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What Do Historians Do?

WHAT IS HISTORY? ANYONE WHO TYPES THIS QUESTION into an internet search engine will discover an array of answers. Henry Ford famously said, "All history is bunk." Voltaire, the eighteenth-century philosopher, believed that history is "the lie commonly agreed upon." The American satirist Ambrose Bierce wrote that history is "an account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools." In a quote that warms the heart of many historians, the Irish writer Oscar Wilde said, "Anyone can make history; only a great man can write it." Are those who do not remember the past condemned to repeat it? The Spanish philosopher George Santayana thought so, and so do thousands of Americans when asked why students should study the subject. What is the purpose of studying history? What do historians do? Does everyone who conducts a serious study of the past qualify as a historian? "In my opinion," writes Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon Wood, "not everyone who writes about the past is a historian. Sociologists, anthropologists, political

scientists, and economists frequently work in the past without really thinking historically.”¹ What does Wood mean?

History and the Past

Any introductory conversation about the vocation of the historian must begin by making a distinction between “history” and “the past.” Most average people think that these two terms are synonymous. They are not. The past is the past—a record of events that occurred in bygone eras. The past is dates, facts, and things that “happened.” The past is what probably turned many of us off to the subject of history during our school years. Perhaps some of you may recall the economics teacher in the popular 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. This teacher reinforces a common stereotype, made famous by Arnold Toynbee, that history is little more than “one damn thing after another.” Played brilliantly by actor Ben Stein, the teacher stands before the class in a tweed sport coat, tie, and thick glasses, rattles off details about the Hawley–Smoot Tariff Act and “voodoo economics,” and monotonously asks his bored students to finish his sentences:

In 1930, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, in an effort to alleviate the effect of the . . . *anyone, anyone?* . . . the Great Depression, passed the . . . *anyone, anyone?* . . . the tariff bill, the Hawley–Smoot Tariff Act which . . . *anyone, anyone?* . . . *raised or lowered?* . . . raised tariffs in an effort to collect more revenue for the federal government. Did it work . . . *anyone, anyone?* . . . *Anyone know the effects?* . . . It did not work and the United States sunk deeper into the Great Depression.

This teacher, with his knowledge of certain facts about economic life in America, might be a successful candidate on *Jeopardy*, but he is not teaching history.

We all have a past. So do nations, communities, neighborhoods, and institutions. At times we can be reasonably sure about what

1. Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 276.

happened in the past. We know, for example, that the Battle of Lexington and Concord took place on April 19, 1775, or that Islamic terrorists attacked the first tower of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001. But at other times, as the chronological distance from a particular moment in the past grows greater, our memory starts to fail us. Sometimes the documentary or oral evidence that tells us what happened in the past is limited or untrustworthy. Whatever the case, the past is gone. Yet we would be foolish to suggest that it has not had its way with us—shaping us, haunting us, defining us, motivating us, empowering us. Enter the historian.

History is a discipline. It is the art of reconstructing the past. As historian John Tosh writes, “All the resources of scholarship and all the historian’s powers of imagination must be harnessed to the task of bringing the past to life—or *resurrecting* it.”² The past is messy, but historians make sense of the mess by collecting evidence, making meaning of it, and marshaling it into some kind of discernible pattern.³ History is an exciting act of interpretation—taking the facts of the past and weaving them into a compelling narrative. The historian works closely with the stuff that has been left behind—documents, oral testimony, objects—to make the past come alive. As John Arnold has noted, “The sources do not ‘speak for themselves’ and never have done [so]. . . . They come alive when the historian reanimates them. And although the sources are a beginning, the historian is present before or after, using skills and making choices. Why *this* document and not another? Why *these* charters and not those?”⁴ There is a major difference between a work of history and a book of quotations.

Historians are always driven by the sources—they cannot make things up—but they do have power to shape their narratives in a style that might be described as “artistic.” Too often I have heard

2. John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2002), 7.

3. John Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13; Arthur S. Link, “The Historian’s Vocation,” *Theology Today* 19 (April 1962): 78.

