole. To Andrews this process of synthesis was the truly creative and important aspect of historiography, but it was also that aspect which was most subject to errors. Truth and objectivity, he insisted, can be obtained only if the past is viewed in terms of the past; to carry back present-day attitudes and values to a former age is to misconstrue that age. An objective and past-minded approach to the colonial period, for instance, required that both sides of the Anglo-American relationship be understood, that the relationship be seen in the light of the dominant ideas of the time, and that the colonies be viewed as *colonies* rather than as independent states in embryo (Eisenstadt, 1951).

Objectivity is not the only problem facing the historian with respect to synthesis. The material is too vast, the scope of the problems too great, and the demand for accuracy too exacting for the "isolated, untrained, and unprofessional scholar to compete with success." As in the other sciences, it is necessary for the historian to share his findings with his peers, and Andrews felt that monographs, journals, and professional associations were essential to this sharing process. He even went so far as to say that, within the sphere of specialized problems, the scholars are writing for each other so that dry, even badly written monographs are of great value. Strongly suspicious of the polished style of the earlier writers whose works were too often biased and inaccurate, he was more than willing to trade good style for good content.

As an historian, Andrews succeeded in living up to his own philosophy with one notable exception; *viz.*, he was never able to deal adequately with social history. Most of his works ignore the subject, and the one book he did write on *Colonial Folkways* was a failure by his own standards since it never succeeds in creating a synthesis out of its vast amount of data and evidence. In a posthumously published article, "On the Writing of Colonial History," Andrews admitted as much and confessed that social history had always been merely a chaos of habits and customs in his estimation (Bailyn, 1956).

In spite of this shortcoming, Andrews helped to lead a successful reaction against the deficiencies of the historiography which he found at the beginning of his career.

It is probably true that some of Andrews' adjustments went too far. In seeking to avoid the shortcomings of the narrative, biographical, and polemical approaches, he succeeded in making history lifeless and dull. By relegating accurate history to the sphere of scholars writing monographs for each other, he abandoned the general public to the often bizarre interpretations of the poets, the politicians, and the novelists, who, for all their faults, present accounts that are vivid and full of life. Furthermore, by stressing the continuity in history and the importance of English institutions and documents, Andrews often underestimated the significance of environment in the development of a civilization that was partly indigenous even in the seventeenth century. Finally, most historians today are not convinced that history is, or can be, the exact science that Andrews believed it was.

Nevertheless, Andrews' real importance is not diminished by his overcompensating. Other scholars will rectify the portions of his work which were too extreme. As he, himself, said, "The writing of history is always

a progressive process, not merely or mainly because each age must write its own history from its own point of view, but because each generation of scholars is certain to contribute to historical knowledge and so to approach nearer than its predecessors to an understanding of the past." (Andrews, 1925). Andrews will be improved upon, but he will always remain one of America's greatest historians. As Eisenstadt noted, Andrews' claim to fame does not depend solely upon his superior scholarship or upon his successful achievement of most of what he had undertaken. He was great not because of the answers he gave but because of the questions he asked. "He knew that an answer might be tentative. The permanent thing with him was the question. He questioned the earlier historians and those of his own time, and when he had done questioning them he questioned himself. He did more, therefore, than bequeath us an Answer. He bequeathed us a Question, the very essence of living historiography." (Eisenstadt, 1951).

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