

History

Memory dictates, and history writes it down. Pierre Nora, 1984¹

The historian does simply not come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, 1982²

The study of memory teaches us that all historical sources are suffused by subjectivity right from the start. Jan Vansina, 1980³

Experience is doubly defective; we are born too late to see the beginning, and we die too soon to see the end of many things. History supplies both these defects.

Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, c. 1735⁴

History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation. Julian Barnes, 2011⁵

History is protean. What it is, what people think it should be, and how it is told and heard vary with time, place, and person. Clio, the muse of history, was likened in America first to a social butterfly and then to a career woman, in the Soviet Union to a streetwalker or bureaucrat. Routed from her ivory tower, she is today an online dating site.⁶ Equally diverse are estimates of her age: one in three Britons think history dates from a moment ago, another third think her ten to twenty years old, the rest date her back to the birth of time.⁷ Americans often conflate history with today, terming yesterday antediluvian and tomorrow potentially hoary. ‘I got married when I was 25’, recalls a columnist; ‘that was in the Mesozoic era, and we had no end of trouble keeping the stegosaurus away from the wedding cake’.⁸ In line with the Los Angeles dictum that ‘history is five years old’, computer pioneer Steve Jobs sought to demolish his 1926

¹ Pierre Nora, ‘Entre mémoire et histoire’, in his, comp., *Lieux de mémoire* (Gallimard, 1984–92), 1: xv–xlii at xxxviii.

² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982; Washington, 1996), 94.

³ Jan Vansina, ‘Memory and oral tradition’, in Joseph C. Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks* (Folkstone: Dawson, 1980), 276.

⁴ Henry St John Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1735; rev. edn London, 1752), Letter II, 1: 35–6.

⁵ Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (Jonathan Cape, 2011), 17.

⁶ Pendleton Herring, ‘Political scientist considers the question’ [do we need a new history], *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 72 (1948): 118–38 at 126–27; *perfectmatch.com*; *loveawake.com*. On history as a whore, see Schopenhauer, below p. 336.

⁷ ‘History? It started a second ago’, *BBC History Magazine*, Nov. 2009, poll of 1,900 readers.

⁸ Gail Collins, ‘Girls and boys together’, *NYT*, 3 Mar. 2011: A23.

historic-register house. Jobs claimed 'I could build something far more historically interesting.'⁹

History extends and enriches, confirms and corrects memory through records and relics. It has come to comprise not only the annals of civilization but of aeons of so-called prehistory. The lack of written records does not mean that preliterate had no history nor does it preclude our inquiries into it. History is transmitted by vision and voice as well as by relics and texts. All manner of depictions – oral narratives, films, folkways, artworks – shed light on prehistoric as well as later times.

Wordless nature is historical too. 'Stones, trees, animals have a knowable past, but no history', thought Vico, because no conscious purposes animated that past.¹⁰ Charles Kingsley drew a sharper line: 'History is the history of men and women, and of nothing else'.¹¹ Yet historical understanding now encompasses the past of non-human entities, from micro-organisms within us to stars and galaxies beyond. Annals of zoology, botany, geology, and astronomy lack the motivating agencies of human history, but their pasts, as discussed in my Introduction, are nonetheless historically contingent and intimately entwined with the career of humanity.¹²

The stuff and scope of historical awareness far surpass conventional history, calling on a wider range of sources and a more comprehensive notion of 'truth'. A total history, thought a French *Annales* pioneer, should 'embrace all the studies concerned with man and time'.¹³ It increasingly does so. But our sense of the historical past comes less from texts and teachers than from everyday things seen and done since infancy. As opposed to academic 'humdrumery', as Bertie Rodgers recalled his 1920s Belfast childhood,

History isn't handed down,
It's handed up . . .
History is in the bounce of a ball,
In the flick of a skipping-rope.¹⁴

Just as myriad diverse memories merge in our minds, so does a host of heterogeneous historical data. Carl Becker's 1931 AHA presidential address told how 'Everyman' patterns history out of a thousand unremarked and unrelated sources:

From things learned at home and in school, from knowledge gained in business or profession, from newspapers glanced at, from books (yes, even history books) read or heard of, from remembered scraps of newsreels or educational films or *ex cathedra* utterances of presidents and kings, from

⁹ Durs Grünbein, 'Aus der Hauptstadt des Vergessens Aufzeichnungen aus einem Solarium', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 Mar. 1998: 1; Steve Jobs quoted in Patricia Leigh Brown, 'Free to a good home: a captain of industry's rejected mansion', *NYT*, 2 Jan. 2005.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (Hogarth, 1976), 29.

¹¹ Charles Kingsley, *The Limits of Exact Science as Applied to History* (Cambridge, 1860), 4.

¹² David Christian, 'A single historical continuum', *Cliodynamics* 2 (2011): 6–26 at 13–18, 21–4; Eric J. Chaisson, *Epic of Evolution* (Columbia, 2005); Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (California, 2008); Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor's Tale* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

¹³ Jacques Le Goff, *La Nouvelle Histoire* (Paris: Retz-CEPL, 1978), 11.

¹⁴ Darcy O'Brien, *W. R. Rodgers* (Bucknell, 1970), 16–17; W. R. Rodgers, *The Return Room* (BBC radio play, 1955), quoted in Michael Moss, 'Choreographed encounter', *Archives* 31:116 (2007): 1–17 at 9.

fifteen-minute discourses on the history of civilization broadcast by the courtesy . . . of Pepsodent, the Bulova Watch Company, or the Shepard Stores [closed 1937].

And beyond events personally experienced, Everyman embroiders 'a more dimly seen pattern . . . of things reputed to have been said and done in past times which he has not known . . . Out of the most diverse threads of information, picked up in the most casual way, from the most unrelated sources . . . he somehow manages, undeliberately for the most part, to fashion a history.'¹⁵

Everyman's history is broader ranging even than professional historians' increasingly inclusive reach. For all academe's manifold retrievals, history remains 'an odd, semi-fictional subject, part fact, part myth, and guesswork', notes a novelist. Everyman's history is 'an engaging blend of fact and fancy', dominated by data 'that seem best suited to his interests or promise most in the way of emotional satisfaction'.¹⁶

A near century on, Everyman's pastiches of the past arise from materials no less diverse and idiosyncratic than those of Becker. A British journalist's *mélange* is drawn from

ill-remembered lessons, what father did in the war, television documentaries with half the instalments missed, bodice-ripper historical novels, fragments of local folklore . . . what that French man seemed to be saying on the train, what we saw of Edinburgh Castle before the wee boy got sick, several jokes about Henry VIII and that oil painting of the king lying dead on the battlefield with his face all green.¹⁷

Formal history is overlain and undermined by myriad exotic arenas of apprehension.

Yet bizarrely adventitious insights infuse historians' intuitions too, often through some novel awareness that 'gradually makes sense of a whole large area of the past'. And it is 'more important that the initial perception should be sharp and vivid than that it should be true', counselled medievalist R. W. Southern. 'Truth comes from error more easily than from confusion'. Only a vivid perception can impel an energetic search.¹⁸

Historical knowledge depends on oft-disdained mythology. 'A myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story', noted Becker, 'as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths'.¹⁹ Perceptions of India's past supply 'no criteria for differentiating between myth and history', held a philosopher. 'What the Westerner considers as history in the West, he would regard as myth in India . . . what he calls history in his own world is experienced by Indians as myth', or nowadays as collective memory.²⁰

¹⁵ Carl L. Becker, 'Everyman his own historian', *AHR* 37 (1932): 221–36 at 229.

¹⁶ Rosemary Harris, 'How to enjoy the first lessons in developing a sense of the past', *Times*, 31 Jan. 1973: 10; Becker, 'Everyman his own historian', 229–30.

¹⁷ Neal Ascherson, *Games with Shadows* (London: Radius, 1988), 12.

¹⁸ R. W. Southern, 'The historical experience' (1977), in *History and Historians* (Blackwell, 2004), 104–6.

¹⁹ Becker, 'Everyman his own historian', 231.

²⁰ Raimundo Panikkar, 'Time and history in the tradition of India', in Louis Gardet et al., *Cultures and Time* (Paris: UNESCO, 1976), 63–88 at 76. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The public life of history: an argument out of India', *Public Culture* 20:1 (2008): 147–68.

Soothsayers and priests, storytellers and minstrels are historians too, just as historians themselves are preachers. Modern 'historical accounts are only in the second place designed for the sake of knowledge about the past. In the first place they are a sacred ritual ... embod[ying] a religious faith: the view that humans are' bound neither by nature, by custom, nor by divine providence, but are 'free and independent agents with the ability to shape their fate, the obligation to act on that ability, and responsibility for the consequences'.²¹ Lauding 'metaphorical' history, Nietzsche devalued factual explanation in favour of mythic insight from drama and fable.²² As later work supplants their facts and sources, historical classics acquire the poetic, universalizing aura of myth. Gibbon is no longer read as authoritative Roman history, but rather as an eloquent meditation on imperial fate.²³

Historical knowledge, academic and Everyman's alike, in many ways falls short of, in others transcends, the past itself. I treat each in turn.

History is less than the past

Even if all that has come down to us by report from the past should be true and known by someone, it would be less than nothing compared with what is unknown ... How puny and limited is the knowledge of even the most curious!

Michel de Montaigne, 1585–8²⁴

A limited form of knowledge, history only scrapes the surface of the past.

Constantin Fasolt, 2004²⁵

Only a tiny fraction of all that has happened can ever be recovered and recounted. Nor is any historical account the same as any actual past. These deficiencies lead some to dismiss history altogether, for besides being incomplete, in Arthur Schopenhauer's reproach, history 'is as permeated with lies and falsehood as is a common prostitute with syphilis'.²⁶ Three constraints limit what can be known: the immensity of the past; the gulf between past events and accounts of those events; and inescapable bias.

First, no historical inquiry can retrieve the virtually infinite sum total of past events. Arduous detailed retrieval recoups only a minute fraction of even the most accessible past. Most that has happened was never recorded, most of the rest fleeting, 'lost without recovery' in Thomas Carlyle's 'dark untenanted places of the Past'.²⁷ Thomas Browne found 'no antidote against the opium of time ... The iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit

²¹ Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago, 2004), 230–1, xvi.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874; Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 39–42.

²³ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Routledge, 1983), 46–7.

²⁴ Michel de Montaigne, 'Of coaches', in *The Complete Essays* (Stanford, 1958), 692.

²⁵ Fasolt, *Limits of History*, 39–40.

²⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), in *Short Philosophical Essays* (Oxford, 1974), 2: 447.

²⁷ Thomas Carlyle, 'On history' (1830), in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1888), 2: 221.

of perpetuity . . . The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been, to be found in the register of God, not in the record of man.²⁸

That most things are transitory elucidates Herbert Butterfield's 'tremendous truth – the impossibility of history':

The ploughman whom Gray saw, plodding his weary way, the rank and file of Monmouth's rebel crowd – every man of them a world in himself, a mystery of personality . . . – these have left no memorial and all that we know about them is just enough to set us guessing and wondering. Things by which we remember an old friend – his peculiar laugh, his way of drawing his hand through his hair, his whistle in the street, his humour – we cannot hope to recapture in history [just as we] cannot hope to read the hearts of half-forgotten kings. The Memory of the world is not a bright, shining crystal, but a heap of broken fragments, a few fine flashes of light that break through the darkness.²⁹

In Flaubert's phrase, 'writing history is like drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful'.³⁰

Second, no account can recover any actual past, for no past was a mere account; it was a set of situations and events. As the past no longer exists, descriptions can never be checked against it, but only against other versions of that past; veracity is judged by correspondence with other reports, not with events themselves. The historian selects not from the totality of what has happened (*res gestae*), but from other accounts of what happened (*historia rerum gestarum*); in this respect, so-called primary sources approximate past reality little better than derivative chronicles.³¹ No hard evidence refutes Peter Munz's claim that 'any particular event . . . can be said to have occurred only because somebody thought it did', or Claude Lévi-Strauss's that 'historical fact . . . only exists as . . . retrospective reconstruction'.³² As Becker insisted:

Left to themselves, the facts do not speak; left to themselves they do not exist; . . . there is no fact until someone affirms it. . . . Since history is not part of the external material world, but an imaginative reconstruction of vanished events, the form and substance of historical facts . . . vary with the words employed to convey them.³³

This is not to deny that historical consensus provides real knowledge. Indeed, 'without genuinely knowable past experience there could be no answer to any question, nor any question to be answered, because there could be no such thing as fact and no intelligible

²⁸ Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia: Urn Burial* (1658), in *Works* (1852; London, 1928), 3: 1–50 at 43–4.

²⁹ Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel* (Cambridge, 1924), 14–15.

³⁰ Gustave Flaubert quoted in Denis Shemilt, 'Drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful: how adolescents make sense of history', in Linda Symcox and Arie Wilschut, eds., *National History Standards* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2007), 141–209 at 142.

³¹ Confusing the past itself with accounts of it bedevils Anglophone thought because in English 'history' means both (German distinguishes *Gegenwart* from *Geschichte*, French *passé* from *histoire*, Italian *passato* from *storia*). Only context reveals that the dismissive 'He's history' and the laudatory 'Barnsley Council will make history today' refer to the past itself, not to a text (John Davis, 'The social relations of the production of history', in Elizabeth Tonkin et al., eds., *History and Ethnicity* (Routledge, 1989), 104–20 at 104).

³² Peter Munz, *The Shapes of Time* (Wesleyan, 1977), 184–5, 209, 186 (quoting Lévi-Strauss (1965)). On retrospective reconstruction see Lawrence D. Walker, 'A note on historical linguistics', *History and Theory* 19:2 (1980): 154–64.

³³ Becker, 'Everyman his own historian', 233.

discourse', concluded C. I. Lewis.³⁴ But just as memories never strictly correspond with original events, neither can historical accounts. As Umberto Eco says of translation, 'there is a way things go, independent of the way our languages make them go', so there is a way things were, independent of how we chronicle them.³⁵

Third, historical knowledge, no matter how consensually verified, is necessarily shaped by both narrator and audience. Imparting and imbibing history depends on precursors' vision and voice, recipients' eyes and ears: interpreters and receivers stage manage our apprehension of past events. To be sure, narrators' spin is potentially corrigible by access to written and other sources. When original observers' own words are available, we are not entirely dependent on traditions retwisted by storytellers. But for the most part we remain at historians' mercy. And to 'explain' the past, they are bound to go beyond the actual record, couching it in contemporary modes of thought and speech. Selecting data from a chosen era, synthesizing later commentaries, the historian reaches conclusions of his own bent. 'Not one but a hundred generations', wrote the sociologist W. Lloyd Warner, 'are now sending their own delayed interpretations' of history.³⁶ But whether narrators are single and recent or multivocal from many epochs, we cannot escape the frameworks they impose. In clarifying the past, these inevitably distance its naked actuality.

Nor can we escape our own frames of reference. Narrators' perspectives and predilections shape their accounts, our own determine what we make of them. The past we construe is contingent on our background, our outlook, our own present. We are products of the past, but the known past is an artefact of our own making. However immersed in antiquity, no perceiver can divest himself of his own experience and assumptions, or 'recall past events without in some subtle fashion relating them to what he needs or desires to do'.³⁷ The disinterested historian concerned with the past entirely for its own sake had little in common, in Michael Oakeshott's view, with 'non-historical', 'practical' people who use the past to understand, sustain, or reform the present.³⁸ But these polar opposites are unreal: the practical man's past is seldom exclusively operational; the historian is unavoidably present minded. 'We are all in some measure both seekers of true knowledge and purposive manipulators of the past', observes Jörn Rüsen; 'no historian can leave his or her time and dive into the depths of otherness. He or she always takes him or herself along into the encounter with historical difference.'³⁹ Our own hopes and fears, expertise and expectations reshape the historical no less than the

³⁴ Clarence Irving Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (1946; Read Books, 1998), 361–2. See C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (Routledge, 1998), chs. 2, 4.

³⁵ Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat: Translation as Negotiation* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 182.

³⁶ W. Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead* (Yale, 1959), 217.

³⁷ Becker, 'Everyman his own historian', 227.

³⁸ Michael Oakeshott, 'The activity of being an historian' (1955), in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Methuen, 1967), 151–83 at 165–6; Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Blackwell, 1983), 35–9, 43. See Stuart Isaacs, *The Politics and Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (Routledge, 2006), 109–21; A. L. Macfie, 'Oakeshott's answer', *Rethinking History* 14 (2010): 521–30.

³⁹ Jörn Rüsen, 'The horror of ethnocentrism', *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 261–9 at 268.

remembered past. To be sure, such predilections are creative as well as limiting, but in either case they distort.

Beyond personal bents, the passage of time that outdates bygone things continually alters our knowledge. Everything we know filters through present-day mental lenses. Newfangled premises and modes of discourse constrain historians' ability to convey the past to a later age. 'We are moderns and our words and thoughts can not but be modern', noted the legal historian Frederic W. Maitland, 'it is too late for us to be early English'; we cannot see the past with their eyes.⁴⁰ 'No recipe exists from which to concoct the thoughts, values, and emotions of people who lived in the past', cautions a chronicler. 'Even having steeped ourselves in the literature of the period, worn its clothes, and slept on its beds, we never shed [today's] perspectives and values.'⁴¹

Today's perspective cumulatively misinterprets the past, as lengthened remoteness multiplies its anachronisms and interposes the outlooks of ever more intervening epochs. Discussing William Morris's take on ancient Greece, Walter Pater showed how our contact with Hellenism is mediated through Roman, medieval, Renaissance, and subsequent prisms, enriching yet estranging our understanding. We cannot expunge our composite inherited experience of all subsequent ages to come directly face to face with the ancient Greeks, any more than we could 'become a little child, or . . . be born' again.⁴²

The language of history also reconfigures the past. Historians' impressions are conveyed in words, converted into mental images by reader or auditor – but the images differ from historians' originals. Any distance – in time, in space, in culture, in point of view – widens the gulf between narrator and audience. And every language imposes its own conventions, deforming understanding of the original record.

Dispute over biblical revision points up dilemmas of obsolescence. Rhetorical force and liturgical tradition make the King James version a much-loved classic. But four centuries leave many of its archaisms incomprehensible; errors of translation and omission continually surface. King Solomon sounds splendid with peacocks, but once one knows the 1611 translators erred, the peacocks (1 Kings 10.22) get replaced by monkeys (more correctly baboons). Confusion clouds Ezekiel 13:18's misogynist prophecy, 'woe to the women that sew pillows to all armholes'.⁴³ Anachronistic unintelligibility is the fate not only of fixed written texts but also of faithful oral accounts, gobbledegook even to narrators deploying obsolete words or alluding to customs now extinct.

To be sure, hindsight also gives us knowledge that people of bygone times could not have had. But at the same time it blinds us to their awareness of that past, for them the present. Hindsight's falsification of perspective troubled W. G. Sebald. 'We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was', he wrote of the carnage of war.⁴⁴ 'Can we really be fair to men of the past', asked a historian of Tudor England, 'knowing what they could not know? Can we, indeed,

⁴⁰ Frederic William Maitland, *Township and Borough* (1898; Cambridge, 2010), 22.

⁴¹ Marcella Sherfy, 'The craft of history', *In Touch* [NPS], no. 13 (1976): 4–7 at 5.