4. Arnold, *History*, 77.

historians describe their work entirely in terms of research. They spend years in the archives combing ancient records, and once the research is complete, they describe the next phase of the historical task as “writing it up.” This phrase implies that they will simply translate their research into prose form without paying any attention to the literary quality of what they are “writing up.” Anyone who has read a scholarly history journal knows what I mean. This problem is not new. In 1939 historian Allen Nevins, a strong advocate of making history accessible to general audiences, said, “The worst examples of how history should never be written can be discovered in past files of *American Historical Review*.”⁵ (The *American Historical Review* was, and continues to be, the most important scholarly history journal in the world.) Such an approach to doing history is common when writing an academic paper, a master’s thesis, or a doctoral dissertation, but too often the bad habits learned in graduate school stay with historians as they enter their professional careers. In the 1990s an academic journal staged an annual “Bad Writing Contest.” One of the winning entries came from a scholarly article about the history of American imperialism. Here is a taste:

When interpreted from within the ideal space of the myth-symbol school, Americanist masterworks legitimized hegemonic understanding of American history expressively totalized in the metanarrative that had been reconstructed out of (or more accurately read into) these masterworks.⁶

While many historians *do* make an effort to write well, others do not. This is unfortunate because the effective and compelling dissemination of one’s work is at the heart of the historian’s vocation. Since the professionalization of history in the late nineteenth

5. Allen Nevins, “What’s the Matter with History,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 19 (February 4, 1939): 3–4, cited in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 196.

6. *Philosophy and Literature: The Bad Writing Contest*, denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm, accessed June 14, 2012.

century (which we will discuss more fully in chap. 3), the literary quality of historical writing that defined an even earlier era has been largely lost, replaced by the accumulation of data and evidence in what professional historians call a “monograph.”⁷ While there is much to learn from the skills and practices of academic historians, and historical narratives build off of specialized research, this particular development in the history of the profession has been unfortunate. Whether it is through a book, article, website, exhibit, lecture, or lesson, all historians present their ideas to the public in some fashion and should do so in ways that are accessible.⁸

The best historians tell stories about the past—stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Most stories end with a lesson or a “moral.” While a historian may not explicitly preach the moral of his or her story, if told in a compelling fashion, the moral will always be evident to the reader. We use narratives to make sense of our world. It is how we bring order to our own human experiences and the human experiences of others. Jonathan Gottschall, in his recent *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, reminds us that the mind “yields helplessly to the suction of story.”⁹ If a quick glance at the *New York Times* best-seller list over the course of the last decade is any indication, the history books that have reached the largest audience are written by narrative historians. Writers such as David McCullough, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and the late Stephen Ambrose have brought the past alive to ordinary readers through their gifted prose and storytelling abilities. They have proved that a book about the past, in the hands of a skillful

7. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 40.

8. Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 141, 50.

9. Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 3. For a helpful analysis of Gottschall’s work from the perspective of historical thinking, see Allen Mikaelian, “Historians vs. Evolution: New Book Explains Why Historians Might Have a Hard Time Reaching Wide Audiences, Getting a Date,” *AHA Today* (blog), May 9, 2012, blog.historians.org/articles/1650/historians-vs-evolution-new-book-explains-why-historians-might-have-a-hard-time-reaching-wide-audiences-getting-a-date.

historian-writer, can be a page-turner. This is because, as historian William Cronon writes,

As storytellers we commit ourselves to the task of judging the consequences of human actions, trying to understand the choices that confronted people whose lives we narrate so as to capture the full tumult of their world. In the dilemmas they faced we discover our own, and at the intersection of the two we locate the moral of the story. If our goal is to tell tales that make the past meaningful, then we cannot escape struggling over the values that define what meaning is.¹⁰

The Five C's of Historical Thinking

Historians are not mere storytellers. Not only do they have the responsibility of making sure that they get the story right; they are also charged with the task of analyzing and interpreting the past. In other words, they need to *think like historians*. Historians Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke have boiled down the task of historical interpretation into what they call the “five C’s of historical thinking.”¹¹ I have found this introductory approach to historical thinking to be extremely helpful in teaching students how to go about their work as apprentice historians. According to Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, when doing their work, historians must always be sensitive to *change over time*, *context*, *causality*, *contingency*, and *complexity*. Let’s explore these ideas more fully.

Historians chronicle *change over time*. While there is continuity between past eras and our own, there has also been significant change. For example, the United States changed considerably between 1776 and 1900: the meaning of the Constitution was defined more clearly by a bloody civil war; the demographic makeup of the country changed immensely with the arrival of new immigrants;

10. William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *The Journal of American History* (March 1992): 1370.

11. Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?,” *AHA Perspectives* (January 2007), www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2007/0701/0701tea2.cfm.

and access to democratic practices, such as voting, was gradually applied to nonlandholders, African Americans, and women. Historians trace these changes. As we will see, their task is to take their audiences on a journey by shedding light on the ways in which life in past eras was different from the world in which we now live. I am writing this paragraph on July 27, 2012. Earlier this evening I watched, with billions of other people around the world, the opening ceremonies of the London Summer Olympic Games. Many of you will remember these ceremonies for the scene, crafted by film director Danny Boyle, in which James Bond and “Queen Elizabeth” parachuted into the Olympic stadium from a helicopter to the roaring applause of the British faithful. I was struck by the way Boyle’s ceremony was based on the historical concept of change over time. The ceremony traced the movement of Great Britain from an agricultural society to an industrial society to a technological society. In essence, Boyle was delivering the world a very expensive and very elaborate history lesson. The historical task is inherently progressive because the historian is ever aware that things do not stay the same.

