5. VOLTAIRE: POLEMICAL POSSIBILITIES OF HISTORY

Síofra Pierse

Introduction

What could have prompted Voltaire, *philosophe*, poet, playwright, social climber and justice campaigner extraordinaire, to style himself not just as a prolific historian, but also as a committed historiographer? Can one ascertain the nature and purpose of Voltaire’s foray into history? Was the undertaking a success? What type of legacy did this Enlightenment historian actually leave to posterity?

This chapter attempts to answer those questions by tracing Voltaire’s historiographical and historical trajectories and by gauging their role within the wider parameters of his immensely prolific career. The aim is to assess the impact of his historical and historiographical writings in terms of history, politics and philosophy. While Voltaire *philosophe* is most usually remembered nowadays as author of the *conte philosophique* *Candide* and as a vocal human rights activist, it is precisely that same ironic narrative fluency so typical of *Candide*, combined with an inherent fundamental scepticism, and a keen sense of social justice and advocacy

---

1 In this chapter “historiography” refers to Voltaire’s writings on the theory and methodology of the writing of history.

2 It is fortunate that recent interest in Voltaire’s history and historiography can now be further facilitated by the availability of new critical editions of his complete works that are being systematically published as part of the *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire/Complete Works of Voltaire* (Geneva, Banbury, Oxford, 1968–) project currently ongoing at the Voltaire Foundation, Oxford [henceforth OCV]. Where histories have not yet been published in this edition, the most convenient reference is René Pomeau, *Œuvres historiques* (Paris, 1957) and Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, ed. Pomeau, 2 vols. (Paris, 1963). For those historical or historiographical works not included in the any of the above, it is advisable to return to an earlier edition of Voltaire’s complete works: *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland, 52 vols. (Paris, 1877–1885).


of religious tolerance which bubbles to the surface and drives Voltaire’s historical vision.

Critical to the core, Voltaire was simply unable to engage with any genre without also analysing it, and devising his own definition and model. In Voltaire’s opinion, as viewed through the critical prism of a philosophe, the ground rules for historiography in terms of approach, organisation and vision, simply cried out for reform. So how does an enflamed, controversial, often biting, and deeply ironic scribbler of letters and pamphlets deal with the constraints of such an august genre as early modern history? Commenting on Voltaire’s decades-long engagement with historiography, Jeroom Vercruysse observes that the topic is boundless. When Voltaire decides to engage with the writing of history, he first reads voraciously, then synthesises, writes and theorises. Although he is influenced by earlier or contemporary historians from Bossuet through Lenglet du Fresnoy, and he uses a myriad other histories as source material, Voltaire systematically rejects contemporary histories as too focused on military history, or dates and battles, and far too lengthy. Instead, following in the spirit of Montesquieu’s Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence (1734), Voltaire aspires to write history with an enlightened, philosophical focus: “a history of human customs and behaviour”. His new type of history purports to engage more with politics, economics, humanity and philosophy, thus bringing together past, present and future within the text of history. Through a study of past societies and political systems, Voltaire’s aim is to demonstrate the measured drive of humanity towards human civilisation and progress. The result is a tale of sporadic forays into historiography, interspersed with concise works of history that are at once attractive, impressive and “philosophic”.

---

6 For discussion of historical and historiographical influences on Voltaire, see Ira O. Wade, The Intellectual Development of Voltaire (Princeton, 1969).
7 Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brède de, Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence (Amsterdam, 1734). The gulf between Montesquieu’s “esprit des lois” [spirit of the laws] and Voltaire’s “esprit du temps” [spirit of the time] is neatly identified by O’Brien, Narratives of Enlightenment, pp. 41–43.
8 Voltaire, Siècle de Louis XIV, in Œuvres historiques, pp. 603–1220 (p. 723).