⁴² Walter Pater, 'Poems by William Morris', *Westminster Review* (Oct. 1868): 300–12 at 307.

⁴³ Christopher Howse, 'The global phenomenon that will never be lost in translation', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 Dec. 2010; Gordon Campbell, *The Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611–2011* (Oxford, 2011).

⁴⁴ W. G. Sebald, *Rings of Saturn* (Harvill, 1998), 106–17, 125, 145, 176.

understand them at all . . . with our minds prepossessed by a knowledge of the result?’⁴⁵ But as ‘knowledge of the result’ suggests, hindsight bias not only occludes the past, it also enlarges it. To these additions I now turn.

History is more than the past

All things are engaged in writing their history . . . In nature . . . the narrative is the print of the seal. It neither exceeds nor comes short of the fact. But . . . in man, the report is something more than print of the seal. It is a new and finer form of the original . . . in a new order. The facts which transpired do not lie in it inert; but some subside, and others shine; so that soon we have a new picture.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1850⁴⁶

Anachronism misinterprets history; hindsight reinterprets it. To explain the past to the present demands taking into account not only changed viewpoints and values, but also what has happened since the period under study. We are bound to see the Second World War differently in 2015 from in 1945, not merely because new evidence has come to light, but also because the ensuing decades unfolded further consequences: the Bomb, decolonization, the Cold War, and much more.

Revisiting old sources with modern tools, deploying data newly emergent, the historian discovers both what had been forgotten and things never before known. ‘People and societies are caught up in processes which can be perceived and described only in hindsight; documents are ripped out of their original context . . . to illustrate a pattern [unknown] to any of their authors.’⁴⁷ No denizens knew they were living in ‘classical antiquity’ or the ‘Renaissance’, both subsequent constructions. Terms of our own which did not exist back then help us understand what happened.⁴⁸

But they also reconfigure how what happened is understood. History informed by hindsight not only adds to what could be known at the time, it makes the reconstructed past more comprehensible than when it happened, endowing it with retrospective plausibility. ‘What we recognize as the Roman Empire was a series of disconnected experiences for the generations who made it up’, writes a medievalist. ‘It is we who give them coherence’. Because we commonly view bygone scholars as more consistent than they usually were, we fabricate ‘a history of thoughts which no one ever actually’ thought, in Quentin Skinner’s derisive phrase, ‘at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained’.⁴⁹ Driven to ‘see the world as more tidy, simple, predictable, and coherent than

⁴⁵ Albert Frederick Pollard, ‘Historical criticism’, *History* 5 (1920): 21–9 at 29.

⁴⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Goethe: or, the writer’, in *CW* (Houghton Mifflin, 1904–12), 4: 259–90 at 261–2.

⁴⁷ R. Stephen Humphreys, ‘The historian, his documents, and the elementary modes of historical thought’, *History and Theory* 19 (1980): 1–20 at 12.

⁴⁸ Munz, *Shapes of Time*, 80, 93.

⁴⁹ Gordon Leff, *History and Social Theory* (Doubleday, 1971), 105; Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas’, *JHI* 8 (1969): 3–53 at 18.

it really is', concludes a psychologist, we impose causal order on the past, making it more explicable than its usual happenstance.⁵⁰

Historical insight, in Wilhelm von Humboldt's persuasive analogy, is 'like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance'.⁵¹ In the near view, the clouds are simply fog. Just as maturity puts childhood in perspective, so is historical truth the daughter of time.⁵² Following Humboldt, historians left recent times to journalists and social scientists, disowning modern history as an oxymoron. Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 1820s famously refused to lecture on post-1648 Europe; Johan Huizinga in 1931 chose to teach the eighteenth century rather than 'the imperfect and unreliable' recent past.⁵³ Erwin Panofsky in the 1950s judged that art history required a distance of sixty to eighty years.⁵⁴ Citing a widely accepted twenty-year rule, an American historian in the 1990s noted colleagues' discomfort in 'trying to make sense of events close to their own lifetimes'.⁵⁵

Knowing the future of the past forces historians to transcend past immediacy, by taking into account how things later came out. The narrator's tempo and structure reflect this retrospective knowledge; being cognizant of the upshot of relevant events, he cannot avoid using what he knows in telling his story.⁵⁶ How hindsight awareness helped make the past a foreign country is explored later in this chapter.

An intelligible past demands inventive retelling. History no less than memory conflates, exaggerates, abridges; what is crucial or unique is made to stand out, uniformities and minutiae fade away. 'Time is foreshortened, details selected and highlighted, action concentrated, relations simplified', notes a literary historian, 'not to alter or distort the actors and events but to bring them to life and to give them meaning'.⁵⁷ For us, as for Henry James, 'history is never, in any rich sense, the immediate crudity of what "happens," but the much finer complexity of what we read into it'. We make sense of the past by communicating it allegorically, enriching its actors and actions with subsequent imagination.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Penguin, 2011), 182, 202–4, 218. See Nassim Taleb, *The Black Swan* (Allen Lane, 2007), 10–12, 70.

⁵¹ Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'On the historian's task' (1822), *History and Theory* 6 (1967): 57–71 at 58.

⁵² Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (Yale, 2013), 1–2. 'Veritas filia temporis' (Aulus Gellius (c. 130–180), *Noctes Atticae*), 'Truth the daughter of time', became Francis Bacon's Aphorism 84 (*New Organon* (1620; Cambridge, 2000), 69).

⁵³ Jaap den Hollander et al., 'The metaphor of historical distance', *History and Theory* 50:4 (2011): 1–10 at 2–3.

⁵⁴ Erwin Panofsky, 'Three decades of art history in the United States' (1953), in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955; Penguin, 1993), 321–46 at 329.

⁵⁵ James T. Patterson, 'Americans and the writing of twentieth-century United States history', in Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories* (Princeton, 1998), 185–204 at 190.

⁵⁶ J. H. Hexter, 'The rhetoric of history', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Macmillan, 1968), 6: 368–94 at 378. See Allan Megill and Donald N. McCloskey, 'The rhetoric of history', in John S. Nelson et al., eds., *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* (Wisconsin, 1987), 221–38.

⁵⁷ R. F. Arragon, 'History's changing image', *American Scholar* 33 (1964): 222–33 at 230.

⁵⁸ Henry James, *The American Scene* (1907; Indiana, 1968), 182. See Hayden White, 'The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory' (1984), in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins, 1987), 26–57.

The past's formless miscellanies become intelligible only when shaped into stories. The medieval *Annals of St Gall's* bare listing of a sequence of years, some left blank, others annotated with discrete, unrelated events – '710. Hard year and deficient in crops ... 712. Flood everywhere ... 720. Charles fought against the Saracens ... 722. Great crops ... 725. Saracens came for the first time' – provides neither meaning nor continuity. It implies things about the past – that farming mattered, that the Saracens raided – but it lacks fullness, structure, and discourse.⁵⁹ Likewise random and disconnected is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: '776. In this year a red cross appeared in the sky after sunset. And that year the Mercians and the people of Kent fought at Otford. And marvellous adders were seen in Sussex.'⁶⁰

Chronicles lend chronology meaning but lack closure and summing up: they simply end, leaving the plot unfinished, the past provisional. Historical narrative adds moral meaning and overview to facts about the past. It is not a faithful portrait of what happened but a story about it. History 'may well be one damned thing after another', argues Munz, 'but it cannot possibly *appear* as such', for that would void it of meaning.⁶¹ A story 'confers both shape and meaning on events: it records not one thing *after* another ... but one thing *because* of another'.⁶² And because most stories stress causal explanation over chance and accident, history imparted to and known by us appears less muddled, more foreseeable, than the past ever was when present.

Thus Bede's life of St Cuthbert (721) wins 'favour with modern historians because of its satisfyingly coherent narrative with its emphasis on chronology and causation', notes Catherine Cubitt. 'Yet it is precisely these qualities that should make the modern scholar wary. Narrative is essentially an artifice, a literary device ... to create the illusion of actuality and to endow fragmented and disconnected events with meaning', in Bede's case to provide a model of spiritual progress by converting Cuthbert's miracles into 'lessons for aspiring monks'.⁶³

History bereft of shape and conviction would not be understood or attended to. Partiality and empathy warp knowledge, but distortion is essential to its conveyance – even to its very existence. Indeed, the more salient the historian's bias, the more believable his account. Early-modern scholars argued that well-informed history could not be impartial, since only those intimately involved with its shaping knew the reasons for their acts.⁶⁴ History is made credible because it is organized by and filtered through

⁵⁹ Hayden White, 'The value of narrativity in the representation of reality' (1980), in *Content of the Form*, 1–25 at 6–7.

⁶⁰ Sarah Foot, 'Finding the meaning of form: narrative in annals and chronicle', in Nancy Partner, ed., *Writing Medieval History* (Hodder Arnold, 2005), 88–108 at 89. See Elizabeth M. Tyler and Ross Balzaretti, eds., *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 2.

⁶¹ Munz, *Shapes of Time*, 239.

⁶² Foot, 'Finding the meaning of form', 90–1. See Donald E. Polkinghorne, 'Narrative psychology and historical consciousness', in Jürgen Straub, ed., *Narration, Identity and Historical Consciousness* (Berghahn, 2005), 3–22 at 15.

⁶³ Catherine Cubitt, 'Memory and narrative in the cult of the early Anglo-Saxon saints', in Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes, eds., *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), 29–66 at 46–9.

⁶⁴ Anthony T. Grafton, *What Was History* (Cambridge, 2007), 130–2, citing Francesco Patrizi. Fear or ambition led all to err, thought an early-modern sceptic who declared most medieval historians forgers

subjective minds, not despite that fact; impassioned interpretation gives it life and meaning. 'Rhetoric is ordinarily deemed icing on the cake of history', but historiographer J. H. Hexter found it 'mixed right into the batter. It affects not merely the outward appearance of history . . . but its inward character, its essential function – its capacity to convey knowledge of the past.' Emotional involvement enables the historian to communicate; without it his account is disjointed, insipid, unread.⁶⁵

Hexter showed how quotations and lists of names serve rhetorical needs. Quotations – veritable vestiges of the past – make the reader not simply respond 'Yes', but exclaim 'Yes, indeed!' Lists lend conviction by sonorous allusion:

The Christian Revival, that intensification of religious sentiment and concern, . . . in its full span had room for Cardinal Ximenes and Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther and Ignatius Loyola, the Reformed churches and the Jesuits, John of Leiden and Paul IV, Thomas Cranmer and Edmund Campion and Michael Servetus.

The reader is deliberately *not* told who they are, but by implication, to 'draw on the reservoir of your knowledge of the times in which these men lived to give meaning to this list'. Greater specificity would have signalled: 'Stop drawing on . . . your knowledge. I have already told you how I want you to think about these men', thus stifling imagination. In gambling that readers would know enough to make sense of the names, the historian may have erred. But historians always have to gauge how much their audience already knows, whether to hint rather than be precise, when to sacrifice fact for evocative force. In translating past into present, they always juggle competing needs for literal faithfulness, allusive recognition, literary quality, sense of period, degree of archaism, subsequent interpretations, and consonance with today's mindset.⁶⁶ To do so capably 'gives us, not the familiar remembered things, but the glittering intensity of the summoned-up hallucination'.⁶⁷ Conveyed as mirage, the historian's message revivifies the past.

Confirmability

The unprovable belief that pasts actually existed gives historians the confidence to collect and order evidence, bringing them 'closer to knowing the truth', argues Gordon Wood, 'even if the full and complete truth about the past will always remain beyond their grasp'. Only such faith distinguishes history from fiction.⁶⁸

Yet scholarly 'truth' is a relatively recent and still uncommon criterion for evaluating histories. Earlier folk gauged accounts more by narrators' repute than by fidelity to known facts. The true past was what was worthy of belief or whatever ancestral spokesmen declared to be true, even about events well known not to have happened. Hence scholars accommodated mutually incompatible faiths – both 'divine immutability and

(Anthony T. Grafton, 'Jean Hardouin: the antiquary as pariah', *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes* 62 (1999): 241–67; Anthony T. Grafton, *Bring Out Your Dead* (Harvard, 2001), 193–4).

⁶⁵ Hexter, 'Rhetoric of history', 390, 380–1.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 386–9; Eco, *Mouse or Rat*.

⁶⁷ Frye, *Great Code*, 227.

⁶⁸ Gordon Wood, 'Writing history', *NYRB*, 16 Dec. 1982: 59.

historical change, the truth of Jewish sacrifices . . . as well as of the Christian sacraments that had superseded them'. We still comfortably embrace contradictory testimonies, even conflicting accounts by the same informant.⁶⁹

History has always served functions other than 'truth', often at cross-purposes with it – to secure the pedigrees of existing or would-be rulers, to promote patriotic zeal, to sanction religious causes or revolutionary reform, to venerate or derogate the dead. Expressly concerned to keep records 'lest age or oblivion destroy the memory of modern events', medieval chroniclers nonetheless conveyed a deliberately contrived and selected version of them. 'Truth' in medieval and early-modern culture meant not literal accuracy but a plausible exposition of virtues and vices and cognizance of what *ought* to have happened.⁷⁰

History's great truths were received and eternal; the historian's mission was not to find but to buttress preconceived conclusions such as the existence of God or, with the Enlightenment, the inevitability of progress. Examples chosen as illustrative were by definition true, and those rejected false; the end purified the means. A true chronicle of a revered ruler was not the events of his life but an exposition of his virtues. And some still elide secular annals with sacred faith. 'In listening to the voice of history', declaimed an American historian in 1893, 'we well recognize the voice of God'.⁷¹ That the history of America reflects divine will remains the avowed credo of many if not most of its elected leaders.

Only since the Enlightenment did knowing the past as it actually was become some historians' holy grail. Purged of precursors' prejudices, successive generations of scholars fancied themselves free of bias. Montesquieu thought himself unprejudiced; exposing Montesquieu's prejudices, the Jacobin Jean-Paul Marat believed he himself had none.⁷² Few recognized their own fallibility. 'Our ancestors . . . thought themselves as little under the influence of prejudice and idle fancy, as we may deem ourselves', wrote an eighteenth-century sceptic. 'The time may arrive, when this age also may be denominated dark; and we' chastised as '*credulous*'.⁷³ Alert to bias in others, nineteenth-century historians preened themselves on being rational and impartial.

As faith in received truth dwindled, historians' own judgements gained weight. Critical comparison of sources made chronicler bias more apparent and less pardonable; it began to seem wrong to slant history for partisan purpose. The ideal historian became 'a man of science, ascetic, levelheaded and detached', who renounced precursors' 'impassioned writing' and 'unabashed partisanship'. Keeping an aloof distance, the historian shed bias.⁷⁴ In 1883 Pope Leo XIII assailed secular historians for twisting evidence and called

⁶⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Distance and perspective', in *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (Columbia, 2001), 139–56 at 148; Thomas L. Haskell, 'Objectivity', *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 321–59 at 343–4.

⁷⁰ Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora* (c. 1250), quoted in Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (Harvard, 1979), 118–20, 147. See Janet Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories* (Cambridge, 1992), 294–9; Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1991), 86–91, 113–38.

⁷¹ William Wirt Henry quoted in Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (Knopf, 1991), 195; Dorothy Ross, 'Grand narrative in historical writing', *AHR* 100 (1995): 651–77 at 655.

⁷² Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and Ideologies of the Enlightenment* (Johns Hopkins, 1968), 350–1.

⁷³ Joseph Berington, *History of the Lives of Abeillard and Eloisa*, 2nd edn (Basle, 1793), 1: li–lii.

⁷⁴ Jo Tollebeek and Ilaria Porciani, 'Institutions, networks and communities in a European perspective', in Ilaria Porciani and Jo Tollebeek, eds., *Setting the Standards: Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3–26 at 7.

for history ‘written by men looking for truth and not for weapons . . . true history, better history, impartial history’. Leo was certain that opening the papal archives would vindicate veracious papal annalists.⁷⁵ Reproving nationalist historiography, in 1896 Lord Acton exhorted *Cambridge Modern History* authors to lofty impartiality: ‘Our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, Germans and Dutch alike.’ Historians sought disinterested objectivity, ‘that noble dream’.⁷⁶ Today testable truth is history’s hallmark, veracious history truth’s ultimate arbiter. Queries such as ‘How will history judge Nixon?’ imply that we are all bound, in the end, to get our just due. (Nixon himself believed that ‘history will treat me fairly’, though ‘historians probably won’t’.⁷⁷)

Historians’ credibility depends on their sources being open to general scrutiny. A trustworthy history must conform to accessible evidence. But it must also be largely consonant with other accepted chronicles. Not even Everyman’s self-made personal history can overstep limits set by his fellows; living with others whose affairs Everyman intimately shares ‘has taught him the expediency of recalling certain events with much exactness’.⁷⁸

The history we consensually inherit is not all equally certain, but much of it is exceedingly sure and stable: it has survived the test of time and the vicissitudes of rival views. ‘Nowadays, historians love to talk about invented pasts’ as an antidote to positivist assumptions that history simply reflects past realities, a medievalist comments. But creative medieval accounts of early Lombard history could not be totally fabricated.

The war between the Lombards and the Longobards reported by [Piacenza notary Johannes] Codagnellus [*Liber Rerum Gestarum*, 1222] is invented to a considerable degree. But even to him, the distant Lombard past was not infinitely malleable. Medieval historiographers mostly dealt with truths that were already there. . . . Even invented pasts could not be invented freely, they had to be likely enough to have come to pass.

Unlike the ‘happy’ fictional ending of the 1961 film *Rosamunda e Alboino* [*Sword of the Conquerer*], ‘whoever wrote histories in the Middle Ages, even *historiae fabulosae*, could not have made the Gepids win’. They could have tweaked the personae or the order of tribal settlement. But ‘the Lombards had to win, for . . . Italy was a Lombard not a Gepid kingdom, and the region around Milan and Pavia was called Lombardy. After all, people knew what their past had led to.’⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Owen Chadwick, *Catholicism and History: The Opening of the Vatican Archives* (Cambridge, 1978), 100–2.

⁷⁶ Lord Acton, ‘Letter to contributors for *Cambridge Modern History*, 12 Mar. 1898’, in *Lectures on Modern History*, 315–18; Gordon S. Wood, ‘A century of writing early American history’, *AHR* 100 (1995): 678–96 at 684; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 71–2, 259.

⁷⁷ Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 216.

⁷⁸ Becker, ‘Everyman his own historian’, 228. Everyman’s coal bill is flagrantly exaggerated, suggesting a Becker spoof (Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, ‘Mr Everyman buys coal’, *AHA Perspectives on History* (Sept. 2009): 3–4).

⁷⁹ Walter Pohl, ‘Memory, identity and power in Lombard Italy’, in Hen and Innes, eds., *Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, 9–28 at 27–8. Because the Carolingian past had largely been forgotten, Verona scholars could invent a largely fictitious one (Cristina La Rocca, ‘A man for all seasons: Pacificus of Verona and the creation of a local Carolingian past’, in Hen and Innes, eds., *Uses of the Past*, 250–79).