Historians think differently than others. When historians are confronted with a new development in contemporary life, their natural reaction is to wonder how such a development differs from previous developments. For example, historians might trace the process in which a town’s Main Street went from a thriving economic center to a depressed area filled with abandoned storefronts that they now encounter. Or historians might ask how the United States moved from a society in which news was spread orally to a society in which more people find their news via the internet. Historians themselves work in the chronological space between the predominantly oral cultures of an earlier era and our present-day internet culture. As Wood has written, “The historian is to describe how people in the past move chronologically from A to B, with B always closer to us in time.”¹²

Historians also study the past in *context*. First, historians, like any interpreters of documents and sources, analyze words in a

12. Wood, *Purpose of the Past*, 83.

given historical text as part of the message of the entire text. The context provides meaning. Politicians, for example, are often prone to ignore context when exploiting the words of their opponents for political gain. During the 2000 presidential primaries, Republican candidate George W. Bush's campaign produced an advertisement against his opponent John McCain that referenced a statement from McCain's hometown newspaper, *The Arizona Republic*. "It's time," the *Republic* stated, "that the rest of the nation learns about the McCain we know." Coming from Bush in the midst of a hotly contested political primary battle, most people from other parts of the country would have assumed that what the people of Arizona "knew" about McCain would somehow hurt his chances of winning the GOP nomination. But actually, Bush's campaign did not quote *The Arizona Republic* in context. The statement about McCain went on to say, "There is much there to admire. After all, we have supported McCain in his past runs for office."¹³

Another example of how the past can be distorted when not understood in context comes from Christian political activist David Barton, one of the nation's foremost supporters of the idea that the United States was founded as a "Christian nation." One of the staples of Barton's talks to churches around the country is the exhibition of an 1809 letter written from American founder and United States President John Adams to Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia doctor and signer of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁴ Barton is quick to call attention to a section of the letter in which Adams writes: "There is no Authority civil or religious: there can be no legitimate Government but what is administered by this Holy Ghost." This quote seems to support the idea that Adams was a Christian who believed that the third person of the Trinity was somehow responsible for the creation of the American republic.

13. John Broder, "The 2000 Campaign: The Ad Campaign, a Matter of Promises," *New York Times*, February 12, 2000, www.nytimes.com/2000/02/12/us/the-2000-campaign-the-ad-campaign-a-matter-of-promises.html.

14. John Adams to Benjamin Rush, December 21, 1809, in *Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals of Alexander Biddle* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1892), A: 248–49.

But what Barton's audiences do not know is that he only reads part of the letter. A few sentences later, Adams makes it clear what he thinks about this notion that "there can be no legitimate Government but what is administered by this Holy Ghost." Adams writes, "All this is all Artifice and Cunning in the secret original of the heart, yet they all believe it so sincerely that they would lay down their Lives under the Ax of the fiery Fagot for it. Alas the poor weak ignorant Dupe human nature." In other words, Adams was being sarcastic. He was actually criticizing those who were foolish enough to believe that the Holy Spirit was in the business of establishing governments.¹⁵ This kind of cherry-picking happens all the time, and it makes for the worst kind of historical interpretation.

Second, any event from the past should be understood in light of the circumstances, settings, or belief systems in which it occurred. This is especially the case when analyzing and narrating the history of ideas. The ideas of great thinkers, such as Plato or Thomas Aquinas or John Locke, are the products of the cultural worlds in which these men lived. Historians, as Peter Novick writes, are "loath to apply implicitly timeless criteria in judging what we describe and, historically, explain."¹⁶ For example, it would be absurd to suggest that someone living in early America was a homosexual because they were described in a letter or diary as being "gay." The word *gay*, as most of us probably realize, was used very differently in the eighteenth century than it is commonly used today. Part of the historian's vocation is to debunk context-free explorations of the past by looking closely at the evidence, exploring the larger social and cultural context in which words are used, and exposing these fallacies to the general public. As we will see in chapter 3, the past can sometimes be akin to a foreign country where people do things differently. Historians must always keep in mind the culture and belief systems of this foreign country as they interpret their sources and draw conclusions about their meaning.

