Preface

The definite article was omitted by design before *Origins* in the title of this book, for it aims not at presenting a narrative account but at offering a critical interpretation. Specifically, it considers how and in what circumstances the ancient world came to an end in Western Europe and the medieval began. Of complete factual accounts presented in chronological order there have been a great many, some of them very useful indeed, but perhaps the time has come to clear away, as well as possible, the debris of views and opinions no longer tenable. A number of such views, some older, some quite recent, are examined in the pages that follow. In the course of this examination, every effort is made to clarify the general trends and bring out the overriding formative importance of the period under consideration—in short, to provide the setting without which the mere story of what happened can only seem puzzling and incomplete.

Despite all the efforts of medievalists to undo in recent decades the mischief wrought by writers wearing glasses of various colors, it has been extremely difficult to persuade the modern world to look at the medieval scene without preconceived notions. This is an old story in the study of history, and as sad as it is old. In this instance, it means that the West has remained largely unaware of a crucial part of its own tradition, a portion of its experience that may hold the power to render its own character more clearly intelligible to it.

Can the study of history legitimately claim to do any such thing? If so, it is very much to the point for our age to know it, particularly at a time when prophets posing as historians fill our ears with warnings of disaster. The most recent word is that the Caesars are coming back, are in fact breathing down our necks at this very moment. Can history make the present intelligible to the present? The best historians think it can. No one has made this point more plainly and succinctly than R. G. Collingwood. Asked what history is “for,” Collingwood replied that history is for human self-knowledge. Further: “The only clue to what man can do is what man has done,” and “The value of history . . . is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.”

It would doubtless be wise not to apply Collingwood's formula too rigidly but, mindful of Solon's warning to Croesus, to allow some leeway for the sake of prudence and human frailty. All the clues are not in until a man dies, and the same may be said of a civilization. The historian must get all the available facts, as much of the record as possible, and hope that it will serve. History may not tell us all we wish to know, but it remains our best source of information about man's potentialities. If we cannot obtain this information from history, we cannot obtain it at all—not by measuring the weight of ten thousand human brains, or by recording ten thousand outward aspects of human behavior, or by tables or charts or differential equations. We must go into man's mind, into the thoughts that have led him, and lead him, to make inventions, enter politics, waste money, fabricate superstitions, write poems, undertake business ventures, fight wars, and do all the other splendid, foolish, constructive, and criminal things he does. To elaborate slightly on Collingwood: The only indication, and it is not a guarantee, of the direction in which man (or a country, or a civilization) is heading is given by the trail or wake he has left behind him—the record of what he has made himself do or let himself be made to do in many different circumstances. Whoever would understand the character of Western civilization, which now includes the Americas, Russia, and much of Asia along with Europe, would do well to examine the record of its origins, the obstacles it overcame, the decisions it made, the courses it began to follow in the difficult time of its beginnings. This record ought to provide reading at least as interesting and informative, if less flamboyant, than the death notices published by the cyclical inspectors of the entrails.

Lucien Febvre, in a tribute to Marc Bloch's views on historical writing, observed that Bloch knew better than anyone that time stops for no one and that books of history, to be useful, must be discussed, plundered, contradicted, and continuously corrected and revised. Truer words could not be written; as Febvre added, a man would have to be stupid to consider himself infallible. One of my hopes for this book is that it will meet the fate of being debated, contradicted, and set right.

One of those best qualified to perform the last-named task is the man to whom it is dedicated. Although this essay should not be taken as proof of it, M. L. W. Laistner taught me a very great deal, including the most valuable of all lessons: that students, if they are to mature mentally, must

learn to think for and by themselves. Nothing could have been conveyed more definitely and more considerably than this truth was conveyed to me by my greatest teacher.

There are many debts of other kinds incurred in the process of research, writing, and preparation for publication. I wish to thank the officers of Stanford University, the Stanford University Library, and the Stanford University Press for their steady encouragement, counsel, and material assistance. Many friends and colleagues have generously responded to appeals for advice and criticism. In this respect, I am grateful above all to Professor Carl Fremont Brand of the Stanford Department of History, who read almost the entire manuscript and in his recommendations gave me the benefit of his long experience and keen critical sense. My wife, Eleanor Carlton Bark, by her comments on the manuscript and in many other ways, has been of the greatest help to me throughout.

WILLIAM CARROLL BARK

Frenchman's House
Stanford University
November 6, 1957