We may be uncertain just who killed Caesar, but to doubt that Caesar was assassinated at all, we would have to reject 'an enormous range of other implicated facts, both about Caesar and about Roman history . . . in general'. To jettison all this would soon make it difficult to believe *anything* about the past, Leon Pompa points out. If so much accepted history were dubious, we would be forced to distrust all extant historical and indeed contemporary thought.⁸⁰

No absolute truth lies waiting to be found; however assiduous and fair-minded, the historian can no more relate the past 'as it really was' than can our memories. But history is not thereby invalidated. We rightly feel it casts *some* light on the past, contains a core of truth. Future insights are bound to reveal present error and falsify present surmise, but evidence now at hand proves that some things certainly did happen while others did not. No opaque curtain cordons off historians from the past; they peer into bygone tableaux, confident that their perceptions and accounts are not just mental figments but at least approximate bygone reality.

Yet most generally received history stems neither from direct empirical knowledge nor rational inference; it reflects a cumulative consensus among those who have sought to know the past. We find it credible not because we ourselves have seen documentary proof, but because we inherit confidence in the repute of those who have. History is verified as much by collegial trust as by its canonical contents; 'we agree to regard each other – at least some others – as bearers of truth', concludes a folklorist, and accept what they tell us as reasonably close to what must have happened.⁸¹ To be sure, countless historical impostures have deceived the credulous, but unfolding evidence progressively corrects errors and exposes mendacities.

The prospect of public exposure makes sourced historical knowledge, even of remote and obscure events, more reliable than eyewitness recall, even of the recent and accessible past. Underlying our trust is faith that previous chroniclers, however naive or self-interested, were, on the whole, honest and assiduous. 'Were not the memory tenacious to a certain degree; had not men commonly an inclination to truth and a principle of probity; were they not sensible to shame when discovered in a falsehood', reasoned David Hume, 'we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony.'⁸² We accredit historical accounts that conform with other trusted accounts. And because consensual, histories can be more rigorously verified or falsified than most memories.

Such confidence is challenged by critics of many stamps, from religious zealots to postmodern nihilists. A classic precursor was Archbishop Richard Whately's anti-Napoleonic satire. Whately argued that those who disbelieved Christian miracles must by the same token doubt Napoleon's existence, for most 'who talk about Buonaparte do not even pretend to speak from their own authority, but merely . . . repeat what they have casually heard'. Professed eyewitnesses had been conned into believing the man they saw

⁸⁰ Leon Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1990), 197–205, 222. On historical consensus, see Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past* (Cambridge, 2004), 23–45.

⁸¹ Sam Schrager, 'What is social in social history?' *International Journal of Oral History* 4 (1983): 76–98 at 78.

⁸² David Hume, 'Of Miracles', in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), in *Philosophical Works* (Aalen: Scientia, 1964), 4: 3–135 at 127.

was Napoleon. Yet only tales in lying or duped newspapers attested his exploits. Their 'grossly contradictory' accounts made them all dubious, but

the story told by any one of them . . . carries an air of fiction and romance on the very face of it. All the events are great, and splendid, and marvellous: great armies, great victories, great frosts, great reverses, 'hairbreadth 'scapes', empires subverted in a few days; . . . everything upon that grand scale so common in Epic Poetry, so rare in real life; and thus calculated to strike the imagination of the vulgar, – and to remind the sober-thinking few of the Arabian Nights. Every event, too, has that *roundness* and completeness which is so characteristic of fiction; nothing is done by halves; we have *complete* victories, – *total* overthrows, – *entire* subversion of empires, – *perfect* re-establishments of them, – crowded upon us in rapid succession . . . The improbabilities . . . would fill volumes.

Only one 'ignorant of history and of human nature' could find it 'conformable to *Experience*, our best and only sure guide. In vain will he seek in history for something similar to this wonderful Buonaparte.'⁸³

Postmodern sceptics' aim was the opposite of Whately's: not to reaffirm faith in seemingly incredible sources, but to demonstrate that *all* sources are fatally tarnished, hence unreliable. Such doubts begin to corrode public confidence in history, as discussed in my final chapters. But they are still very much the exception.

Few caveats subvert historical faith instilled in school. Children are 'taught history as they were taught math – as a finite subject with definite right or wrong answers', fretted a museum director. Most history texts are 'written as if their authors did not exist, as if they were simply instruments of a divine intelligence transcribing official truths'. Their veracity goes unquestioned. 'All the information is written down', students say; 'you've just got to find the answers in the book'. Textbook certitude makes it hard for teachers to deal with doubt and controversy; saying 'I don't know' violates the authoritarian norm of classroom certitude. Hence history teachers adopt the omniscient tone of their texts. Students ignore historical actors diverse motives; taking for granted that texts and teachers simply report known facts is less effort and earns higher marks.⁸⁴

Older folk learned history as Simone de Beauvoir recalled of her 1920s schooling, 'never dreaming there might be more than one view of past events'.⁸⁵ Today contrary

⁸³ Richard Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte* (1819; 7th edn London, 1841), 12–18, 25–30. Whately scoffed at the 'abundance of busts and prints of this great being; all striking likenesses – of one another' (54). When Napoleon's remarkably preserved corpse was exhumed in 1840 to be reburied in Paris, Whately suggested duplicate remains to compensate St Helena, instancing the several skulls of Oliver Cromwell (55–6). Three years after Cromwell's death in 1658, his disinterred remains were hanged at Tyburn, the head falling off. Three skulls were later claimed as Cromwell's ('Cromwell's head riddle', *Oxford Times*, 3 Mar. 1988: 1).

⁸⁴ Indianapolis Children's Museum director Peter Sterling quoted in George Gonis, 'History in the making', *History News* 40:7 (July 1985): 12–15. See Samuel S. Wineburg, 'Probing the depths of students' historical knowledge', *AHA Perspectives* 30:3 (Mar. 1992): 19–24; Samuel S. Wineburg, 'On the reading of historical texts' (1991), in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Temple, 2001), 63–88 at 76–7, and vii–viii; James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995), 280–1.

⁸⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958; London, 1963), 127.

views may be posed, but alternatives are only good or bad, right or wrong; honest differences of opinion are seldom an option. Asked to decide between two versions of a historical event, a student says, 'It was cool to hear both sides of the story and choose who you think was telling the truth.'⁸⁶ Both sides! Truth! History becomes a courtroom: every story has just two sides, and whoever was wrong must have lied. Historians scrutinize documents like prosecutors; students take them as literally as jurors.

In school texts, history remains one-dimensional even where controversy is rampant. The antiquity of Native American settlement is nowadays keenly disputed, but textbook readers would never know this; most texts portray either the 'early' or the 'late' arrival version as undisputed fact. Loose ends are avoided lest they unravel faith. Everything in school history was 'presented as if it were the full picture', recalled a student in 1991, 'so I never thought to doubt that it was'. Few historians try to explain that there may be more than one 'accurate' version of the same event.⁸⁷

To show children 'that history and the way we interpret it is not carved in granite . . . that the past can never be totally reconstructed', the museum director cited above stressed how provisional history is:

We're not saying, 'This is the past. Believe it!' . . . We're saying, 'Given what we know, this is our best interpretation.' [Children] find out we're constantly finding out things that change our perception of the past. They'll learn that what we know about the past today is not what we'll know [tomorrow]. They'll also learn that there are some things we can never find out.⁸⁸

But this laudable lesson is seldom learned, for it is rarely taught. Many children do, however, learn to mistrust textbooks, either as politically sanctioned or test-worthy diktats. Two generations of Soviet-dominated Estonians imbibed party-line history curricula while scorning it. Anglo-American students learn to regurgitate textbook history for good grades. Asked to monitor his eleven-year-old daughter's history lessons, a historical novelist is horrified by their preposterous perversions. 'Oh, poppy! this is for an exam; this is not the truth. I know better than this.'⁸⁹

But rubbishing received history has its own hazards. Conflicting versions of what caused the Jamestown colony's 'starving time' (1609–10) led students to reject all accounts of the past as constructed by people who 'regularly and intentionally distorted the truth, . . . just made things up or were simply lying'. Was it wise, asks their teacher, for 10-year-olds to abandon 'sublime trust in the veracity of history textbooks' for 'intrigue-filled but overgeneralized suspicion?' To dismiss history as bogus 'because historical agents are all lying' presupposes an ideal of unattainable probity. 'If only they were to

⁸⁶ Judy P. Hohmann, 'Discovering documents', *History News* (Sept.–Oct. 1993): 13–16. See Denis J. Shemilt, 'Adolescent ideas about evidence and methodology in history', in Christopher Portal, ed., *The History Curriculum for Teachers* (Lewes: Falmer, 1988), 39–61 at 41–3.

⁸⁷ Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 92–3, 5 [student]; Eric Foner and John Sayles, 'A conversation', in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 11–29 at 25.

⁸⁸ Peter Sterling quoted in Gonis, 'History in the making', 12–15.

⁸⁹ Robert Penn Warren in Ralph Ellison et al., 'The uses of history in fiction', *Southern Literary Journal* 1:2 (Spring 1969): 57–90 at 70.

tell the truth, then we could get to . . . what really happened'. But absent an impeccable witness, all chroniclers were dishonest, all chronicles alike untrustworthy.⁹⁰

The historian's often declared task is to provide society with a discriminating memory.⁹¹ Yet to do so the historian must likewise discriminate. Only by selectively reshaping selected sources can any chronicler, whether academic scholar or spinner of romance, memorably recount the past. But the gulf between historians' discriminating memory and the fables of the popular media widens all the time. More about the past is known than ever before, yet is ever less shared. The 'Progressive' synthesis that marked American history writing up to half a century ago, for example, gave way to congeries of fragments. Among the general public, burgeoning historical fiction and retro fancies contrast starkly with the growing neglect of history in school, decline in academe, and professional historians' diminishing role in purveying the past.⁹²

Thirty years ago I attributed the gulf mainly to the enormous expansion of historical knowledge. Widespread literacy and the preservative powers of print allowed everything known about the past to accumulate, and formal history had broadened to include the past of non-European cultures and of a host of new phenomena. As a result, no individual could take in more than a tiny fraction of it.⁹³ We were already all specialists, the football fanatic who knew every team's past scores no less than the expert on the lives of saints or the history of majolica. Historians perforce remain ignorant of most aspects of things past. Many blamed historians' increasingly narrow remits, forbidding technical paraphernalia, disregard of the wider public: 'fragmentation and overspecialization have stultified . . . much of the profession'.⁹⁴

Plaints continue to be made that 'academic history . . . is in danger of becoming a priestly caste', marooned in historians' 'cobwebbed studies' and 'the bilious world of the intellectuals'.⁹⁵ 'Historians are more and more specialized, experts on single decades or single subjects, and still they cannot keep up with the profusion of monographs. Most now make no pretence of writing for the educated public. They write for each other, and with all their scientific paraphernalia . . . they can sometimes count their readers on their hands', noted Gordon Wood in 1982. A quarter-century later the ongoing loss of readers and history course enrolment led Wood to renew his criticism; postmodern theory had made 'academic history writing almost as esoteric and inward directed as th[at] of literary scholars'.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Bruce A. VanSledright, 'Confronting history's interpretive paradox while teaching fifth graders to interpret the past', *American Educational Research Journal* 39:4 (2002): 1089–115 at 1103–5, and *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education* (Routledge, 2011), ch. 4.

⁹¹ Michael Kammen, 'Vanitas and the historian's vocation', *Reviews in American History* 10:4 (1982): 1–27 at 19–20.

⁹² John Lukacs, 'Obsolete historians', *Harper's Magazine* 261 (Nov. 1980): 80–4.

⁹³ *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), xxiv–xxv.

⁹⁴ E. Bradford Burns, 'Teaching history: a changing clientele', *AHA Perspectives* 21:1 (1983): 19–21.

⁹⁵ David Harlan, 'Historical fiction and the future of academic history', in Keith Jenkins et al., *Manifestos for History* (Routledge, 2007), 108–30 at 120; Ivo Dawney, 'History matters', *National Trust Magazine*, no. 108 (Summer 2006): 20–2.

⁹⁶ Gordon S. Wood, 'Star-spangled history', *NYRB*, 12 Aug. 1982: 4; Gordon S. Wood, *Purpose of the Past* (Penguin, 2008), 3–6.

With few exceptions historians continue to eschew neologisms and jargon for ordinary language, in work more accessible to the general public than that of most other scholars. Yet growing specialization makes historical dialogue 'ever more technical and self-referential', in AHA president William Cronon's recent charge, hence 'dry, dead, and boring' for non-professionals.⁹⁷ Indeed, academic historians agree that their work, long on analysis and short on synthesis, 'is not meant to be accessible'. And their concentration on specialized knowledge leaves students with an absence of connective tissue.⁹⁸

Today's populist Zeitgeist likewise encourages the public to privilege its own take on the past without deferring to expert views. Postmodernists preach that historians like all of us are partial, selective, above the fray; we should mistrust self-interested professionals all the more for claiming expertise. But students taught 'that every historical source is biased . . . often dismiss all sources as unreliable and give up on the possibility of knowing anything about the past'.⁹⁹ But if all pasts are dubious, they are also equally deserving of attention. Your past, my past, so-and-so's past all differ, but each has the high populist merit of being someone's past. The collective past thus becomes the ungraded crazy quilt of humanity's individual memories. In this anti-elitist *mélange* 'everything is presumed as equally important, since any . . . emphasis would suggest [the politically incorrect view] that certain ideas, cultures, or individuals are worthier of interest than others'.¹⁰⁰

How the learned imbibe history also sets them more apart. Sources now seem 'impenetrable, irreducible, resistant to our efforts to exploit them for information and meaning; instead of reading through them as if they were windows onto the past, historians now treat them . . . as mysterious body parts of the vanished past'.¹⁰¹ But while professionals increasingly recognize history as 'an unnatural act', the public at large, bemused by simplified visual displays and by ready Internet access to 'facts', tends to view the past as transparently easy to fathom, graspable without effort let alone doubt. 'Accepting false information as truth is an everyday classroom occurrence', notes Sam Wineburg. Asked 'how they "know" that our president was born in Kenya or that the Mossad (or George Bush himself) plotted 9/11, students . . . blithely respond, "I found it on the Internet"'.¹⁰²

Not those who query sources but those who swallow them whole feel Mircea Eliade's 'terror of history', softened by Charles Schulz in 'Peanuts' into something 'that should always be studied in the morning, before anything else can happen'.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ William Cronon, 'Professional boredom', *AHA Perspectives on History* (Mar. 2012): 5–6.

⁹⁸ Johann N. Neem, 'Taking historical fundamentalism seriously', *Historically Speaking* 12:5 (2011): 2–5 at 4. See Gordon S. Wood, 'In defense of academic history writing', *AHA Perspectives* (Apr. 2011): 19–20.

⁹⁹ Keith C. Barton, 'Research on students' historical thinking and learning', *AHA Perspectives* (Oct. 2004): 19–21.

¹⁰⁰ Paula Marantz Cohen, 'Make mine a vixen' *TLS*, 17 Sept. 2004: 7–8.

¹⁰¹ Lionel Gossman, 'Voices of silence', *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 272–7 at 274. See Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Cornell, 2001).

¹⁰² Sam Wineburg, 'Changing the teaching of history, one byte at a time', *Edutopia: Education Trends*, 14 Nov., 2013 edutopia.org. Digital con artists dupe textbook authors as well as students. The falsehood that 'thousands' of slaves fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War (Joy Masoff, *Our Virginia: Past and Present* (Five Ponds Press, 2010)) came from a Sons of Confederate Veterans website.

¹⁰³ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949; Princeton, 1994), 139–62.

Western and other histories

History has long been seen – notably by Western historians – as a preponderantly Western enterprise. Other peoples' interest in their pasts was a far cry from the *historical* awareness that emerged in the European Renaissance. Some further held that only Europe *had* history: non-Europeans were historically unconscious because they had no history to be conscious of, until contact with (and the usual sequel, conquest by) Europeans.¹⁰⁴

Scholars of many stripes confined history to modern Western civilization. Karl Marx thought non-Europeans unreachable by revolutionary change because outside the stream of history.¹⁰⁵ 'The Caucasians form the only truly *historical* race', intoned a popular 1870s schoolbook. 'Civilization is the product of the brain of this race'.¹⁰⁶ Up to 1950, a canonical architectural text dismissed non-Western (Asian and Saracenic) building styles as 'Non-Historical'.¹⁰⁷ 'The history of the world, for the last five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history', declared the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper in 1965. 'Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history. But at present, there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely, like . . . pre-Columbian America, darkness'.¹⁰⁸

Eurocentrism embraced overseas settlers of European stock. 'The only population of America that has counted in history has been of European origin', held a respected 1904 text.¹⁰⁹ California high school students in the 1970s, white and black alike, agreed that 'if Africa had had a history worth learning about, we would have had it last year in Western Civ'. To this day, 'the world outside Europe, except for the United States, hardly exists in European school history'.¹¹⁰ Non-Western history concerns only 16 percent of British historians, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa barely 13 percent of Anglo-Americans' historical research.¹¹¹

The supposed absence of history elsewhere reflected Enlightenment views that equated history with progressive change, long limited to the 'civilized' West. For Hegel Africa was 'unhistorical, undeveloped, . . . mere nature'. Consigning non-Europeans to static timelessness accorded with their own reiterated claims of hewing to ancestral practice.

¹⁰⁴ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (California, 1982), is the classic statement.

¹⁰⁵ Samir Amin, *L'eurocentrisme* (Paris: Anthropos, 1988); Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins* (Chicago, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ William Swinton, *Outlines of the World's History* (New York, 1874), 2. See Peter Munz, *Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge* (Routledge, 1985), 314.

¹⁰⁷ Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, 15th edn (Batsford, 1950), 888.

¹⁰⁸ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (Thames & Hudson, 1965), 11, reiterated in his 'The past and the present: history and sociology', *Past & Present* 42 (1969): 3–17. See Finn Fuglestad, 'The Trevor-Roper trap', *History in Africa* 19 (1992): 309–26; Finn Fuglestad, *The Ambiguities of History: The Problem of Ethnocentrism in Historical Writing* (Oslo: Academic Press, 2005), 10–11, 16, 64–5, 75.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Potts Cheyney, *European Background of American History, 1300–1600* (New York, 1904), xxvii.

¹¹⁰ Martha Doerr Toppin, 'I know who's going with me: reflections on the fellowship of history', *Social Education* 44 (1980): 456–60; Joke van der Leeuw-Roord, 'Beyond the doorstep: the nature of history teaching across Europe', in Semih Aktekin et al., eds., *Teaching History and Social Studies for Multicultural Europe* (Ankara: Harf, 2009), 155–76 at 169. See Joke van der Leeuw-Roord, 'Yearning for yesterday', in Symcox and Wilschut, eds., *National History Standards*, 73–95 at 91n20.

¹¹¹ Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt, 'It's a small world over all: the wider world in historians' peripheral vision', *AHA Perspectives on History* 51:5 (May 2013): 24–7.

Anthropologists recorded the immutable traditionalism of backward peasants and tribal primitives, resistant to change until impacted by Western dynamism.¹¹² Whether seen as rural idiots or, later, as noble savages, such folk had no history. It was to counter this demeaning depiction that Chinua Achebe's historical novels aimed to teach Nigerians 'that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them'.¹¹³

The Western fallacy was to mistake mystiques of changelessness for actuality, to assume that 'a society can be subject to the gaze of history only when the society itself is historically self-conscious'.¹¹⁴ 'History is *conscious*', asserted Oswald Spengler, '*making*' history as opposed to merely passive 'endurance of fate'.¹¹⁵ Peoples 'without history' were not devoid of interest in the past or unaware that it differed from the present, although, like most Europeans until recently, they deeply regretted change. All peoples claim to cleave to ancestral tradition despite overwhelming contrary evidence. To palliate dismaying change inherent in all societies, continuity is stressed and mutable history denied.