15. Gregg L. Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of the American Founders* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 121.

16. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 6.

Historians also realize that specific events in the past are best understood in relation to other events; in other words, historians are concerned with *causality*—the examination of cause and effect. In this sense, the historian moves beyond the mere recitation of facts and tries to explain why particular events happened in the way they did or how events have been shaped by previous events. What were the social, cultural, economic, or political factors that “caused” the American Civil War? How does the long history of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow laws explain why the civil rights movement emerged when it did? What role did the immediate aftermath of World War I play in motivating Adolf Hitler to form the Nazi party? The historian uses the sequence of events in an attempt to determine causality.¹⁷

Because the past is removed from the present and because the human experience as it unfolds through time is so complex, it is often difficult to nail down definitive causes for many historical events. Take, for example, the case of the Umbrella Man. On November 22, 1963, the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated, the skies in Dallas were sunny and clear. Yet photos of Kennedy’s motorcade route through the city reveal a man standing along the road with an open black umbrella, probably the only person with an open umbrella in all of Dallas that day. The man with the open umbrella was standing on Dealey Plaza near Kennedy’s motorcade precisely at the time the gunshots were fired. What caused this man to stand under an open umbrella on a perfectly sunny Texas morning? It would seem natural, if not logical, to suspect that a man with an open umbrella standing at the spot of the assassination was somehow connected to the plot to kill the president. But when the Umbrella Man testified before the House of Representatives in 1978, he said that he stood under the umbrella to protest the World War II appeasement policies of Kennedy’s father, Joseph Kennedy. (While Joseph Kennedy served as the United States ambassador to England in the 1930s, he supported the decision of British Prime Minister

17. Lee Benson and Cushing Strout, “Causation and the American Civil War: Two Appraisals,” *History and Theory* 1 (1961): 163; Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 38.

Neville Chamberlain to let Hitler conquer neighboring European countries unopposed. The strategy was called “appeasement,” and Chamberlain—and Joseph Kennedy—thought it was the best way of stopping Hitler from continuing with his imperialistic romp through the continent.) The Umbrella Man said his umbrella was a reference to Chamberlain’s famous black umbrella, an iconic symbol of his supposed weakness in the face of Hitler’s advances.

For historians, the case of the Umbrella Man reminds us that there are an infinite number of explanations or potential causes for any historical event, even some that seem so weird or strange that they are virtually impossible to identify. So while historians should certainly try to explain the causes of historical events, they can never be entirely sure how one event may or may not have influenced another. Sometimes the actions of humans in the past do not conform to what we deem to be common or ordinary patterns of behavior. Sometimes we simply don’t know.¹⁸

Historians are also concerned with *contingency*—the free will of humans to shape their own destinies. As historian David Hackett Fischer notes, people’s choices matter. It is the historian’s task to explain the way people are driven by a personal desire to break free from their circumstances and the social and cultural forces that hold them in place. History is thus told as a narrative—an often exciting and heroic one—of individual choices made by humans through time. Contingency, of course, is at odds with other potential ways of explaining human behavior in the past. Fatalism, determinism, and even Christian providentialism (which we discuss more fully in chap. 4) are philosophical or religious systems that teach that human behavior is controlled by forces—fate, the order of the universe, God—that are outside the control of humans. While few professional historians today would suggest that chance, determinism, or God’s providence is a helpful way of interpreting past events, it is undeniable that we are all products of the macrolevel cultural or structural contexts that have shaped the world into which we

18. For the story of the Umbrella Man, see Errol Morris, “The Umbrella Man,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2011, <http://video.nytimes.com/video/2011/11/21/opinion/100000001183275/the-umbrella-man.html>.

have been born. Karl Marx suggested that human action is always held in check by “the circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.”¹⁹ It is unlikely that any proponent of contingency would deny that human behavior is shaped by larger cultural forces, but in the end historians are in the business of explaining why people—as active human agents—have behaved in the past in the way that they did.

One prominent example of contingency is the way that historians of the Civil War have interpreted the Battle of Antietam. After suffering several defeats at the hands of the Confederacy, the Army of the Potomac (the main Northern army under the leadership of General George McClellan), desperate for a military victory, was preparing to meet the Army of Northern Virginia (under the command of Robert E. Lee) in a major military campaign, which would eventually take place at Antietam Creek in Maryland. About one week before the battle, while the Army of the Potomac was passing through Fredericksburg, Maryland, Corporal Barton Mitchell of the 27th Indiana Regiment found a copy of Lee’s battle plans. There were seven copies of “Special Orders, No. 191” produced by the Army of Northern Virginia, and one of them was now in enemy hands. Historian James McPherson has suggested that the “odds against the occurrence of such a chain of events must have been a million to one,” and “yet they happened.” The Battle of Antietam turned out to be the bloodiest single day in American history. Over 6,300 soldiers were killed or mortally wounded. But the Union victory on September 17, 1862, prompted President Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in the South and setting the war on a course that would eventually result in Northern victory.²⁰ And it was all because someone stumbled across a piece of paper rolled around three cigars lying in a field.

19. Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1849), in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 97.

20. The best treatment of the battle is James McPherson, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

There are several ways that we can interpret what happened in the week leading up to the Battle of Antietam. Perhaps it was mere chance. Wheaton College English professor Roger Lundin is not entirely satisfied with this answer. He would prefer to see the theological dimensions of contingency. As a Christian drawing from the ideas of fifth-century theologian Augustine, Lundin questions whether a coincidence like this is ever possible:

The history of a nation and the fate of a race dependent upon a piece of paper wrapped round a few cigars in a field? That sounds as uncannily coincidental and disturbingly unpredictable as the claim that a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger could be the son of God. It is, apparently, a law of life that so much depends upon contingent events and the free actions of agents, both human and divine.²¹

Lundin wants to remind us that, for Christians, contingency gets us only so far. Humans have free will, but it is ultimately exercised in the context of a sovereign God who orders the affairs of his creation. As we will see in later chapters, the idea of God’s providence in matters such as the Battle of Antietam is a subject worthy of exploration for Christians, but these kinds of theological matters are not part of the historian’s job description.

Finally, historians realize that the past is *complex*. Human behavior does not easily conform to our present-day social, cultural, political, religious, or economic categories. Take Thomas Jefferson for example. Jefferson is the most complex personality of all of the so-called founding fathers. He was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence—the document that declared that we are “endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” He was the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom—one of the greatest statements on religious freedom in the history of the world. He was a champion of education and founder of one

21. Roger Lundin, “Changing the Script,” *Books and Culture*, July/August 2003, www.booksandculture.com/articles/2003/julaug/8.24.html?paging=off.

of our great public universities—the University of Virginia. As a politician, he defended the rights of the common man, and he staunchly opposed big and centralized governments that threatened individual liberties. As president, he doubled the size of the United States and made every effort to keep us out of war with Great Britain. At the same time, Jefferson was a slaveholder. Though he made several efforts to try to bring this institution to an end, he never succeeded. Jefferson needed his slaves to uphold the kind of Virginia planter lifestyle—complete with all its consumer goods and luxury items—that he could not live without. He was in constant debt. And he may have been the father of several children born to his slave Sally Hemings.

Another example of the complexity of the past is the ongoing debate over whether or not the United States was founded as a Christian nation. I recently published a book titled *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* In the course of my promotion for the book—at speaking engagements and on radio shows across the country—I was often asked how I answered this question. I found that most people came to my talks or tuned into my radio interviews with their minds already made up about the question, looking to me to provide them with historical evidence to strengthen their answers. When I told them that the role of religion in the founding of America was a complicated question that cannot be answered through sound bites, many people left the lecture hall or turned off the radio disappointed, because such an answer did not help them promote their political or religious cause. Yet the founding fathers' views on religion were complex, and they do not easily conform to our twenty-first-century agendas. The founding fathers made sure to keep God and Christianity out of the United States Constitution but did not hesitate to place distinctly Christian tests for office in most of the local state constitutions that they wrote in the wake of the American Revolution. Some founders upheld personal beliefs that conformed to historic orthodox Christian teaching, while others—especially major founders such as Adams, Jefferson, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin—did not. The founders opposed an

established church and defended religious liberty while at the same time suggesting that Christianity was essential to the health of the republic.²²

The life of Jefferson and the debate over Christian America teach us that human experience is often too complex to categorize in easily identifiable boxes. The study of the past reminds us that when we put our confidence in people—whether they are in the past (such as the founding fathers) or the present—we are likely to be inspired by them, but we are just as likely to be disappointed by them. Sometimes great defenders of liberty held slaves, and political leaders who defended a moral republic rejected a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ or the inspiration of the Bible. Historians do their work amid the messiness of the past. Though they make efforts to simplify the mess, they are often left with irony, paradox, and mystery.