The view that Westerners are especially historically-*minded* has more merit. To be sure, diurnal, seasonal, and generational regularities still dominate quotidian life in the West as elsewhere. But biblical concepts of linear and unrepeatable history superimposed a divinely ordained narrative in which events happened once and only once. A sacred chronology beginning in Creation and ending in Resurrection made secular time finite and irreversible. The datable life and death of Jesus ordained historical consciousness, secular as well as sacred. As discussed in Chapter 5, the course of individual human lives became a template for the history of nations, Earth, and cosmos.¹¹⁶

Yet Christians, no less than polytheists, long denied fundamental change beyond the scripturally ordained. Only with the Renaissance and the Reformation did new perspectives on time and causality begin to direct Western thought. Briefly, these are a linear view of past and future, reliance on written texts, awareness of anachronism, belief in growth if not progress, focus on collective agency, search for causal explanation, and zeal for objectivity. Together, they comprise 'specifically historical interest in the past' as opposed to stress on memory and tradition.¹¹⁷ Barely nascent for fifteen centuries, such historicism is by no means universal today; cyclic modes of consciousness persist

¹¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (1830–1; Dover, 1956), 99; Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985); Edmund Leach, 'Tribal ethnography', in Tonkin et al., eds., *History and Ethnicity*, 37–47 at 37–40.

¹¹³ Chinua Achebe, 'The novelist as teacher' (1965), in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Heinemann, 1975), 42–8 at 45. Jack Goody (*The Theft of History* (Cambridge, 2006), 1–7, 23, 186–92), rebuts Trevor-Roper and Fernand Braudel's claims of European inventive uniqueness versus static 'others'.

¹¹⁴ Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 50.

¹¹⁵ Oswald Spengler, *Aphorisms* (Regnery, 1967), 46.

¹¹⁶ Johan Galtung, 'Western deep thinking and Western historical thinking', in Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Western Historical Thinking* (Berghahn, 2002, 85–100 at 87–91.

¹¹⁷ Peter Burke, 'Western historical thinking in a global perspective', 15–30, and Hayden White, 'The Westernization of world history', 111–118 at 112, both in Rüsen, ed., *Western Historical Thinking*. To be sure, other cultures exhibit or claim some of these traits: Chinese devotion to textual analysis, Korean to impartial objectivity, Indian to progress within cyclical determinism. See Ming-ke Wang, 'What continued in history?', in Chun-Chieh Huang and John B. Henderson, eds., *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2006), 185–9.

alongside them. But by and large they distinguish Western historical philosophy, if not practice, today, and, with globalization, increasingly that of the rest of the world.

Chronology and narrative

Narratives sequences, dates, and chronologies so suffuse Western history as to seem attributes of the past itself. But they are not; our precursors put them there. From classical times to the Renaissance, chronology was a valued scholarly enterprise.¹¹⁸ Ordering events by universally accepted dates is much more recent and far from unanimous practice. Even today, the past remains for many chaotically episodic, a hotchpotch of chronologically muddled figures and events. In this heaving and formless sea stand a few islands of measured fixity, on which unlettered moderns huddle for temporal security.

Facts about the past are timeless and discontinuous unless woven together in stories. We do not experience a flow of time, only a succession of situations and events. To many, historical awareness remains as temporally untethered as memory. Calendric vagueness is the rule in oral societies, temporal distance ignored or smudged by narrators and auditors alike. Without dates or records to consult, neither the duration nor the order of past events is fixed; they are telescoped, expanded, and reordered in line with their ascribed significance. Brief moments of perceived change typically punctuate long periods of stasis; significant events are consigned either to a mythic time of origin or to recent living memory. Dynastic founders get credit both for their own deeds and for their successors', whose own agency is forgotten. The repetitive regularity of the orally transmitted past fits the mantra that 'nothing happened' between the beginning and recent times. In contrast, historians reliant on written sources dwell on incremental change over the whole span of time; their history never stands still.¹¹⁹

Oral temporal habits persisted well into Europe's scribal age, when chronicles were still mainly read aloud. Medieval audiences shuffled Caesar, Charlemagne, Alexander, David, and other ancients like playing cards, viewing each as prototypes; thus Alexander walked in Miltiades' footsteps. Caesar took Alexander as his model, Charlemagne became Caesar. It took two centuries of printing to accustom literate Europeans to look back via ordered sequences of epochs. Even after writing made dating easier, few but tax collectors and census-takers were impelled to divide time into calendrically equivalent segments.¹²⁰

Temporal order was instead segmented by dynasty, chronologies dated by consular or regnal epochs, starting with the first year and ending with the ruler's last. Calendric tables stressed distance from Adam or Abraham, Noah or Aeneas, Romulus and Remus. Nascent efforts to universalize time in the Roman Empire foundered with its fall. Chronologies based on noble lineages grounded medieval time in procreation and

¹¹⁸ Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 10.

¹¹⁹ Louis O. Mink, 'History and fiction as modes of comprehension', *New Literary History* 1 (1970): 541–58 at 545–6; David P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition* (Clarendon Press, 1974), 2–9; Joseph C. Miller, 'Listening for the African past', in his, ed., *African Past Speaks* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980), 1–59 at 16, 37.

¹²⁰ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989), 62; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, 'Clio and Chronos: an essay on the making and breaking of history-book time', *History and Theory*, 6 (1966): 36–64.

filiation.¹²¹ But these dynastic histories were disconnected. Separate temporal frameworks precluded comparative analysis.

The need for an agreed sacred calendar, manifest in fixing dates for Easter, at length unified Western chronology. Fully accepted only a millennium on, the sixth-century Christian calendar overcame the insularity of dynastic narrative. Annalistic replaced event-dominated accounts; year-by-year frameworks overshadowed the episodes they framed. Specific happenings – a plague, a coronation, an eclipse, a royal birth – were assigned to various years in these annuaries, with other years simply left blank: it was the enumeration itself that mattered. Showing the years of our Lord unfolding from known beginning towards promised end, this agreed chronology, from the Incarnation to the impending Resurrection, possessed God-given fullness and continuity.¹²² But growing disparities between Christian and scientific history made the commingling of sacred with secular calendars, of mythical with verifiable events, first futile and then dispensable. Few now know – and some who do complain – that BC means before Christ, AD in the year of our Lord.¹²³

The start and end of millennia, centuries, and decades spawn recurrent mystiques. From millennial forebodings preceding the year 1000, decimal determinism ascribed reality to epochs demarcated by century, with *fin-de-siècle* malaise around 1700, 1800, 1900, and 2000. Decades became clotheshorses for calendric fashion – the Gay '90s, the Stylish '30s, the Swinging '60s, the Naughty '00s. What began as nominal shorthand – fifth-century Athens, seventeenth-century England – became frames for fleeting Zeitgeists. Like such synthesizing constructs as 'the Middle Ages' or 'the Depression', calendar stereotypes harden and reify thought about the past: the nineteenth century or the 1930s become a 'thing' like a battle or a birthplace, and causal agents in their own right.¹²⁴

These excesses aside, we owe much to the chronologists: clock, calendar, and numbered page habituated us to sequential order. But only the printing press and the spread of literacy secured its acceptance and universality. And centuries of painstaking

¹²¹ Denis Feeney, *Caesar's Calendar* (California, 2007); Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History, historicism, and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65 (1990): 59–86 at 78–80; Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, 'Year-dates in the early Middle Ages', in Chris Humphrey and W. M. Ormrod, eds., *Time in the Medieval World* (York Medieval Press, 2001), 5–22.

¹²² Denys Hay, *Annalists and Historians* (Methuen, 1977), 22–7, 38–42; Mink, 'Everyman his or her own annalist', 233–4; Rosenberg and Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, 11–12; Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2009), 86–100, 277. Deeds and charters were long dated by regnal years rather than *anno Domini*; the king's coronation was more recent and publicly remembered (Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 240).

¹²³ Eisenstein, 'Clio and Chronos', 43; E. G. Richards, *Mapping Time: The Calendar and Its History* (Oxford, 2000); Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008). BC also stands for Before Columbus, Bar Code, Birth Control, and Bacon Cheeseburger, AD for After Death, American Dream, and Alzheimer's Disease, among others.

¹²⁴ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford, 1968), 96–8; Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past* (Cambridge, 1969), 136; Roger Bromley, *Lost Narratives* (Routledge 1988), 102–3; Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End* (Doubleday, 1989); Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter, eds., *Fin de Siècle and Its Legacy* (Cambridge, 1990); Walter Laqueur, 'Fin de siècle', *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996): 5–47; Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns* (Chicago, 1997), 19–20, 23; Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, eds., *The Fin de Siècle* (Oxford, 2001).

correlation from myriad sources were needed for the securely timed and dated series on which we now rely.¹²⁵

Chronology or 'history-book time' accustomed the schooled to view the past as an all-inclusive narrative. Above all, the printing press enabled each 'to sort out and arrange almost any portion of the past he encounters, to find his ancestors or to "find himself"'. A sequence of familiar monarchs made Britain the fortunate possessor, a historian recalled, of 'a national time scale immediately understandable to any English child'. A novelist's 1950s Oxford course 'began at the beginning of English history' and went 'on in a nice straight line without any gaps, [shaping] an orderly, chronological image . . . a nice, linear, uninterrupted memory'.¹²⁶

Offshoots of Joseph Priestley's charts, my own 1940s Harvard history chronologies mapped Western Civilization from the Egyptians and Babylonians to 1815.¹²⁷ Some epochs in this continuum I barely recognized, but being charted made them seem retrievable. Aligning pharaohs and kings and presidents in one chronological column, battles and conquests in another, discoveries and inventions, poets and painters in a third bolstered faith that all history was knowable and interrelated *because* datable. Reliance on chronology was often rigid or simplistic, to be sure. It envisioned history as an interlinked process of growing complexity and improvement. 'Western Civilization' curricula revealed history as an unfolding panorama of progress.

Along with progress, dates and chronology are now out of fashion. Censured as constricting and simplistic, they give way to flashbacks and fast-forwards in history as in fiction. History today follows not one Eurocentric line but those of many diverse cultures, impossible (and politically incorrect) to lump within a common sequence. As historians discovered both the Third World and the West's previously voiceless 'minorities' – women, children, peasants, blacks – 'Western Civ' gave way along with the ethnocentrism that made it canonically pre-eminent.¹²⁸

Emphasizing economic, social, and intellectual history further vitiated chronological relevance: cultures and ideologies proved less datable than kings and conquests. New-found aspects of the past 'impinge on the modern consciousness from so many directions', observed an historian in 1966, 'that they tax the capacity of the human intelligence to order them coherently'.¹²⁹ Half a century on, many abandon coherent order as

¹²⁵ James William Johnson, 'Chronological writing', *History and Theory* 2 (1962): 124–45; Anthony Grafton, 'Joseph Scaliger and historical chronology', *History and Theory* 14 (1975): 156–85; Donald J. Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past* (Chicago, 1987).

¹²⁶ Richard Cobb, 'Becoming a historian', in *A Sense of Place* (Duckworth, 1975), 7–48 at 21–2; Penelope Lively, 'Children and the art of memory', *Horn Book Magazine* 54 (1978): 17–23, 197–203 at 200.

¹²⁷ Joseph Priestley, *A New Chart of History* (London, 1769); Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley* (PennPress, 1997), 128–31.

¹²⁸ Gilbert Allardye, 'The rise and fall of the Western Civilization course', *AHR* 87 (1982): 695–725, and Morris Rossabi, 'Comment' on Allardye, *AHR* 87 (1982): 729–32; Eugen Weber, 'Western Civilization', in Molho and Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories*, 206–20. See William H. McNeill, 'What we mean by the West', *American Educator* 24 (2000): 10–15; Daniel A. Segal, '"Western Civ" and the staging of history in American higher education', *AHR* 105 (2000): 770–805; Glenn Ricketts et al., *The Vanishing West 1964–2010: The Disappearance of Western Civilization from the American Undergraduate Curriculum* (Princeton: National Association of Scholars, 2011).

¹²⁹ Eisenstein, 'Clio and Chronos', 63.

chimerical. The common response to the dilemma is to scrap chronology entirely, as Penelope Lively's fictional headmaster urged a history teacher:

'Children under fifteen just aren't ready for a chronological approach to history. And yet here we are teaching them history as narrative, one thing after another.'

'That's what it is. One thing does happen after another.'

'Yes, but that's a very sophisticated concept . . . children can't grasp it. So you give it to them in nice digestible chunks, as themes or projects. You teach them about revolutions, or civil wars, or whatever.'¹³⁰

The dating of events, not long ago the *sine qua non* of historical knowledge, is so passé that most French schoolchildren were said to know neither that the French Revolution began in 1789 nor what century that year was in. 'They ask me a question, 16-year-olds', says an English history teacher, 'the Hundred Years' War, was that in 1914–18?' Another fifteen-year-old located the Battle of Hastings 'sometime between Robin Hood and when Alfred burned the cakes'.¹³¹ Many American schoolchildren know only two dates, 1492 and the 4th of July, and not what happened at either.¹³² Children turned off by chronology seem incapable of conceiving continuity. 'You know the 18th century?' Jenny Diski's sixteen-year-old asks her teacher. 'Was it before or after the war?' She had never connected the two; in her world-view 'there was only either pure narrative or disembodied detail'.¹³³

Temporal order is *terra incognita* to youngsters unmoored in the twenty-first century. Few have any sense of a datable past, virtually none of time before their grandparents' day. As one youngster said when told a building was 400 years old, not 100 as he had thought, 'Old is old, it doesn't matter how old'.¹³⁴ Lack of a chronological frame of reference deprives children today of the 'arc of connectedness' set by traditional time-lines.¹³⁵ 'Our [own] sense of chronology is so deeply ingrained', say British history teachers, that we can hardly grasp 'the difficulties encountered by those who do not have it'. They have been robbed, charges an American archivist, not only of knowledge about the past but of the ability to *sense* the past.¹³⁶

In forsaking dates much is lost; events are jumbled into a grab-bag of epochs and empires, significant figures and social movements cut adrift from context. 'In the minds of modern illiterates . . . who know how to read and write and even teach in schools and

¹³⁰ Penelope Lively, *The Road to Lichfield* (Heinemann, 1977), 87, 188. I conflate the exchange with the subsequent retelling.

¹³¹ Thomas Kamm, 'French debate teaching of history', *IHT*, 11 Apr. 1980: 6; Brian Moynahan, 'Teaching: it's trendy to be trad', *Sunday Times* 10 Feb. 1985: 15; Shemilt, 'Drinking an ocean and pissing a cupfull', in Symcox and Wilschut, eds., *National History Standards*.

¹³² Rosenberg and Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, 197.

¹³³ Jenny Diski, 'On the existence of Mount Rushmore and other improbabilities' (1993), in *The Vanishing Princess* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), 169–77. See Simon Schama, 'Fine-cutting Clio', *Public Historian* 25:3 (2003): 15–25 at 17.

¹³⁴ Reid Bishop, 'The Perception and Importance of Time in Architecture' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Surrey, 1982), 149, 190.

¹³⁵ Harry Belafonte interview in Mary Willis, 'Daylight come', *Modern Maturity* 45:3 (May–June 2000): 87.

¹³⁶ Historical Association, *History 14–19: Report and Recommendations* (London, 2005), sec. 5.4.12; Richard J. Cox, *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal* (Scarecrow Press, 2003), 210.

at universities, history is present but blurred, in a state of strange confusion', charged Nobelist Czeslaw Milosz. 'Molière becomes a contemporary of Napoleon, Voltaire a contemporary of Lenin.'¹³⁷ So-called thematic history – 'Revolutions' that lump the Puritan with the French, the American, the Russian, the Cuban – scants the obdurate reality that people at *each* of these times lived lives, acted from motives, and fashioned milieux distinctively their own.

Understanding the past demands awareness of temporal location. To clarify things in context, to capture the essential individuality of past events, requires a chronological framework. History taught as 'glittering pearls of Romans, cavemen, the battles of the First World War, medieval monks, and Stonehenge, suspended in temporal, non-causative isolation, hardly enhance[s] appreciation of the necklace of time'.¹³⁸ The pearls of history accrue value not merely from being many and lustrous, but from being sequentially strung; the narrative confers a conformity that ennobles the necklace.

To be sure, the linear narrative constrains historical understanding, forcing the auditor or reader to stay on a single track from start to finish. *Awareness* of the past involves far more than linear movement. Myriad social and cultural circumstances defy or complicate a narrative in continual flux with histories of other peoples, other institutions, other ideas. The past is too multiform and reflexive to be wholly conveyed in one-dimensional story lines. History hence increasingly ditches the straightforward, unilinear, annalistic framework. Lucidity may favour not recounting past acts at particular times, but scanting or coalescing many events, continually violating temporal sequence.

Such 'polychronicity' captures historical realities missed by old-style sequential simplicity. The new history attracts 'because its mode of cognition approximates the reality of everyday life; most readers view the past in the same manner as they comprehend their own existence' – an interwoven, overlapping set of stories.¹³⁹ Just as we think back and cast ahead in recapitulating memories, so do historical narratives backtrack to clarify (or else undermine) causality and amplify hindsight. So doing, however, risks confusing past events with accounts of those events.

Historians latterly rediscovered the virtues of narrative. But they mainly eschew the once-popular broad sweep over entire cultures and epochs, now condemned as simplistically univocal. Instead, emulating the comprehensive details and narrative sweep that make Tolstoy's *War and Peace* so forcefully gripping, they scrutinize particular events and arenas circumscribed in time and space and personae – George R. Stewart's *Pickett's Charge* (1959), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's handful of Pyrenean peasants in fourteenth-century *Montaillou* (1976), Carlo Ginzburg's deluded miller in *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), Laura Thatcher Ulrich's *The Midwife's Tale* (1990), Davis's seventeenth-century women of divers faiths and fortunes (*Women on the*

¹³⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, 'Nobel lecture, 1980', *NYRB*, 5 Mar. 1981: 12.

¹³⁸ Peter J. Fowler, 'Archaeology, the public and the sense of the past', in David Lowenthal and Marcus Binney, eds., *Our Past before Us* (London: Temple Smith, 1981), 56–68 at 67.

¹³⁹ James Henretta, 'Social history as lived and written', *AHR* 84 (1979): 1293–1322 at 1318–19. See Munz, *Shapes of Time*, 28–43.

Margins, 1995), Jonathan Spence's late Ming dynasty aesthete and chronicler (*Return to Dragon Mountain*, 2007).

Dwelling on the lives and loves of the poor and previously obscure, often unknown, armed with sources and insights derived from art and fiction and symbolism, micro-history sheds light on the psyches of past peoples, the hidden dynamics of past communities, the interplay between beliefs and values and social relations.¹⁴⁰ But narrowed focus may make such case studies eccentric rather than characteristic. The 'sheer interest and intensity of their particular stories overwhelm their larger significance', suggests Gordon Wood, 'turning them into little trees in search of a forest'.¹⁴¹ Seldom relating the particular lives and events they treat to larger trends, they fragment awareness of the past, lending it an anachronistic likeness to an exoticized present.