All Historians Are Revisionists

As noted above, the responsibility of the historian is to resurrect the past. Yet, because we live in the present, far removed from the events of the past, our ability to construct what happened in bygone eras is limited. This is why the doing of history requires an act of the imagination. Sometimes we do not have the sources to provide a complete picture of “what happened” at any given time. As historian Peter Hoffer notes, “History is impossible. Nothing I have written or could write will change that brute fact.”²³ Or, in the words of historian David Lowenthal,

No historical account can recover the totality of any past events, because their content is virtually infinite. The most detailed narrative incorporates only a minute fraction of even the relevant past; the sheer pastness of the past precludes its total reconstruction. . . . The

22. John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

23. Peter Hoffer, *The Historian's Paradox: The Study of History in Our Time* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 179.

historian must accept Herbert Butterfield's "tremendous truth—the impossibility of history."²⁴

Historians must come to grips with the fact that they will never be able to provide a complete or thorough account of what happened in the past.

Even the best accounts of the past are open to change based on new evidence or the work of historians who approach a subject with a different lens of interpretation. In this sense, history is more about competing perceptions of the past than it is about nailing down a definitive account of a specific event or life. As Lowenthal notes, "History usually depends on someone else's eyes and voice: we see it through an interpreter who stands between past events and our apprehension of them."²⁵ While the past never changes, history changes all the time. Think, for example, about two eyewitness accounts of the same auto accident. Even if we can assume that the drivers involved in the accident believe that they are telling the truth about what happened, it is still likely that the police will receive two very different accounts of how the accident occurred and two different accounts of who is to blame or who *caused* the accident. It is thus up to the police officer in charge, or perhaps a judge, to weigh the evidence and come up with a plausible interpretation of this historical event. But let's imagine two weeks after the paperwork is filed and the case is closed, a reliable eyewitness to the accident emerges with new evidence to suggest that the person who the judge held responsible for the accident was actually not at fault. This new information leads to a new historical narrative of what happened. History has changed. This is called revisionism, and it is the lifeblood of the historical profession.

The word *revisionism* carries a negative connotation in American society because it is usually associated with changing true facts of the past in order to fit some kind of agenda in the present. But actually, the historian who is called a "revisionist" receives a high

24. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 214–15.

25. *Ibid.*, 216.

compliment. In his book *Who Owns History?*, Pulitzer Prize-winning history professor Eric Foner recalls a conversation with a *Newsweek* reporter who asked him, "When did historians stop relating facts and start all this revising of interpretations of the past?" Foner responded, "Around the time of Thucydides." (Thucydides is the Greek writer who is often credited with being one of the first historians in the West.)²⁶ Those who believe "revisionism" is a negative term often misunderstand the way it is used by historians. Revisionists are not in the business of changing the facts of history. Any good revisionist interpretation of history will be based on evidence—documents or other artifacts that people in the past left behind. This type of reconstruction of the past always takes place in community. We know whether a particular revision of the past is good because it is vetted by a community of historians. This is called peer review. When bad history does make it into print, we rely on the community of historians to call this to our attention through reviews.

A few examples might help illustrate what I mean when I say that revisionism is the lifeblood of history. Without revisionism, our understanding of racial relations in the American South after the Civil War would still be driven by what historians call the "Dunning School." William Dunning was an early twentieth-century historian who suggested that Reconstruction—the attempt to bring civil rights and voting rights to Southern blacks in the wake of the Civil War—was a mistake. The Northern Republicans who promoted Reconstruction and the various "carpetbaggers" who came to the South to start schools for blacks and work for racial integration destroyed the Southern way of life. In the end, however, the South did indeed rise again. In Dunning's portrayal, Southerners eventually rallied to overthrow this Northern invasion. They removed blacks from positions of power and established a regime of segregation that would last for much of the twentieth century. These so-called redeemers of Southern culture are the heroes of the

26. Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), xvi.

Dunning School, an interpretation of Reconstruction that would inform D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), one of the most popular, and most racist, motion pictures of the early twentieth century. In the 1930s the Dunning School was challenged by a group of historians who began to interpret the period of Reconstruction from the perspective of the former slaves. Rather than viewing the blacks in the post-Civil War South as people without power, these revisionist authors provided a much richer understanding of the period that included a place for all historical actors, regardless of skin color or social standing, in the story of this important moment in American history.²⁷