These trends – multivocality, polychronicity, abandonment of grand narrative – share postmodern history's relativistic dubiety about all knowledge, and hence its aversion to causal judgement. Given the multiform shifting ground of history's manifold actors and interpreters, it becomes safer and humbler to avoid inquiry into motives and aims, along with their temporal contexts. But to so confine history deprives it of its true significance: what events meant to people then and afterward.

Past vs. present: emergence of the foreign country

This book's title declared the past an alien land; back then, L. P. Hartley's *Go-Between* told us, people did things differently. The remembered past seems less a foreign than a neighbourly realm supporting present hopes and dreams, aims and plans. And belief that the historical past is distinct from the present is not innate; it is acquired, and often uncertain, incomplete, or wholly absent. Hartley's view is recurrently contested. Some, like Virginia Woolf's Mrs Swithin, feel past–present differences trivial. Others attribute a common humanity to people past and present but, like English teenage history students, dismiss pre-moderns in primitive surroundings as 'closer to monkeys in them days', their weird beliefs and practices explained by moral and intellectual inferiority.¹⁴²

Where knowledge is transmitted only by voice or gesture, no records exist, and no relics survive or are seen as such, awareness of bygone times depends on present accounts. Whatever may have in fact changed, past and present are not differentiated. In Anglo-Saxon England 'remembered truth was flexible and up to date, because no ancient custom could be proved older than the memory of the oldest living wise man',

¹⁴⁰ Lawrence Stone, 'The revival of narrative' (1979), in *The Past and the Present Revisited* (Routledge, 1987), 74–96; Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993): 10–35; Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (Yale, 2013), ix–xi, 187–9, 197–201.

¹⁴¹ Wood, *The Purpose of the Past*, 129.

¹⁴² Hartley, *The Go-Between*; 174–5; Woolf, *Between the Acts*; Denis Shemilt, 'Beauty and the philosopher: empathy in history and classroom', in A. K. Dickinson et al., eds., *Learning History* (Heinemann, 1984), 39–84 at 49; Peter Lee, 'Fused horizons? UK research into students' second-order ideas in history', in Holger Thünemann et al., eds., *History of Researching History Education* (Schwalbach, Germany: Wochenschau, 2013).

writes Michael Clanchy; 'hence there was no conflict between past and present practice'.¹⁴³ Some oral societies consider the present merely a continuation of an all-encompassing past; in others the present pre-empts attention and the past vanishes unremarked. Neither truly distinguish past from present. The past 'is not felt as an itemized terrain', concluded Walter Ong. 'It is the domain of the ancestors, a resonant source for renewing awareness of present existence.'¹⁴⁴ Absent textual relics, oral communities rely on present-day narrators to convey that ancestral domain, or indeed any past prior to living memory.

Unlike oral myth and memory, historical understanding rests on *past* accounts in the form of eyewitness testimonies or subsequent chronicles. Such accounts need be neither accurate or impartial (and seldom are); their historical salience inheres in coming from earlier times and voices. 'What is handed down . . . in a text is transmitted like nothing else that comes down to us from the past';¹⁴⁵ the written word is uniquely durable, portable, and replicable. 'The pastness of the past depends upon a historical sensibility that can hardly begin to operate without permanent written records'.¹⁴⁶ Yet not even such records assure that sensibility.

Although durable records make patent the distinction between past and present, Western savants long resolutely denied it. 'Any linear . . . history, irreversible and cumulative', asserts a Norwegian polymath, 'will leave the past irrevocably behind, more and more "foreign"'.¹⁴⁷ But for medieval scholars past otherness was heresy. Scripture was sacred truth valid for all time. Allegedly ancient textual evidence of difference must have been misread or fabricated to instil diabolical error. Gospel certitudes delayed historical insights in Christendom for nearly two millennia.¹⁴⁸

Medieval historians largely ignored or anachronized the past's strangeness to reassure themselves that nothing fundamental had really changed. Yet they were intermittently aware of (and even deliberately perpetrated) anachronisms to shore up some patron's or monastic order's claim to nobility or priority. For example, the twelfth-century Abbot Wibald veered between atemporal rhetoric and sophisticated time-twisting; for him 'the past was truly like a foreign country', but only in Douglas Adams's sense that 'they do things exactly the same there'.¹⁴⁹

Common to medieval and early-modern devotees was detestation of change, which either had not or ought not to have occurred. All change was degradation. Reformation divines and Renaissance savants appalled by medieval changes sought to return to original biblical and patristic purity. Absent the sainted men and holy wonders of

¹⁴³ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 233.

¹⁴⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (1982; Routledge, 2002), 97.

¹⁴⁵ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 96.

¹⁴⁶ Goody and Watt, 'Consequences of literacy', 34.

¹⁴⁷ Galtung, 'Western deep thinking', 96.

¹⁴⁸ Magne Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 2: *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

¹⁴⁹ Jean Dunbabin, 'Discovering a past for the French aristocracy', 1–14, and Timothy Reuter, 'Past, present and no future in the *regnum Teutonicum*', 15–36 at 36, in Paul Magdalino, ed., *Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Hambledon Press, 1992); Douglas Adams, *Life, the Universe, and Everything* (1982; Del Rey, 1985), 85.

distant antiquity, wrote the twelfth-century monk Ordericus Vitalis, moral decay mounted, and as the world neared its end ‘all the historian can do is record crimes and more crimes’.¹⁵⁰

Christianity brought sacred history into secular annals. But rather than secular time thereby becoming historical, it got swallowed up within eternal, immutable, and changeless sacred time. Transcendent import made Christ’s life, death, and resurrection ritually ever present. Scriptural rhetoric denied and cancelled change over time; Jerome’s Vulgate (c. 400) was esteemed because fathers and grandfathers had read and spoken the same words.¹⁵¹ Even when too archaic to comprehend, its durability ensured to posterity the necessary signs of salvation.¹⁵² ‘What was remembered was a universal truth, not the sensual particulars of the disordered and meaningless past.’ History was purged (blanched, the Cistercians put it) of all but Scripture’s universal experiences. Abolishing historical or mutable time united the believer with the time of direct revelation. Christian history anticipated and portended sacred eternity.¹⁵³

Temporal uniformity had to be avowed lest neologisms unravel the fabric of faith. Time’s sacred chain led from Christ to the Elders who knew him, to those who knew the Apostles, to the literal texts of their words and deeds, to a consensual Vulgate, and to the martyrs and their relics. That chain ensured the sacred past’s total survival. Hence historicity was denied, any seeming novelty declared an original truth. The divinely completed past, insisted Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1140), made any new doctrine or practice *ipso facto* wrong, any innovation presumptuous.¹⁵⁴ History was a unified Christian drama intolerant of secular temporal change.

Thus, secular history was effectively annulled. To the Spanish priest Orosius, Alaric’s sack of Rome and subsequent Goth incursions were trivial events, for the miseries of all peoples in all ages were essentially the same. In medieval eyes the Roman Empire endured in essence in the Holy Roman Empire; the Corpus Christianum was metaphysically ‘one single world in which past, present and future were effectively co-existent’.¹⁵⁵

‘The men of those ages had no past’, concluded a Victorian chronicler. Apart from family lineage, Le Roy Ladurie’s French peasants ‘lived in a kind of “island in time”, even more cut off from the past than from the future’. As Raymond de l’Aire of Tignac put it in the early fourteenth century, ‘There is no other age than ours.’¹⁵⁶ As late as 1521, that

¹⁵⁰ Ordericus Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (1140), quoted in Aron J. Gurevitch, *Categories of Medieval Culture* (1972; Routledge, 1985), 123.

¹⁵¹ Anthony Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness* (Oxford, 1991), 9; Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 97.

¹⁵² M. T. Clanchy, ‘Reading the signs at Durham Cathedral’, in Karen Schousboe and Mogens Trolle Larsen, eds., *Literacy and Society* (Copenhagen: Akademisk, 1989), 171–82 at 171.

¹⁵³ Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories*, 324, 186; Jean-Claude Schmitt, ‘Appropriating the future’, in A. J. Burrow and Ian P. Wei, eds., *Medieval Futures* (Boydell, 2000), 3–18 at 16.

¹⁵⁴ ‘To the Canons of Lyons, on the conception of Mary’, in *Some Letters of Saint Bernard* (London, 1904), 307, and ‘Sermons on *The Song of Songs*’, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 207–78 at 262.

¹⁵⁵ Paulus Orosius, *Historiarum adversus paganos, The Anglo-Saxon Version* (c. 417; London, 1773), 49–52, 85, 238; Kemp, *Estrangement of the Past*, 33. See Gurevitch, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, 100–1.

¹⁵⁶ E. A. Freeman, *The Preservation and Restoration of Ancient Monuments* (Oxford, 1852), 16–17; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou* (1975; London: Braziller, 2008), 284.

future wholesale innovator Henry VIII asserted that no true novelty was possible.¹⁵⁷ Anachronisms later derogated as implausible were highly regarded by medieval scholars. Showing 'a Jesus not of a distant, foreign past, but of an eternal present', they reinforced the conceit of a Christ who had died not just in His own, but in *their* own world and time. In the medieval view only eternal substances were true and worth knowing. Thus, tradition accumulated by denying its accumulations, and declaring its innovations ancient and original.¹⁵⁸

Yet early-modern like medieval authors routinely modernized biblical and Roman materials. English humanists recognized classical texts as products of another culture, but one to which they felt such close affinity that they lacked 'any sense of the past as a foreign country', concludes Quentin Skinner. 'Having dusted down the ancient texts they exhibit almost no interest' in trying to understand them in the context of their times. 'On the contrary, they approach them as if they are contemporary documents with an almost wholly unproblematic relevance to their own circumstances.'¹⁵⁹

The Reformation and the Renaissance continued to detest change, but instead of pretending it was absent, found its corruptions ubiquitous. 'Where medieval history condemned innovation and denied it had occurred, Luther condemned innovation and saw it everywhere.'¹⁶⁰ For humanists (Chapter 4), the evil novelty was the retrogression that cost the Dark Ages the classical legacy. For religious reformers, the evil novelty was the Satanic corruption that destroyed Christianity's original innocence. Both evils must be expunged to retrieve the pure source of inspiration, Christ and the classics, after which nothing would ever change again.

Humanist historians who rebelled against the divine authority of the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire – both pope and emperor claimed communion with changeless eternity – were deemed sacrilegious. But they contended, and for the most part even believed, that 'far from breaking with the past, they were reviving it', writes Constantin Fasolt.

They were doing nothing but telling the truth, except to tell it better. . . . Maintaining that their interpretation of the texts was merely a better understanding of the same ancient sources on which the authorities relied (only more of them, and in more authentic form), they were oblivious to the charge of heresy. The continuity with ancient truths in which they saw themselves confirmed them in the good conscience that they were right.

The self-deception was crucial alike to their physical survival and their persuasive certitude. But 'fear of authority thus contaminated history with a subliminal degree of dishonesty', concludes Fasolt, 'that has never been altogether shed' and lingers on in the illusion of objectivity.¹⁶¹

For Catholic theologians, secular history since the Apostles had changed nothing; for Protestant reformers, intervening centuries marked a dreadful fall from grace. This

¹⁵⁷ Henry VIII, *Defence of the Seven Sacraments* (1521; New York, 1908).

¹⁵⁸ Kemp, *Estrangement of the Past*, 50, 79.

¹⁵⁹ Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996), 40.

¹⁶⁰ Kemp, *Estrangement of the Past*, 82.

¹⁶¹ Fasolt, *Limits of History*, 17–23.

narrowed reformers' range of historical empathy. Whereas the medieval mind could identify intellectually with all past Christian generations, Protestants could identify with none but the earliest; all since the Apostles had been in error. 'A person of the 14th century could experience complete intellectual communion with the past . . . a person of the 17th felt that all who had come before had lived in ignorance.' Only the primitive and the classical were esteemed.¹⁶²

The new shape of time thus estranged all but the distant past. Restoring the Golden Age – the primitive church, the classical vision – was Protestants' and humanists' parallel and often conjoined aim; 'to awake all antiquity', as Francis Bacon put it, required rediscovering 'the ancient authors, both in divinity and in humanity'.¹⁶³ But the new history was still anti-historical in essence. Truth was eternal and unchanging, innovation diabolical, reform simply reversion to original timeless perfection.

The Pilgrims who fled the Old World to escape the sinful present epitomized such sacred return. Plymouth founder William Bradford saw the past as a human invention, history as idolatry; recovering gospel purity required complete severance from history.¹⁶⁴ Subsequent sages, religious and secular alike, reiterated the longing for divinely inspired truth freed from the woeful annals of humanity. 'Foregoing generations perceived God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes', grieved Emerson; the occluding past was oppressive and crippling.¹⁶⁵ Restorationists from Millerites through Mormons and beyond posited a blessed primitive church providentially reanimated in their own latter-day sects. Most sheltered in the sacred fixity of their chosen Scripture. In a common statement of faith, the Authorized Version 'preserves the very words of God in the form in which He wished them to be represented in the universal language of these last days: English'. Not content with anathematizing historical change in the past, Baptists rule out changes to come: 'The King James Bible supersedes any extant Greek or Hebrew text, including any texts *that may be discovered in the future*.'¹⁶⁶

Awareness of antiquity as another time separated from their own was a paramount insight for Petrarch and Erasmus. Renaissance humanists saw the classical past as *another* country, but one they sought to make less foreign, usefully illustrative of enduring virtues and vices. As noted in Chapter 4, many humanists denied or ignored Erasmus's perception of historical change. Yet the more clearly they perceived antiquity, the less it resembled their own world. And when Enlightenment *philosophes* again rediscovered the classical world, they realized how remote it was, how unattainable the model of

¹⁶² Kemp, *Estrangement of the Past*, 82, 104.

¹⁶³ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning, Book I* (1605; Clarendon Press, 1885), iv, 28.

¹⁶⁴ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, (Xlibris, 2006), bk 1 (1630; 1856), 27–124; bk 2 (1647–50; Boston, 1912), 125–429. Bradford always contended there was 'no new thing under the sun' ('First Dialogue' (1648), quoted in Mark L. Sargent, 'William Bradford's "Dialogue" with history', *New England Quarterly* 65 (1992): 389–421 at 416). But Book II (1647–50) moves from viewing history as fixed and preordained to circumstantial and contingent, 'so uncertain are the mutable things of this unstable world' (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, 170). See Walter P. Wenska, 'Bradford's two histories', *Early American Literature* 13 (1978): 151–64 at 158–9.

¹⁶⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature', in *CW*, 1:3.

¹⁶⁶ 'The King James Bible: the authorized version', av1611godsword.yuku.com/topic/1258.

antique harmony. Though its relics abounded, the iconic past became truly irrecoverable.¹⁶⁷ And the conjoint impact of the French and the Industrial Revolutions made more recent pasts likewise irrecoverable. Thus, slowly and with much angst, came about 'the complex, paradoxical, and drawn-out process by which humanity gradually learned that the past is a foreign country'.¹⁶⁸

That perception was a plant of slow growth nurtured by secularism, comparative scrutiny of sources, and dawning awareness of anachronism. Munz calls it 'one of the greatest changes which have come over our view of the world'.¹⁶⁹ Yet influential school texts such as Johannes Buno's *Idea historiae universalis* (Lüneburg 1672) left past and present wholly undifferentiated.¹⁷⁰ Even beyond the eighteenth century, the past remained for many a seamless whole scarcely distinguishable from the present, human motivations the same in all epochs. 'Instead of having a history, [people] regarded themselves as having an unchanging nature or essence.'¹⁷¹ English Whig historians stressed the familiarity and continuity of pasts they found exemplary. The immemorial open-air gatherings of Swiss cantons vividly conjoined past and present for Freeman; Macaulay witnessed the passage of the 1831 Reform Bill as 'like seeing Caesar stabbed in the Senate House, or seeing Oliver Cromwell taking the mace from the table'; late-Victorian classicists found Homer's world a mirror image of their own, and fondly ascribed their own thoughts to Plato and Aristotle.¹⁷² Organic metaphor stressed such analogies: the seeds of the present seemed immanent in the past, past effects everywhere evident. Today's obsession with roots and DNA, ancestors foreshadowing descendants, family traits forever ingrained, reflects similar essentialist premises.

Countering cults of continuity and recurrence, however, comparative insights revealed the extraordinary diversity of historical experience. Herder and his followers assigned every epoch as well as each culture its own unique character. Uniformity over time came to seem a hoary error, the present of necessity unlike any past. The Romantic imagination delighted less in antiquity's parallels than in its exotic remoteness.¹⁷³ The past really was dead, noted the Victorian littérateur James Anthony Froude; not intimacy but inaccessibility made medieval and even early-modern England poignant:

In the alteration of our own character, we have lost the key which would interpret the characters of our fathers, and the great men even of our own English history before the Reformation seem to us almost like the fossil skeletons of another order of beings . . . Now it is all gone; . . . and between

¹⁶⁷ Myron P. Gilmore, *Humanists and Jurists* (Harvard, 1963), 14, 95–6, 101, 109; Jean Starobinski, 1789: *The Emblems of Reason* (Virginia, 1982), 272.

¹⁶⁸ Grafton, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 279.

¹⁶⁹ Munz, *Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge*, ix–x.

¹⁷⁰ John Butt, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity* (Cambridge, 2010), 118–19.

¹⁷¹ Zachary Sayre Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Johns Hopkins, 2011), 272.

¹⁷² Edward A. Freeman, *The Growth of the English Constitution from the Earliest Times* (London, 1872), 1–8; T. B. Macaulay to Thomas Flower Ellis, 30 Mar. 1831, in *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay* (Cambridge, 1974), 2: 9; Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (Yale, 1981), 175–86, 418–27. See Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge*, 42–9, 192, 223.

¹⁷³ Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 145; Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (Penguin, 1981), 175–84, 197ff.; Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot* (Yale, 1981); Robert Harbison, *Deliberate Regression* (Knopf, 1980), 139–40.

us and the old English there lies a gulf of mystery which the prose of the historian will never adequately bridge. They cannot come to us, and our imagination can but feebly penetrate to them.¹⁷⁴

The pace of visible change made the past not just remote but fearsomely different. History diversified also grew ephemeral: views of the past were now in flux. 'Time has now become so fluidly rapid. It is not possible to keep up', remarked the novelist Dorothea Schlegel in 1809; between one day and the next 'lies an entire historical epoch'. Goethe concurred: 'In the same town one will hear in the evening an account of a significant event different from that heard in the morning.'¹⁷⁵ A particularly poignant gulf alienated the present from the *ancien régime*. The speed with which everything – landscape, customs, manners, fortunes, loyalties, allegiances – seemed to change left survivors of the French Revolution and its aftermath adrift, aware that the world of their forebears was forever gone. Trying to make historical sense of the times, Chateaubriand in 1797 realized that whatever he had written during the day was by night already overtaken by events; the French Revolution had no previous example.¹⁷⁶ 'Never before in a period of ten years', wrote a German observer in 1799, 'have such a large number of important and intertwined events, such a rapid sequence of transformations and restless movement, and such piled-up revolutions taken place'.¹⁷⁷

The dissolution of religious orders, abrupt endings of the French monarchy and the Holy Roman Empire, Napoleonic incursions into Europe and beyond, the rise of new sovereign states, brought ordinary people into the flow of history and severed them from the traditional timeless past, many as hapless refugees. Before, daily and annual rounds of time's cycle had conserved the rural past pretty much intact; from 1789 and 1815 on, time's arrow flew. 'The past was conceived more and more as something bygone and lost, and also strange and mysterious, and though partly accessible, always remote.' And people of the 1820s and 1830s, added Tocqueville, 'do not resemble their fathers, – nay they perpetually differ from themselves, for they live in a state of incessant change of place, feeling, and fortunes'.¹⁷⁸

The frenzy of material novelty left George Eliot breathless.