Similarly, in 1913 historian Charles Beard wrote a book titled *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. Beard argued that the framers of the Constitution were motivated primarily by economic interests. The founders were all wealthy landholders and thus had a natural desire to protect their wealth from common farmers and smaller farmers who could conceivably threaten the founders' livelihood if they were given too much power in government. The Constitution was thus a "counter-revolution." With its system of checks and balances, and a Senate and President not elected directly by the people, the Constitution, according to Beard, curbed the democratic impulses of the masses and made it more difficult for them to pass legislation that would bring economic equality to the country. Beard's thesis was eventually challenged by revisionist historians who argued that the founders were motivated less by economic gain and more by political ideas. These revisionists, such as Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood, read hundreds of pamphlets written by the proponents of revolution and concluded that the founders and framers of the Constitution sought to apply the republican ideals of eighteenth-century writers who defended individual rights and liberties. In their effort to offer a different interpretation of the American founding period, one based more on ideas than class warfare, Beard's critics have given

27. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 232. The most thorough critique of the Dunning School is Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

us a more complete picture of why the founding fathers framed the Constitution the way they did.²⁸

One of the more recent developments in the historical profession has been the way historians have turned to religion as a category of explanation. During the 1960s and 1970s, many publishers of American history textbooks responded to a host of Supreme Court decisions that limited religious expression in public schools. For example, in the wake of cases such as *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), which made any prayer in schools unconstitutional, and *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), which prohibited school-sponsored Bible reading, publishers began to downplay the role of religion in American history. Things got so absurd that several popular textbooks avoided the mention of religion in discussions of the Pilgrims and the Puritans. Scholars of the First Amendment have universally argued that many textbook companies, and their clients in the public schools, misunderstood these Supreme Court decisions to mean that religion was not permitted in the curriculum. Because they feared that schools would not purchase their books if they had too much religion in them, textbook companies chose instead to take religion out. After *Vitale* and *Schempp*, school districts and textbook companies became unnecessarily paranoid about violating the First Amendment's religious clause and thus erred on the side of caution.²⁹

In the last several decades, revisionist historians have been correcting this problem. They are making religious belief and practice an important part of the stories that they are telling about the past. Historians are taking seriously the way religious faith shapes behavior. In fact, the membership statistics of the American Historical

28. Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1913). For revisionist challenges to Beard, see Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); and Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

29. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, "Religion in the Curriculum," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Fall 1987): 569-88.

Association, the largest and most important organization of professional historians in the country, reveal that religion is now the most popular subject being explored by practicing historians. American religious history is one of the hottest subfields in American history. While the Christian Right continues to complain about the apparent lack of religious content in textbooks, this revisionist revival promises to give faith a prominent place in the American history curriculum.

In the end, all historians are revisionists. The Christian historian R. G. Collingwood wrote that "every new generation must rewrite history in its own way; every new historian, not content with giving new answers to old questions, must revise the questions themselves." This may mean that a historian will challenge the cherished myths of a particular culture or uncover evidence that does not bode well for a patriotic view of one's country. (At other times, of course, evidence could strengthen the public bonds of citizenship.³⁰) As new evidence emerges and historians discover new ways of bringing the past to their audiences in the present, interpretations of specific events change. This makes history an exciting and intellectually engaging discipline.

Is Historical Knowledge Possible?

If finding the whole truth about what happened in the past is nearly impossible and if interpretations of the past are constantly being changed or revised, then how can we make any definitive statements about what really happened in the past? In other words, is historical knowledge possible? For several decades, postmodernists have harshly criticized the narratives that historians tell about the past. A narrative, they argue, is ultimately shaped by a narrator who brings his or her biases to the story, exercises power over the

30. Collingwood quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 103–4. Also Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 158–59; MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*, 43.

story, and chooses which voices to include in the story and which voices to exclude. Take, for example, a college history textbook. Many undergraduates assume that the textbook they have been assigned for their United States or World Civilization survey course simply provides them with a narrative of "what happened" in the past, without realizing that the authors of that textbook have made interpretive choices—either consciously or subconsciously—in how they have chosen the story. The authors have made choices about how much space to devote to certain historical actors, how the various pieces of the past are organized and presented, and where to begin and end the story. As a result, many postmodernists argue that no single narrative is capable of actually capturing the past because it will always be the product of the biases and interpretive choices (often based on those biases) that the narrator brings to the story. Narratives will thus be forever contested and do not offer us any reliable guide to what happened in the past. As Cronon notes, "The vision of history as an endless struggle among competing narratives and values may not seem very reassuring. How, for instance, are we to choose among the infinite stories that our different values seem capable of generating?"³¹

In the midst of this postmodern attack on historical narrative, several historians have stepped up to defend the discipline. Cronon, who as I write this is serving as the president of the American Historical Association, is not unwilling to abandon the "immense power of narrative writing," but he also insists on "defending the past . . . as real things to which our storytelling must somehow conform lest it cease being history altogether." Historical narratives, he argues, cannot contradict the "known facts of the past," and they must be written within a diverse community of historians who will expose our biases and correct our "wrong-headed" assumptions and interpretations. "Most practicing historians," Cronon argues, "do not believe that all stories about the past are equally good." The practice of deciphering what is a good story about the past, and what is not, comes

31. Cronon, "A Place for Stories," 1370.

through the historian's willingness to work within a fellowship of other historians who are also interested in defending the past. Cronon concludes, "There is something profoundly unsatisfying and ultimately self-deluding about an endless postmodernist deconstruction of texts that fails to ground itself in history, in community, in politics, and finally in the moral problem of living on earth."³²

Others have used a similar defense of history against postmodernist critics. Historian John Arnold writes,

To relinquish "Truth" and the idea of *one* history does not lead to absolute relativism, where any version of events is taken as being equally valid as any other. It does not, for example, give succor to those charlatans and ideologues who seek to deny that the Holocaust ever happened. The evidence for the systematic murder of more than six million people by the Nazis is overwhelming. To try to argue that it never occurred is to violate the voices of the past, to suppress that evidence which goes against that twisted thesis.³³

Though the historical task is always limited by our distance from the past, historians must never cease in their pursuit of truth. History is not an exact science. Historians will never reach anything close to a modern certainty about everything that happened in a bygone era, but, as Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob have argued in *Telling the Truth about History*, this should not stop them from trying. A significant amount of historical knowledge can be ascertained through the diligent investigation of the sources available to us. When the historian's vocation to pursue truth is combined with the reality that we can never produce a complete account of the past, we get what Hoffer calls "the historian's paradox." History may be "impossible," but "something happened out there, long ago, and we have the ability, if we have the faith, to learn what that something is." Hoffer wants historians to know that

32. Ibid., 1371-74.

33. Arnold, *History*, 119.

it is safe to go back into the archives, safe to return to the classroom and the lecture hall, safe to sit at the word processor or to lift the pen over the yellow pad, safe to go to the library and take out a history book or buy one on Amazon.com. It is safe to teach and write and read and listen to history.³⁴

Summing Up

This chapter has looked at the way people—from Henry Ford to George Santayana—have attempted to define the discipline of history. Historians think about the world differently than others. They tell stories about the past, but they also analyze and interpret what those stories mean and how those stories provide insight into the human experience as it has unfolded through time. If you are reading this book as part of a history course, take some time to listen to how your professor—a trained professional in historical thinking—explains the past. Notice how each lecture and discussion builds on the previous one ("change over time" and "causality"), how they include "complex" human characters acting in time to create a compelling story ("contingency"), and how these characters live in worlds that are often fundamentally different from our own ("context").

If you listen carefully, you may even hear your professor debunking commonly held myths about the past or explaining why this or that older view of the past cannot be sustained by the evidence he or she is presenting in the lecture or the primary document that you are reading. In the process, you will realize the redundancy of the term "revisionist history." Since the goal of historians is to explain, to the best of their ability, what happened in the past, history is always changing and historians are always revising. I also imagine that your professor's lectures assume that something actually happened in the past. In other words, they are doing their best to tell you stories that are true. As historian Shirley Mullen

34. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 4, 181; Hoffer, *Historian's Paradox*, 181.

has written, historians “bear witness” to the past. They “are called upon to report what they have seen.”³⁵ Such witness bearing should inspire you to action—to dive into the sources of the past, engage in the necessary detective work, and imaginatively tell stories that will remind our generation what it has meant to be human. A noble task indeed!

35. Shirley A. Mullen, “Between ‘Romance’ and ‘True History’: Historical Narrative and Truth Telling in a Postmodern Age,” in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 23–40.

2

In Search of a Usable Past

IT IS OUR NATURAL INSTINCT TO FIND SOMETHING USEFUL IN THE past. Recently a colleague in the education department at the college where I teach told me about a student teacher who was having a hard time making his history lesson relevant to the present needs of his pupils: “I told Sam that if history does not have relevance to our world today, then why study it? Why teach it?” On one level, my colleague gave Sam some good advice. If the past does not have any connection to the present, then what good is it? Why should students have to make sense of it? Many believe that if the past does not serve our needs in the present, whatever those needs might be, it is worthless. This chapter examines our never-ending quest for a past that is usable. It focuses on our natural inclination to make the past our own by consuming it. The consumption of the past is inevitable and can even be useful in making sense of our contemporary world, but, as we will see in chapter 3, it must always be done with caution.

A Consumable Past

As modern individuals we have an insatiable desire to consume. We need to consume to live. But we have also learned to be discriminating