Those old leisurely times, when the boat, gliding sleepily along the canal, was the newest locomotive wonder, [are] gone – gone where the spinning-wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow wagons . . . [They tell you] the steam-engine is to create leisure for mankind. Do not believe them; it only creates a vacuum for eager thought to rush in. Even idleness is eager for amusement;

¹⁷⁴ James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (1856; rev. edn. London, 1893), 1: 3, 62.

¹⁷⁵ Dorothea Schlegel to Sulpiz Boisserée, quoted in Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present* (Harvard, 2004), 93; Goethe to Ludwig I of Bayern, 17 Dec. 1829, quoted in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past* (1979; Columbia, 2004), 208.

¹⁷⁶ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Essai historique, politique et moral sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes* (1797; Paris, 1861), 249. See François Furet, 'L'ancien régime et la révolution', in Nora, *Lieux de mémoire* (1992), III, 1: 107–39.

¹⁷⁷ Friedrich von Gentz, *Politische Paradoxien* (1799), quoted in Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 27.

¹⁷⁸ Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 27–9, 5; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1834–40; Cambridge, MA, 1863), 2: 69.

prone to excursion-trains . . . and cursory peeps through microscopes. . . . Old Leisure was quite a different personage . . . contemplative . . . quiet . . . sauntering . . . sheltering.¹⁷⁹

Accelerating change fuelled fears of society spinning out of control. 'The series of events comes swifter and swifter', wrote Carlyle, 'velocity increasing as the square of time', foreboding a fearsome future.¹⁸⁰ Writers from Tennyson and Ruskin and Hardy to Spengler and Wells likened the decline of the West to the death of the universe. *Fin-de-siècle* forecasts of universal winter, reprieved by Rutherford's 1904 discovery of the sun's radioactive energy, later resurfaced as fiery fate by nuclear fission. The Bomb and its dread progeny have since made doom-laden prognoses common coin.¹⁸¹

Thus, in the span of a single century the past ceased to be familiar and omnipresent, becoming remote and lost in nostalgic mists. History was more and more seen as a relentless, often painful alienation from the past. By the end of the nineteenth century objectively minded historians had erected a 'Chinese wall between past and present', in Raphael Samuel's phrase. And 'a progressively widening and deepening knowledge of antiquity increasingly rendered it dead and buried'.¹⁸²

Regarding the past as a foreign country came at a steep cost. Distanced and differentiated, it ceased to be a valuable source of lessons and became a midden of anachronisms. Many historians were at a loss to discern its causal links to the present. 'To live in any period of the past', as a medievalist thought a historian should aim to do, 'is to be so overwhelmed with the sense of difference as to confess oneself unable to conceive how the present has become what it is'.¹⁸³

Against this alien past's reduced relevance, compensatory benefits emerged. With the loss of its exemplary role, the past ceased to exert so crippling an influence. To bring about the 'death of the past' and thus relieve the present of its burden became an avowed historical aim.¹⁸⁴ 'Explaining, and therefore lightening, the pressure that the past must exercise upon the present' was for Maitland the duty of historical research. 'Today we study the day before yesterday, in order that yesterday may not paralyze today, and today may not paralyze tomorrow.' Benedetto Croce concurred: history liberated humanity from slavery to the past.¹⁸⁵

Recognizing the past as foreign also enhanced appreciation of hindsight. The past as depicted in history becomes more definitive and magisterial than the present, for hindsight clarifies yesterday as it cannot clarify today. The consequences of the past are at least partly

¹⁷⁹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859; Chicago, 1888), 461–2.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Carlyle, 'Shooting Niagara: and after?' (1867), in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1888), 4: 586–627 at 590.

¹⁸¹ Jerome H. Buckley, *The Triumph of Time* (Harvard, 1967), 55–70; Gillian Beer, 'The death of the sun': Victorian solar physics and solar myth', in J. B. Bullen, ed., *The Sun Is God* (Clarendon Press, 1989), 159–80 at 171–3.

¹⁸² Raphael Samuel, 'On the methods of the History Workshop', *History Workshop* 9 (1980): 162–76 at 168; Schiffman, *Birth of the Past*, 273.

¹⁸³ V. H. Galbraith, 'Historical research and the preservation of the past', *History*, n.s. 22 (1938): 303–14 at 312.

¹⁸⁴ J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (1969; Penguin, 1973).

¹⁸⁵ F. W. Maitland, 'A survey of the century' (1901), in *The Collected Papers* (Cambridge, 1911), 3: 432–9 at 439; Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London, 1941), 44.

worked out and revealed; the results of present acts are yet to be seen. Unlike current accounts, those that 'history presents to us, both of men and of events, are generally complete', wrote the prescient Bolingbroke. 'We see [men] at their whole length in history . . . through a medium less partial . . . than that of [immediate] experience.'¹⁸⁶

No past is ever entirely over and done with, of course; whatever our present retrospective wisdom, new insights ever unfold. But any degree of hindsight makes the past more definitively known than the present, as the Victorian writer Elizabeth Gaskell ironically observed:

In looking back to the last century, it appears curious to see how little our ancestors had the power of putting two things together, and perceiving either the discord or the harmony thus produced. Is it because we are farther off from those times, and have, consequently, a greater range of vision? Will our descendants have a wonder about us, such as we have about the inconsistency of our forefathers, or a surprise about our blindness? . . . Such discrepancies ran through good men's lives in those days. It is well for us that we live at the present time, when everybody is logical and consistent.¹⁸⁷

Even more than memory, history clarifies, tidies, and elucidates. This is the point of Lewis Namier's paradox that historians 'imagine the past and remember the future'.¹⁸⁸ They explain what has happened through the lens of subsequent events, events that lay in that past's future.

That the passage of time clarifies the past for us but not for those who lived in it often goes unrecognized. 'Man proceeds in the fog. But when he looks back to judge people of the past, he sees no fog on their path', observed Milan Kundera.

From his present, which was their faraway future, their path looks perfectly clear to him, good visibility all the way. Looking back, he sees the path, he sees the people proceeding, he sees their mistakes, but not the fog . . . Who is more blind? Mayakovsky, who as he wrote his poem on Lenin did not know where Leninism would lead? Or we, who judge him decades later and do not see the fog that enveloped him? Mayakovsky's blindness is part of the general human condition. But for us not to see the fog on Mayakovsky's path is to forget what man is, forget what we ourselves are.¹⁸⁹

Narrative needs magnify temporal disparities. To make history intelligible, the historian can hardly resist giving the illusory impression that things had to happen more or less as they did. Knowing something of the past's outcome, the historian uses that knowledge to give a sense of fullness and completion. Only apocalyptic prophets describe the present in this way. Hence the authoritative flavour common in biographies. The biographer's revelatory hindsight yields an ordered clarity in marked contrast with the felt chaos of the biographee's actual life, as the imprecision of our own unfinished lives well corroborates.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, Letter II, I: 32.

¹⁸⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863; London, 1964), 58–9.

¹⁸⁸ Lewis Namier, *Conflicts: Studies in Contemporary History* (Macmillan, 1942), 70.

¹⁸⁹ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* (1992; HarperCollins, 1996), 238. Vladimir Mayakovsky's 'Lenin lived! Lenin lives! Lenin will live forever!' (1924) was constantly recited in Soviet schools.

¹⁹⁰ Helen Vendler, 'All too real', *NYRB*, 17 Dec. 1981: 32; Bromley, *Lost Narratives*, 60.

Yet hindsight merges past with present as well as differentiating them. To understand now what happened then, as distinct from what people in the past thought or wanted others to think was happening, requires our own current thinking. And just as present thoughts shape knowing of the past, so awareness of the past suffuses the present. A literary historian writes ‘not merely with his own generation in his bones’, in T. S. Eliot’s phrase, ‘but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order’.¹⁹¹

Eliot’s sense of past–present synchrony, however, resonates less and less nowadays among historians for whom the past remains a foreign country, and who feel it their mission to convey that alien strangeness to a public that prefers to deny it and is bent on domesticating the past. ‘The truly great historians lived in times . . . where the present . . . was so different from the past and so surprising that someone had to . . . sit down and puzzle out some sense from it all’, suggests historian-turned-novelist Philippa Gregory.¹⁹²

History, fiction, and faction

I cannot help but be a story-teller, it is my way of describing the world; but I have learned to be a historian, it is my way of understanding the world.

Philippa Gregory, 2005¹⁹³

The most pellucid pearls of historical narrative are formed in fiction’s shells. Ever since Scott and Dumas, historical romance has trumped history texts in memorably conveying the past.¹⁹⁴ Novelists use history as a theatre for made-up people, fictionalize real lives, insert imaginary episodes among actual events. To give ‘as complete an illusion as possible of having lived in the past’, Hervey Allen felt the novelist ‘*under obligation* to alter facts, circumstances, people, and even dates’.¹⁹⁵ Some fictional pasts seem faithful depictions of former times, others exotically unlike them. Either way, novelists commonly outdo historians in making readers aware of the past. And the fictional past has another advantage: because it is contrived, it *must* make sense. Contrariwise, history must in part baffle. ‘Fiction makes us feel more metaphysically comfortable’, notes Eco, because ‘in fiction every secret message can be deciphered’, since created by authorial intent.¹⁹⁶ Victorians portrayed fictional life as ‘a coherent tale, summarizable, pointed, and finally moralizable’. Paradoxically, it is only in the fictional narrative that we can be absolutely certain about something. In actual history we wonder, with Eco, ‘whether there is a message and, if so, whether [it] makes sense’.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the individual talent’, in *Selected Essays* (Faber and Faber, 1934), 13–22 at 14.

¹⁹² Philippa Gregory, ‘Born a writer’, *History Workshop Journal* 59:1 (Spring 2005): 237–42 at 239.

¹⁹³ Gregory, ‘Born a writer: forged as a historian’, 242.

¹⁹⁴ Scott’s star has faded from ‘the most popular and influential author on the planet’ to the ‘Great Unread’ (Alan Taylor, ‘Did Walter Scott invent Scotland?’ *TLS*, 8 Dec. 2010; Kathryn Sutherland, ‘Factory settings’, *TLS*, 27 Sept. 2013: 3–5).

¹⁹⁵ Hervey Allen, ‘History and the novel’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 173:2 (Feb. 1944): 119–20.

¹⁹⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Book of Legendary Lands* (Maclehose, 2013), 440, and *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Harvard, 1994), 116.

¹⁹⁷ Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves* (Oxford, 2001), 7; Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, 116.

Conversing with the past points up a cognate distinction between history and fiction. Desire for intense personal contact with bygone times animates practitioners of both, was 'what drew us in the first place to the books we chose to read . . . the lives we chose to live'. And literary historians 'seized with the conviction that someone we do not know is addressing us personally with urgency and eloquence' continue to pursue that dream despite knowing that the dead cannot really hear or speak.¹⁹⁸ Even when 'all I could hear was my own voice', recalled Stephen Greenblatt, 'even then I did not abandon my desire'.

My own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead, [many] uncannily full of the will to be heard, had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves . . . in the voices of the living . . . It is paradoxical, of course, to seek the living will of the dead in fictions, . . . where there was no bodily being to begin with. But those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations, [for they self-consciously] anticipate and compensate for the vanishing of the actual life that has empowered them.¹⁹⁹

Crucial to the discipline of history, however, is 'the assumption of an absolute distinction between past and present, a kind of primal rupture that turns the dead not into conversational partners so much as ever-elusive objects of desire', writes David Harlan. The dead are not reincarnated but given 'scriptural entombment'. And historians fear that literary enthusiasts 'who throw themselves into their own narrative . . . silence the dead by domesticating them . . . forc[ing] them to speak in our voices rather than their own'.²⁰⁰

In according fabrication parity with truth, the fictional analogy troubles many historians. To be sure, they themselves cannot avoid rhetorical invention. Like novelists tellers of tales, they nonetheless distance themselves as *truthful* chroniclers. Open to critical peer scrutiny, historians must cleave scrupulously to past realities; writers of fiction can be largely heedless of such constraints. The reader of a history of the French Revolution expects conformity with and confirmation by well-attested sources; the reader of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* has few such demanding expectations.²⁰¹

Both the opposition and historians' dismay are recent, however. In former epochs, history and fiction often coalesced or were mutually supportive. Classical writers did distinguish *historia* (true narrative) from *fabula* (untrue), but fictive works such as the *Aeneid* and Aesop's fables were canonically admired. Indeed, fiction, which told what *might* have happened (and explained how), was deemed superior to history, prosaically limited to what *had* happened. Instancing Homer's *Iliad*, Erasmus praised pagan historians' fictional dialogues, 'for everyone accepts that they are allowed to put speeches into the mouths of their characters' (Erasmus allowed Christian historians less inventive scope). Style and language outranked factual fidelity; much history mattered less for *what* it said about the past than *how* it was said.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, "'Stay, illusion": on receiving messages from the dead', *PMLA* 118:3 (2003): 417–26 at 419, 414.

¹⁹⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (California, 1988), 1.

²⁰⁰ David Harlan, 'Reading, writing, and the art of history', *AHA Perspectives on History*, Nov. 2010: 37–8.

²⁰¹ Monika Otter, 'Functions of fiction in historical writing', in Partner, *Writing Medieval History*, 114–15.

²⁰² Charles William Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (California, 1983), 94–5, 135, 163–5; Desiderius Erasmus, *Copia* (1512), in CW, 24: 279–656 at 649; Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago, 1981), 488–90.

Medieval theorists saw the history/fiction distinction as linguistic. 'Connoting clerical and scholarly seriousness of purpose, not to mention divine sanction', the use of Latin was suggestive of historical truth, whereas vernacular writing could be more openly and even playfully inventive. But many Latin histories were famously fictitious, and many vernacular writers claimed historicity. Moreover, in bracketing sober factual elements with saintly miracles and monstrous hybrid creatures, fiction no less than history might allegorically portray deeper moral or theological truths.²⁰³ 'The poetic lyre strikes a false note on the superficial rind of the letter', wrote the theologian Alain de Lille, 'but on a more profound level communicates . . . a secret of higher understanding . . . and sweeter kernel of truth'.²⁰⁴

The divorce of history from fiction followed early-modern concern with source accuracy. The two genres diverged into 'history' (actual events open to scrutiny from manifold sources) and 'poetry' or 'romance' (eschewing pretence to historical fidelity). Prose became the preferred genre of historical fact, poetry of fiction. 'The poet may say or sing things, not as they were but as they ought to have been', remarks *Don Quixote's* Samson, whereas 'the historian must write things . . . as they have been, without adding or taking aught from the truth'.²⁰⁵ For William Godwin 'true history consists in a delineation of consistent, human character', which the historian could not know; hence 'the writer of real history' was the imaginative romantic novelist.²⁰⁶ Restricted to known facts, historians abdicated bardic omniscience. And as history retreated to the arid confines of empirical rigour, fiction pre-empted the colourful and fanciful that historians relinquished. 'To make the past present, to bring the distant near . . . to invest with the reality of human flesh and blood . . . to call up our ancestors before us with all their peculiarities of language, manners, and garb, to show us over their houses, to seat us at their tables, to rummage their old-fashioned wardrobes', wrote Macaulay, 'these parts of the duty which properly belongs to the historian, have been appropriated by the historical novelist'.²⁰⁷

As history's handmaid, nineteenth-century fiction gained wide acclaim. Scott's imaginative empathy endeared the past; he showed 'bygone ages . . . actually filled by living men . . . with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach', extolled Carlyle, 'not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions'.²⁰⁸ The novelist recreated a vivified past. 'Out of the fictitious book I get the expression of the life of the time – the old times live again', attested Thackeray. 'Can the heaviest historian do more

²⁰³ Otter, 'Functions of fiction', 112–16.

²⁰⁴ Alain de Lille, *De Planctu Naturae* (1160/1180) quoted in David Rollo, 'William of Malmesbury, Gerbert of Aurillac and the excavation of the Campus Martius', in Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski et al., eds., *Translatio Studii* (Rodopi, 2000), 261–86 at 262.

²⁰⁵ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Johns Hopkins, 1997), xvi, 182, 191–2; Miguel de Cervantes, *History of Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1615; London, 1923), 2: 21. Historical truth, however, was deliberately slanted, a partisan record 'serving particular group interests' (Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, 193).

²⁰⁶ William Godwin, 'Of history and romance' (1797), appendix to *Things as They Are* (1794; Penguin, 1988), 359–74 at 372.

²⁰⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Hallam' (1828), in *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review* (London, 1903), 1: 115–202 at 115.

²⁰⁸ Thomas Carlyle, 'Sir Walter Scott' (1838), in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 3: 165–223 at 214.

for me?' Fiction went beyond history's momentous episodes to vibrant everyday life. His Henry Esmond 'would have History familiar rather than heroic'.²⁰⁹

No wonder the Marxist critic Georg Lukács commended Scott. The awakening of ordinary folk caught up in great events mattered more than the events themselves; in the humble annals of the poor, readers saw how past masses thought, felt, and acted. In quotidian lives 'great events' were rightly crowded out, wrote a reviewer of Scott, for 'a greater part of the time of the greater part of the people is spent in making love and money'.²¹⁰ Fiction not history expressed a people's true unique essence devoid of dross. Like landscape gardeners, novelists smoothed away history's rough contours and unified past incongruities.

Scholars turned novelist the better to convey the past. 'We write novels like history, and history like novels', in Disraeli's Mr Sievers's summation; 'all our facts are fancy, and all our imagination reality'. As priests Kingsley, Wiseman, and Newman penned historical fiction to impart spiritual lessons – the holiness of the medieval church, the need to revive it again – to the widest public. In means if not ends they saw eye to eye with Heine and Hegel, who praised novels for making the past accessible to the unlearned. Fiction was a virtue, the novelist's past more vital than the historian's *because partly made up*.²¹¹

Historical fiction's great champion was the historian Butterfield. 'The past as it exists for all of us is history synthesised by the imagination, and fixed into a picture by . . . fiction.' The historical novel let readers *feel* the past as formal history could not:

The life that fills the street with bustle, that makes every corner of a slum a place of wonder and interest, the life that is a sad and gay, weary and thrilling thing in every hillside cottage, is a dim blurred picture in a history. Because of this, history cannot come so near to human hearts and human passions as a good novel can; its very fidelity to facts takes it . . . farther away from the heart of things . . . To make a bygone age live again, history must not merely be eked out by fiction . . . it must be turned into a novel.²¹²

Not content to let the past tell its own tale, the hindsight-encumbered historian hauled it 'into relationships with the whole of subsequent development'. Barred from immersion in the past, the reader of history 'stands aside to compare it with the present'. Seeing from a distance a world finished and ended forcibly reminds him that he is *not* in the past. Conversely, fiction allied readers with people of the past, who could not know what was coming next.

²⁰⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1853), 94; W. M. Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852; Penguin, 1970), 46.

²¹⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1937; Penguin, 1981), 44; 'Francis Jeffrey, Tales of my landlord', *Edinburgh Review* (Mar. 1817): 528–35 at 533. See Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 31–7.

²¹¹ Benjamin Disraeli, *Vivian Grey* (1827; Teddington: Echo, 2007), 323; Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840–1880* (Macmillan, 1978), 15, 120–47, citing Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* (1852–3), Nicholas Wiseman's *Fabiola* (1854), and John Henry Newman's *Callista* (1855); Heine and Hegel cited in Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 57–61; Morse Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism* (South Carolina, 1970), 141.

²¹² Butterfield, *Historical Novel*, 22, 18, 23.

It is not enough to know that Napoleon won a certain battle; if history is to come back to us as a human thing we must see him on the eve of battle eagerly looking to see which way the dice will fall . . . The victory that is achieved on one day must not be regarded as being inevitable the night before . . . To the men of 1807 the year 1808 was a mystery and an unexplored tract; . . . to study the year 1807 remembering all the time what happened in 1808 . . . is to miss the adventure and the great uncertainties and the element of gamble in their lives; where we cannot help seeing the certainty of a desired issue, the men of the time were all suspense . . . History does not always give us [these] irrecoverable personal things; but we know they existed.

These 'are the very touches that are needed to turn history into a story'. Unlike history, fictional narrative could forget or transcend hindsight.²¹³

But never entirely. Butterfield to the contrary, historical fiction exhibits certain hindsight needs, not just to make the past intelligible but to reveal *some* matters not available to original eyewitnesses. Like historians, novelists cannot avoid portraying the past in present-day terms. 'To all situations one brings a modern spirit', in Goethe's words, 'for only in this way can we understand them and, indeed, bear to see them'.²¹⁴ Scott was frank about his modernizing. 'It is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject [be] translated into the manners as well as the language of the age we live in'.²¹⁵ His Anglo-Saxon and Norman characters not only spoke pretty much the English of Scott's grandparents' day, they explained history far more clearly than medieval folk could have done. But Scott did not confuse the twelfth with the sixteenth century', his anachronistic jumble of Elizabethan with medieval sources was deliberate.²¹⁶ Temporal juggling in historical fiction is not only desirable; it is unavoidable.

Butterfield assigned history and fiction clearly defined roles: 'To the historian the past is the whole process of development that leads up to the present; to the novelist it is a strange world to tell tales about'.²¹⁷ But as the ideal of scientific objectivity took hold in the late nineteenth century, professional historians faulted fiction. Initially inspired to explore the past by Walter Scott, Leopold von Ranke later renounced historical romance because he was dismayed by Scott's deliberately false portrayals of Charles the Bold and Louis XI in *Quentin Durward*.²¹⁸ Rebuking littérateurs for preferring fable to fact, *fin-de-siècle* historians denounced booming sales of popular historical narrative as vulgar fabrication. The 'noble dream' of objectivity divorced scholarly history from fiction.²¹⁹ And their subsequent reconciliation, fuelled by relativist disavowal of all historical truth and by historians' re-embrace of narrative, remains frail and flimsy, disconfiting to both.

²¹³ Ibid., 22–6.

²¹⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Teilnahme Goethes aus Manzoni' (1827), in *Gedenkausgabe der Werke* (1948–71), 14: 812–44 at 838.

²¹⁵ Walter Scott, 'Dedicatory epistle to the Rev. Dr. Dryasdust, F.A.S.' (1817), in *Ivanhoe* (1820; Boston, 1834), 3–15 at 8.

²¹⁶ Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 63; Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (California, 2007), 131.

²¹⁷ Butterfield, *Historical Novel*, 113.

²¹⁸ C. Veronica Wedgwood, 'The sense of the past' (1957), in *Truth and Opinion* (Collins, 1960), 27–8.

²¹⁹ Gregory M. Pfitzer, *Popular History and the Literary Marketplace* (Mississippi, 2006), 9–16, 64–7, 332–4; Novick, *That Noble Dream*.

Yet both history and fiction now claim to disown Butterfield's distinction. Each encroaches on the other's domain; history grows more like fiction, fiction more like history. And both restructure the past more profoundly than ever. Flashbacks, streams of consciousness, duplicitous narrators, and multiple endings decompose temporal flow. While *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is saturated with history, John Fowles let readers choose their preferred ending.²²⁰ The 1982 Booker prize for fiction went to Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, which the author termed a 'true history'; as the prize chairman temporized at the ensuing controversy, 'history is always a kind of fiction'.²²¹ Novelists enjoy confounding the two. 'There's no more fiction or nonfiction now, there's only narrative', asserted E. L. Doctorow, who called his novel *Ragtime* 'a false document'.²²² Novelists glory in overcoming 'inconsequential' distinctions between fact and fiction.

Convergence led compilers of historical fiction to term it 'more truthful than history itself', for history often pretends to be true but is false, while novelists simply say much of their past is 'true to life and much fictional'.²²³ Arrogating the past's 'inner' truths to themselves, some novelists deprecate historians' insights. 'Fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence', argued E. M. Forster.²²⁴ 'The novelist's 'imaginative truth ... transcends ... what the historian can give you', William Styron enlarged on Butterfield. 'An historian can tell you just what happened at Borodino, but only Tolstoy, often dispensing with facts, can tell you what it really was to be a soldier at Borodino.' Unlike the astute novelist who tells it like it really was, the historian is merely a shallow chronicler.²²⁵ A literary scholar lauds fiction as 'the higher reality, not limiting and arbitrary like historical truth'. Most dismissive is Gore Vidal's narrator: 'There is no history, only fictions of varying degrees of plausibility. What we think to be history is nothing but fiction.'²²⁶

Now inclined to doubt that history could ever achieve a wholly faithful account, some historians began to think it wrong even to try. They themselves constructed the past, charged postmodern relativists. 'Historical explanations are crafted forms', and

the most illuminating works of history are those governed by the most imaginative and capacious regulative fictions. ... The blurring of lines between history and fiction ought to humble historians, reminding them how fragmentary and oblique their view of the past must always be ... They might even acknowledge the truth-telling power of literary fictions.

²²⁰ Cushing Strout, *The Veracious Imagination*: (Wesleyan, 1981), 10, 18; Tony E. Jackson, 'Charles and the hopeful monster: postmodern evolutionary theory in "The French Lieutenant's Woman"', *Twentieth Century Literature* 43:2 (1997): 221–43.

²²¹ John Carey quoted in Michael Hulse, 'Virtue and the philosophic innocent: the British reception of *Schindler's Ark*', *Critical Quarterly* 25:4 (Dec. 1983): 43–52.

²²² E. R. Doctorow quoted in Barbara Foley, 'From U.S.A. to *Ragtime*: notes on the forms of historical consciousness in modern fiction', *American Literature* 50 (1978): 85–105 at 102, 99.

²²³ Daniel D. McGarry and Sarah H. White, *World Historical Fiction Guide* (Metuchen, NJ: Swallow Press, 1973), xx.

²²⁴ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, 1927), 98. See Nancy Partner, 'Historicity in an age of reality fictions', in Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, eds., *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago, 1995), 21–39.

²²⁵ William Styron in Ellison et al., 'Uses of history in fiction', 76.

²²⁶ Larzer Ziff quoted in Edwin McDowell, 'Fiction: often more real than fact', *NYT*, 16 July 1981: C21; Gore Vidal, 1876 (Heinemann, 1976), 196–7, 194.

For example, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* 'devastates positivist assumptions about linear causality and historical truth . . . but it also tells some profound historical truths about the "modernization" of a colonial society'.²²⁷

Being seen as 'higher' history, however, hobbles fiction's ability to retrieve the spirit of the past. In modernizing Edwardian notables, *Ragtime* subverts racial confrontations both back then and in Doctorow's 1960s. Anachronistic modern sensibilities in *The Sot-Weed Factor*'s (1960) picaresque seventeenth-century world suggest that John Barth 'does not believe in such a thing as history even while his narrative pretends to evoke it'.²²⁸ Much recent historical fiction sets out not to clarify but to scarify, making the past fearsomely unfamiliar. By showing us how little we know the past, they further estrange us. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), Bernice Morgan's *Cloud of Bone* (2007) serve up histories so brutally inhumane as to be not only unrecognizable but unknowable, too agonizing to absorb.²²⁹

All histories are partly invented; all storytelling distorts. At the same time, all fiction is partly true to the past; a wholly fictitious story cannot be imagined, for no one could understand it. True history is not the only truth about the past; every tale is true in countless ways, more anchored to past actualities in history, more imaginatively veracious in fiction. If fiction belittles history in cannibalizing it, history derogates fiction while borrowing fictional insights and techniques. New sources and devices enable historians to do what Victorians thought only fiction could do – chronicle the everyday past in hallucinatory detail. And historians increasingly accept that fictive rhetoric is both unavoidable, as Hayden White shows, and essential, as Hexter argued.²³⁰

Some go further, avowing error and invention as integral to historical validity. Alex Haley thus defended *Roots* when much of his eighteenth-century African setting was disclosed as invented. Elusive actual facts mattered less, Haley retorted, than his fictionalized symbolic past, with which millions of black Americans had come to identify. The Juffure he described had never existed, but was a justifiable composite likeness of Gambian villages of the time. Haley's Juffure in fact amalgamated West Africa with Avalon, Eden, and idealized small-town America in a Club Med-cum-Platonic city-state. Indeed, only such anachronisms let black Americans identify *their* past with this remote unlikely place; had Haley depicted Juffure as it actually was, his picture would have been not just disbelieved but ignored. Factuality was jettisoned for a serviceable past. And that past triumphed, tourist fame transforming Juffure into a facsimile of Haley's idealization.²³¹

²²⁷ T. J. Jackson Lears, in 'Writing history', *NYRB*, 16 Dec. 1982: 58–9.

²²⁸ Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970* (Jonathan Cape, 1971), 245.

²²⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as technique' (1917), in David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory* (Longman, 1988), 16–30; Jess Row, 'Styron's choice', *NYT Book Review*, 5 Sept. 2008.

²³⁰ Hayden White, 'The historical text as literary artifact', in *Tropics of Discourse* (Johns Hopkins, 1978), 81–100, and 'Historical fiction, fictional history, and historical reality', *Rethinking History* 9 (2005): 147–57; Hexter, 'Rhetoric of history'.

²³¹ Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, 'Roots and the new "faction"', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89:1 (Jan. 1981): 3–26; Philip Nobile, 'Uncovering Roots', *Village Voice* [NY], 2 Feb. 1993: 31–8; Tina Susman, 'Bitter "Roots": Kunta Kinte's village bashes Alex Haley', *Seattle Times*, 1 Apr. 1995.

Historians who claim unique fidelity to the past, and writers of fiction who claim total exemption from such fidelity, are equally mistaken. The difference between history and fiction is more one of purpose than of content. Whatever rhetorical devices the historian deploys, tenets of the craft forbid deliberate invention or concealment. In terming their work a history, they opt to have it judged for accuracy, internal consistency, and congruence with surviving evidence. And they dare not fabricate characters, ascribe unknown traits or incidents to real ones, or ignore incompatible evidence to make their tale more gripping or intelligible. Such perversions cannot be hidden from others with access to the record, nor condoned when found out.²³²

By contrast, the historical novelist is bound to invent either characters and events, or imaginary thoughts and actions for real people in the past. The constraints the historian willingly embraces are intolerable to the writer of fiction, as John Updike found when gathering materials for a life of President James Buchanan. Suffocated by the stubborn facticity of history, Updike could not leap the divide from fiction. 'Researched details failed to act like remembered ones, they had no palpable medium of the half-remembered in which to swim; my imagination was frozen by the theoretical discoverability of *everything*. An actual man, Buchanan, had done this and this, exactly so, once; and no other way. There was no air.'²³³

History and fiction are neither mutually exclusive nor wholly congruent routes to the past. Combining them does not, however, condone performance that claims the merits of both but abides by the strictures of neither. 'Factional' docudrama follows postmodernist fashion in smudging distinctions between history and fiction, but its pretended omniscience glosses over the past's profound otherness.

Similar anachronisms in nineteenth-century fiction went undetected or unregretted. Novelists feigned 'a bogus sense of intimacy with Pompeii' by flattering readers with 'a special knowledge denied to pedants and professors'.²³⁴ Verisimilitude made their romances seem authentic, but it denied, tamed, and leached away the past's true strangeness. Anachronism became decoration, residues too rough to digest were hidden or bowdlerized. Those who painstakingly verified every detail forgot that readers craved not accuracy but intimate immediacy. By the time of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, authenticity had become a tedious bane; 'now that history provided a museum of styles, none seemed authentic'. Pastiche and parody permeated historical painting as they did historical fiction, in striking harbingers of postmodern aesthetics.²³⁵

All such recreations, Henry James objected (anent Sarah Orne Jewett's 1901 *Tory Lover*), sought in vain to represent 'the old *consciousness*, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make . . . the modern world, were non-existent, [and] whose own thinking was intensely otherwise conditioned. You

²³² J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (Basic Books, 1971), 289–90.

²³³ John Updike, *Buchanan Dying* (Knopf, 1974), 'Afterword', 259.

²³⁴ Richard Jenkins, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Blackwell, 1980), 83–6.

²³⁵ Alexander, *Medievalism*, 27, 119, 162, 208. See Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 33–4; Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and consumer society', in John Belton, ed., *Movies and Mass Culture* (Rutgers, 1996), 185–202.

may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints as much as you like – the *real* thing is almost impossible to do.²³⁶

Factional portrayals wish away that impossibility. TV docudramas like historical novels readily abandon fact for fiction. But in continuing to claim factual fidelity, they let go of the anchor while pretending still to be grasping it. Deceptive authenticity has bedevilled documentary filmmaking at least since Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922).²³⁷ 'This is how it was' heralds faction, not 'It may have been something like this'. All-knowing certitude, cloaked in authoritative anonymity, lends such sagas a stamp of revealed truth. Hence the TV past is readily mistaken for gospel truth. Viewers take shows that confessedly commingle fact and fiction as veracious accounts of what actually happened and what life was really like.

In written histories, the author's voice alerts us at the outset to authorial perspective. Television eliminates authorial specificity and responsibility, lending documentaries an aura of unassailable expertise enhanced by compelling visual images more convincing than written accounts. 'In the good old days, people believed things they read', said a critic. But faith in the invariable veracity of books and newspapers gave way to the belief that 'the camera never lies . . . You can actually see it, so it must be true.'²³⁸ Producers themselves share this faith. Those who made *The Birth of a Nation* (1914), along with most who saw it, felt it literally true. 'You will see what actually has happened', said director D. W. Griffith, 'there will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history . . . The film could not be anything but the truth.'²³⁹

Griffith's credulity persists. John Sturges's *The Great Escape* (1963) began with the blunt assertion 'This is a true story', though no Stalag Luft III 1944 escapees had leapt the barbed wire like Steve McQueen (on a motorcycle built twenty years later). Hollywood still claims adherence to naked truths. 'I've shown this movie to world-class historians who have said it's amazing', exclaimed Zack Snyder of his *Battle of Thermopylae* box-office hit *300* (2007). 'They can't believe it's as accurate as it is. . . . This stuff really happened! Well, most of it, anyway. . . . The events are 90% accurate', for his narrator, 'knows how not to wreck a good story with truth'.

Indeed, directors deride historical doubt as fuddy-duddy claptrap. 'Historians from England will say I'm a liar!' intones the voiceover in *Braveheart*, an England-bashing film that makes a horrendous haggis of Scottish heritage; 'but history is written by those who have hanged heroes!'²⁴⁰ Even more dismissive of historians is Roland Emmerich, whose film *Anonymous* (2011) claims that the Earl of Oxford authored Shakespeare. 'You have

²³⁶ To Sarah Orne Jewett, 5 Oct. 1901, in *Selected Letters of Henry James* (London, 1956), 234–5.

²³⁷ Angela Piccini, 'Faking it: why the truth is so important for TV archaeology', in Timothy Clack and Marcus Brittain, eds., *Archaeology and the Media* (Left Coast Press 2009), 221–36 at 223.

²³⁸ Patrick Brogan, 'America's history being rewritten on TV by confusing fact-fiction serials', *Times*, 11 Oct. 1977.

²³⁹ Griffith quoted in Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History* (Blackwell, 1980), viii–ix; Griffith, 'Five dollar "movies" prophesied' (1915), quoted in Robert Lang, ed., *The Birth of a Nation* (Rutgers, 1994), 4.

²⁴⁰ Snyder quoted in Josh Horowitz, "'300" trivia', 13 Mar. 2007, *mtv.com*; Alex von Tunzelmann, 'Braveheart: dancing peasants, gleaming teeth and a cameo from Fabio', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2008.

to be careful of history books, because they are old scholars, basing their stuff on errors, and often writing within a totalitarian state.²⁴¹

Paying lip-service to history before ignoring or butchering it was said to peak with *Pearl Harbor*'s (2001) anachronistic wartime America blessedly free of smoking and segregation. 'Playing fast and loose with the past is no longer acceptable in film', avers a British critic. Given 'a historically literate audience ...', film-makers now feel an obligation to reflect the past as accurately as possible within the demands of the art'. Yet four of *Time* magazine's Top 10 Historically Misleading Films postdate 2006 (*300*, *Robin Hood*, *The King's Speech*, and *10,000 BC*, in which woolly mammoths help build the pyramids). Hollywood turned Aztecs into Mayans who succumb to the Spanish six centuries too soon in *Apocalypto* (2006); slandered Spartans as quasi-democratic Athenians, Persians (to Iranian anger) as demonic barbarian monsters in *300* (2007); and credited *Robin Hood* (2010) with Magna Carta.²⁴²

However revamped, the past must still *seem* authentic. Grossly anachronistic portrayals are papered over with painstakingly genuine antiquity. *Brideshead Revisited*'s 1981 TV producers secured Evelyn Waugh's actual 1920s rooms at Oxford, speckled pullet eggs to simulate the novel's plovers' eggs, and (echoing Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor) garnished Castle Howard with faux-marble columns and Felix Kelly murals. Yet it was a post-war fantasy of England's aristo past that entranced viewers. In filmed versions of E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (1987), Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* (1987), Julian Mitchell's *Another Country* (1984), and the Merchant-Ivory production of *A Passage to India* (1984), as in the current (2011–) *Downton Abbey* series, the splendour of the settings overwhelms the ironic or sardonic intent of the narratives, put-downs of pomp and privilege smothered in the surfeit of period detail.²⁴³ British antiquity in film is constructed 'in our own image of it ... the Iron Age is always already as we know it', combining today's anti-hegemonic stance with yesterday's denigration of 'the Celtic fringes as backward and unchanging'.²⁴⁴

Film and TV history is not, for all its 'meticulous scholarship', what historians normally term history. Rather it is a semi-fictitious saga of impassioned valour and villainy. *Mutiny on the Bounty* portrayed Captain Bligh as a sadist for the sake of 'a closeknit, strong, and more comprehensive' portrayal; the actuality might have 'confused the issue'.²⁴⁵ Indeed, 'getting [things] wrong is quicker, simpler, and usually makes a better story than getting them right', explained an apologist for Disney's 1995 *Pocahontas*.²⁴⁶

²⁴¹ Caroline Frost, "Anonymous" asks the right questions of Shakespeare's work, says director Roland Emmerich', *Huffington Post*, 26 Oct. 2011.

²⁴² Ben Macintyre, 'At last Hollywood history is no longer bunk', *Times*, 18 Jan. 2011: 21; *Time Magazine*, 26 Jan. 2011; Alex von Tunzelmann, 'Pearl Harbor: no smoking, no racism, no clue', 18 Sept. 2008; 'Apocalypto and the end of the wrong civilisation', 6 Nov. 2008; 'Snyder's 300 is an epic fail', 9 Oct. 2008; 'Reel history special: Ridley Scott's Robin Hood – wide of the mark?' 23 Sept. 2010; Robert Tait, 'Spartans film is psychological war, says Iran', 15 Mar. 2007, all in *Guardian*.

²⁴³ Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema* (Oxford, 2003), 80–4.

²⁴⁴ Angela Piccini, 'Filming through the mists of time', *Current Anthropology* 37 (1996): s87–s111 at s88.

²⁴⁵ Film teaching manual quoted in Greg Denning, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (Cambridge, 1992), 158; Greg Denning, 'Hollywood makes history' (1993), in *Performances* (Melbourne University Press, 1996), 168–90 at 179–80.

²⁴⁶ Hanay Geigomah quoted in 'Disney assailed for Pocahontas portrayal', *IHT*, 27–28 May 1995.

In *Lincoln*'s (2012) counterfactual climatic scene, Connecticut congressmen vote to keep rather than abolish slavery as they actually did. Screenwriter Tony Kushner cited a 'time-honored' justification for the blatant canard: when history failed to follow 'the rules of drama', the film must 'manipulate a small detail in the service of a greater historical truth'. And director Steven Spielberg privileged cinema's portrayal of 'impossible places' off limits to historians – the past's undocumented unknowns. Transcending historical evidence, filmmakers 'enlist the imagination . . . to bring the dead back to life [and] form our collective memory of all that has passed [in] perfect and complete recall'.²⁴⁷

To be sure, fictional pasts have been peddled as true to the spirit if not the facts of history at least since Walter Scott, if not Shakespeare. But today fiction is the principal, often the sole, source of public understanding of remote as well as recent times. Given little history at school, youngsters turn to film and TV, especially for knowledge of the twentieth century. 'They learn of the Great War from *Birdsong* and of the Holocaust from *Schindler's List*. For Normandy, they watch *The Longest Day* and *Saving Private Ryan*. For Vietnam they go to *The Deerhunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. For the death of Kennedy, Heaven help them, they rely on *JFK*'.²⁴⁸ They learn about biblical times from *The Da Vinci Code* (which doesn't pretend to be true) and terrorist history from *Fahrenheit 9/11* (which does).

Purported documentaries are likewise congeries of truth and 'truthiness'. 'There was a time when TV documentaries were broadly fact-based', recalls a critic; 'now they always embed truth within story'.²⁴⁹ And their 'uninflected capture of actual life' more and more brazenly manipulates subjects and feelings to stress argument, advocacy, prosecutorial zeal. Fact and faction become indistinguishable.

When we say 'like a documentary' do we really mean 'like one of those sitcoms pretending to be a documentary', in which characters glance at and sometimes speak directly into the camera? 'Like reality television?' 'Like the evening news?' . . . Do we mean something that tries to make us forget we're watching a movie, by giving us what seems like raw, unmediated access to characters and their stories? Or do we mean the opposite: a film that reminds us with every awkward cut and jolting camera movement that what we are watching is not the literal truth?²⁵⁰

The confusion has become endemic. Fiction is not the opposite of fact but its complement. To 'locate our own private stories within a larger collective narrative' we embrace 'true' lies, credible falsehoods.²⁵¹ That myths may be batty and irrational does not negate their influence. Camelot and the Holy Grail lack historical credibility but convey psychological authority; rooted mythologies lend cosmic meaning to our own lifetime quests.

²⁴⁷ Tony Kushner to Joseph Courtney, 7 Feb. 2013, quoted in Maureen Dowd, 'The Oscar for best fabrication', *NYT*, 17 Feb. 2013: 11; Steven Spielberg, 'Speech for the 149th anniversary of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address', Gettysburg, 19 Nov. 2012, lincolnfellowship.org.

²⁴⁸ Simon Jenkins, 'History is not bunk, but most historians are', *Times*, 5 July 2002.

²⁴⁹ Tony Whittaker, 'The National Trust and its plans for a younger generation', *Times*, 20 Oct. 2010 (letter).

²⁵⁰ A. O. Scott, 'As documentaries pour forth, the word has lost its meaning', *IHT*, 15 Oct. 2010: 10–11; A. O. Scott, 'How real does it feel?' *NYT*, 9 Dec. 2010.

²⁵¹ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minnesota, 1990), 163.

Said the presenter of Alex Haley's flagrantly anachronistic *Roots*, 'There you have it . . . some of it fact, and some of it fiction, but all of it true, in the true meaning of the word'.²⁵²

History and memory

Appraising these two routes to the past through the same lens distresses historians who feel 'history to be hard work while recollection seems passive, noninferential, and unverified'.²⁵³ In academe, memory engages only a minority of psychologists, but history is historians' fundamental enterprise. And while most psychologists usually deal with lab-test recall remote from everyday memory, historians' central remit is pasts familiarly known. To be sure, psychologists who used to deal with 'only memory for lists and list-making', notes Ulric Neisser, 'now study memory for facts, stories, familiar routines . . . and personally experienced events'.²⁵⁴ But even they devote little attention to the actual past. Their concern is not the contents of memories, but their accuracy, vividness, and emotional force. There are no index entries for 'history' or 'the past' in any recent compendia on everyday or autobiographical memory.

Historians' reliance on the written word reflects the modern discipline's derivation from scriptural chronology and remains hardly less extreme than that of biblical fundamentalists. 'The art of writing', declared Leopold von Ranke, 'is the basis of historical knowledge', leaving prehistory to theology and science. 'For want of documents the history of immense periods . . . is destined to remain for ever unknown', agreed the French authors of an authoritative *fin-de-siècle* manual of history. 'There is no substitute for documents: no documents, no history.'²⁵⁵ R. G. Collingwood concurred. Only when I confirm that 'I remember writing a letter to So-and-so' by seeing that 'my memory is not deceiving me, because here is his reply', is a statement prioritizing *textual evidence*.²⁵⁶ The fetish persists. For custodians of history 'yesterday did not exist except on paper', found novelist Stevie Davies. Having lost the note of Davies's telephoned request to visit its rare book collection, the John Rylands Library in Manchester took 'absence of documentation . . . as ocular proof that I had made no request. No memo, no event.' Memory meant nothing; 'everything depended on a written record'.²⁵⁷

Today's academic fixation on original documents contrasts starkly with prior (and popularly persisting) conflation of oral with written, folkloric with fact-based accounts. If Abbott Ælfric derogated Old English saga as *fabulae* 'which never happened, nor can

²⁵² Quoted in Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (North Carolina, 1989), xxiii.

²⁵³ Louis O. Mink, 'Everyman his or her own annalist', in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago, 1981), 233–9 at 234. See Kerwin Lee Klein, 'On the emergence of memory in historical discourse', *Representations* 69 (2000): 127–50 at 130–1.

²⁵⁴ Neisser, 'New vistas in the study of memory', 1–10 at 8, and 'What is ordinary memory the memory of?', 356–73, in Neisser and Winograd, eds., *Remembering Reconsidered*.

²⁵⁵ Leopold von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte: Die Römische Republik und ihre Weltherrschaft* (1881), ix; Charles V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History* (1898; New York, 1904), 17.

²⁵⁶ R. G. Collingwood, 'Historical evidence', in *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), 249–82 at 252–3.

²⁵⁷ Stevie Davies, *Impassioned Clay* (London: Women's Press, 1999), 139. See Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 44–46.

ever happen', and praised *historia* as 'things and deeds, which were done in the old days and . . . set down in writing', he like other Anglo-Saxon scholars commonly interwove oral and written sources, popular stories with political and tenurial charters, in a world 'dominated by talk not texts, gossip not parchment'. Indeed, oral transmission was felt to guarantee the reliability of Abbo of Fleury's *Passio sancti Eadmundi* (985–7).²⁵⁸

Written history may be denied if it supersedes or conflicts with collective memory. Burgundian villagers shun history as the realm of national matters beyond their control, remote from daily life, menacing to customary routine. They prize orally recounted local heritage laden with enduring and cyclic events, easy to grasp and comfortingly predictable. Much of it is in fact cribbed from local histories in books found in many homes, yet 'never did anyone say to us that they knew something through having read it', reported scholars. 'They knew it from "having heard it said", they knew it "by word of mouth", as if only the spoken word were a true guarantee of the facts'. They concealed the written origin and favoured the spoken word 'to invent a time without blemish or interruption'.²⁵⁹

History is deeply reliant on memory; after all, Clio is the daughter of Mnemosyne. Yet they wholly differ, both in how they gain and test knowledge of the past and in how they transmit, preserve, and alter it. We accept our own memory as a premise of knowing; we infer history from evidence mainly of other people's memories. My memory may be flawed, but I must implicitly trust it or surrender any claim to knowing the past. Historical data in principle ultimately require empirical confirmation. Memory is given, history contingent.

Yet ambiguity and overlap confound these distinctions. Memory includes second-hand accounts of the past – that is, history. And history relies on eyewitness recollections – that is, memory. We treat other people's memories much like history, to be tested against evidence; like Everyman, we often have to confirm our own recall. Facts of memory – when things happened, who met whom, what ensued – can often be verified or falsified by records; the prudent memoirist checks his memory against historical sources, and finds, all too often, as Collingwood noted, that he has substituted a subsequent thought or event. But he can rely only on his memory for his *feelings* about those events, for he alone is privy to such knowledge. All he can test those memories against are his own previous accounts.²⁶⁰ Disparities between what we once reported and what we now recall can be deeply dismaying, as noted in the Bloody Sunday Inquiry (Chapter 7).

But historical reconstruction often impinges on memorial recollection. I treat a bit of history cribbed from someone else as *prima-facie* true, just like the rest of my memory. If only to avoid acrimony, what spouses and friends tell us happened is usually trusted like our own memories. Only when conflict or patent improbability arouse major doubt do we subject their memory claims to a beady historical eye.

²⁵⁸ Catherine Cubitt, 'Folklore and historiography: oral sources and the writing of Anglo-Saxon history', in Tyler and Balzaretto, eds., *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, 189–223 at 204 (quoting Ælfric's *Grammar*, c. 998), 221 ('talk not texts'), 196–7 (*Passio*).

²⁵⁹ Françoise Zonabend, *The Enduring Memory: Time and History in a French Village* (Manchester, 1984), 3–4.

²⁶⁰ R. G. Collingwood, 'History as re-enactment of past experience', in *Idea of History*, 282–302 at 295–6.

Unlike memory, history is intrinsically social. Although my remembered past stems in large part from interacting with others, and is partly shared with and influenced by them, much of it is solely mine. But history is by its very nature collective. Whereas 'an isolated individual could remember no past other than his personal recollections', the historical past is innately sociable. To record and communicate such a past requires enduring associations. Groups validate their identity through history as individuals do through memory. Indeed, historical enterprise is crucial for social preservation. 'Since all societies are organised . . . to ensure their own continuity', noted J. G. A. Pocock, saving and handing on history helps to conserve existing arrangements and fosters the feeling of belonging to coherent, stable, and durable institutions.²⁶¹

Endurance privileges historical knowledge. Most memories perish with their holders, but histories long outlive their authors. Indeed, preserving knowledge of the past is one of history's *raison d'être*: archival records are kept against the lapse of memory and devouring time. And history is less open to alteration than memory. Both undergo change to conform with present needs, but the historical record to some extent resists deformation: writing and especially print can preserve information virtually as it was, even if the original source is defunct. Speech normally involves the speaker's *presence*, writing the writer's *absence*; 'like monuments, writing cheats death by preserving unchanged what has perished'.²⁶²

While the durability of history today owes most to dissemination in print, much knowledge survives scribal and even oral transmission more or less intact. Notwithstanding manifold copying errors and forgeries, most manuscripts remain essentially true to authors' intent. Oral history cannot be checked against previous records, but residual anachronisms in retold tales show that much persists from narrator to narrator.²⁶³ And those who recount and receive histories – oral, scribal, printed – rely on their being largely stable and faithful records, whereas we *expect* memory often to mislead us.

Hindsight knowledge further distinguishes history from memory. 'Historical understanding is not remembering', notes Walter Benn Michaels, 'but learning about pasts we've never known' before.²⁶⁴ To be sure, time-transformed recollections also invent and discover; memory like history reviews the past from the standpoint of present knowledge. But memory revision is usually unselfconscious, whereas historians intentionally reinterpret the past through subsequent lenses. Both history and memory engender new knowledge, but memory seldom sets out to do so, while history almost always does. Memory makes us; we remake history.

Recent decades have brought memory studies into ever greater prominence, enriching history with data and insights from 'laws and buildings, documents and oral

²⁶¹ J. G. A. Pocock, 'The origins of the study of the past', *Comparative Studies in Society & History* 4 (1962): 209–46 at 211. See Jeffery Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge, 2008), 183–9.

²⁶² Charles W. Hedrick, Jr., *History and Silence* (Texas, 2000), 245–6. See Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (Columbia, 1970), 215–33; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, 1979; 3rd edn 1991), 112–15.

²⁶³ Joseph C. Miller, 'Listening for the African past', in Miller, ed., *African Past Speaks*, 1–59; Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The consequences of literacy' (1963) in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), 27–68 at 28–31, 57–67.

²⁶⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, 'Race into culture', *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 655–85 at 681n.

tradition', writes a medievalist.²⁶⁵ Yet memory also threatens to swamp and displace history. Searing personal accounts of monstrous evils make their bearers 'messengers from another world', as is said of Holocaust survivors 'who alone can communicate the incommunicable', thereby salvaging histories otherwise lost.²⁶⁶ But prevalent uses of such accounts – 'practicing a "therapy of memory" to counter the "pathology of history"' – aim less to tell what happened than to reveal how traumatized victims felt about it. Recollections become sacred relics, venerated not as historical documentation but tragic testimony and potential routes to redemption.²⁶⁷ 'What makes us authentic ... is our sense of trauma, and thus our status as victims', just as many historians now focus more on 'feelings than doings'. But 'feelings can only be expressed, not discussed', leading either to 'mute acceptance of whatever people wish to say about themselves, or [to] violent confrontations', concludes Ian Buruma. 'You cannot argue with feelings.'²⁶⁸

The distinction between facts and feelings reflects divergent approaches to the past. History 'puts the past at a distance', explains a historian, 'help[ing] us understand the weight and complexity of past events'. By contrast, memory 'brings the past into the present. It is ... an affective emotional relation to the past that ... abolishes distance.' Hence 'memory seems more valuable than history'.²⁶⁹ Memory's attraction lies in 'a poignant immediacy generally absent from history'.²⁷⁰

Memory's inherent subjectivity means that we can never ensure its truth or shun its errors. Yet these very 'fallibilities, frailties, and imperfections' lend memory a 'paradoxical strength', argues Oliver Sacks, making it a font of 'flexibility and creativity'. Memory's 'confusion over sources or indifference to them' frees us 'to see and hear with other eyes and ears, to enter into other minds, to assimilate the art and science and religion of the whole culture, to enter into and contribute to ... the general commonwealth of knowledge'.²⁷¹ But thus to sift and assimilate the shared past is the supreme role not of frail forgetful memory, but of sturdy source-based history.

"Memory" is portrayed as wider and somehow more profound and richer', notes history educator Peter Lee, 'than the narrow workings of "academic" history'. This confers equal status on every recall, entitling everyone, informed or ignorant, imperial or indigenous, to assert 'their own versions not only of the past, but of their relationship

²⁶⁵ Matthew Innes, 'Introduction', in Hen and Innes, eds., *Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, 1–8 at 6–8.

²⁶⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Cornell, 1998); Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Wisconsin, 2003), 38–9.

²⁶⁷ Daniel Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer* (Abrams, 2001), 93; Hayden White, 'Afterword', in Jenkins et al., *Manifestos for History*, 230. See Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error*, 19–21, 30; Klein, 'On the emergence of memory in historical discourse', 137–41; Susannah Radstone, 'Memory studies', *Memory Studies* 1:1 (2008): 31–9.

²⁶⁸ Ian Buruma, 'The joys and perils of victimhood', *NYRB*, 8 Apr. 1999: 4–9 at 8–9; Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 178.

²⁶⁹ Henry Rousso, *The Haunting Past, Memory and Justice in Contemporary France* (1998; PennPress, 2002), 16. See Klein, 'On the emergence of memory in historical discourse', 128–9.

²⁷⁰ Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Political History in Postwar America* (Wisconsin, 2013), 23–4.

²⁷¹ Oliver Sacks, 'Speak, memory', *NYRB*, 21 Feb. 2013: 19–21 at 21.

with it, and hence what counts as knowledge'. History, by contrast, is 'not the property of any person or group [but] a public form of knowledge' requiring consensual 'standards of validity and relationships to evidence that *anyone* can work with'. Unlike memory, historical knowledge 'constrains what we can assert' about the past, 'however inconvenient or unpalatable such knowledge may be'.²⁷²

Three decades ago Pierre Nora wrote of history's conquest and virtual eradication of memory; today the emotive immediacy of memory smothers history or relegates it to the margins. How this trend affects our understanding of the past is addressed in my Epilogue. Here it suffices to note, with Nora, that memory and history seem in fundamental opposition. Less 'a stage of progress beyond memory', as it used to be commonly seen, history is more and more 'the antithesis of memory'.²⁷³ Historians find 'an empathic or compassionate response' to traumatic memories without sacrificing critical analysis a daunting challenge.²⁷⁴ Yet 'emotion-laden memory is inescapable for all of us', wrote historian Bernard Bailyn in the context of the African slave trade, 'and we cannot escape from it by the rational, critical reconstruction of the past'.

Perhaps history and memory in the end may act usefully upon each other. The one may usefully constrain and yet vivify the other. The passionate, timeless memory . . . may be shaped, focused, and informed by the critical history we write, while the history we so carefully compose may be kept alive, made vivid and constantly relevant and urgent by the living memory we have of it. We cannot afford to lose or diminish either.²⁷⁵

²⁷² Peter Lee, 'Series introduction', in Mario Carretero et al., eds., *History Education and the Construction of National Identities* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2012), ix–xvi at x–xii.

²⁷³ Nora, 'Entre mémoire et histoire', xviii–xix; Sarah Foot, 'Reading Anglo-Saxon charters: memory, record, or story?', in Tyler and Balzaretto, eds., *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, 39–65 at 65. See Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester, 2007), 46–9, 60, 244.

²⁷⁴ Dominick LaCapra, 'Resisting apocalypse and rethinking history', in Jenkins et al., eds., *Manifestos*, 160–78 at 173.

²⁷⁵ Bernard Bailyn, 'Considering the slave trade: history and memory', *William & Mary Quarterly* 58 (2001): 245–52 at 251.