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CHAPTER 1

What is History?

The problem of definition

Any dictionary will give you a range of possible definitions and shades of meaning of the word 'history': just consider the different ways the word is being used in phrases like 'natural history', 'medical history' and 'you're history'. Even in the context of the classroom or lecture theatre the word is ambiguous, meaning both the past and the study of the past. 'Ancient history' is both the sum total of events and processes that took place during a particular period (of history ...) and an academic discipline that involves the study of those events; it is both something that you learn about, and something that you do. History is clearly always concerned in some way with what happened in the past, but not all accounts of the past are considered to be history: what about historical novels, or legends such as that of King Arthur? What about 'pseudo-history' like *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* or the works of Erich von Däniken, which claim to be critical accounts of the past but which are, in the eyes of most historians, clearly not 'proper' history? The problem of definition, of determining exactly what history 'is', thus forms the

traditional starting point for studies of the theory and philosophy of history.

Even so, as far as many people are concerned (many professional historians among them) this really isn't much of a problem. After all, most words have a number of different meanings, and usually it's perfectly clear what they mean from the context in which they're used. The fact that Shakespeare occasionally used 'history' as a verb does not mean that there is some fatal ambiguity and uncertainty in the idea of history as studied in schools and universities. Even the confusion between history as the past and history as the study of the past seems rather trivial. 'History' as a subject covers both: we study a period of history so as to learn how to do history, and we learn how to do history so as to learn about different periods of history. We are perfectly well aware that when we 'write history' we are producing an account of the past, not reproducing the past itself; there is no real confusion there. Common sense helps us to distinguish between a proper work of history and a historical novel, or the ravings of conspiracy theorists and UFOlogists. Quite simply, we *know* what history is, without the need for an elaborate theoretical definition; we can recognise it when we see it.

The fact that I've chosen to follow tradition by devoting my opening chapter to the problem of definition should make it clear enough that I think there are some problems with this 'common sense' approach. Certainly we 'know' what history is, and can generally recognise it without much

difficulty, but that is not because we are born with some innate historical instinct. On the contrary, it is because we have learnt to understand the word in a certain way, to accept the particular idea of history prevalent in our culture and above all the model of history offered to us by our teachers. The 'common sense' approach to definition assumes that this idea of history, which we acquire more or less unconsciously, is obvious, natural and universally valid. It is taken for granted, not subjected to any analysis or criticism. Each generation of history students learns to follow the unwritten rules laid down by previous generations – often, I suspect, without noticing how far their freedom of thought is being restricted. 'Proper' history is seen to be that which is accepted as such by 'proper' historians – basically, those with university appointments – and most investigations of the nature and methodology of history focus exclusively on the activities of professional historians. History is what historians do: this is a recipe for conservatism if ever there was one.

Even a brief survey of the history of historiography shows clearly that our idea of history is not universally valid but is on the contrary no more and no less than *our* idea. From the time of its invention in the late sixth century BC until the eighteenth century AD, history was regarded as primarily a type of literature. In the nineteenth century it became an academic discipline based in the universities, and was promoted as a kind of science. Different periods have had different ideas of the proper content of history (the idea that historians might study the lower classes, or women, is of

fairly recent date), its methodology (even the earliest historians, like Herodotus and Thucydides, disagreed on the proper way to treat evidence) and its purpose. History has been practised in different ways in the past, and it seems either naive or arrogant to assume that our present methods will never be improved on in future. If we think of history purely in terms of its present form, we exclude from consideration a whole range of possible ideas about what history is and how it should be practised. It may turn out that this is the correct thing to do; conceivably, our idea of history *is* far superior to that of earlier periods, and the activities of present-day professional historians do constitute the highest and/or the truest form of history yet developed. I have my doubts about this, and it is certainly not something that we should take for granted.

Examining our vague, unreasoned assumptions about the nature of history with a critical eye is not, therefore, a matter of complicating a perfectly straightforward issue with unnecessary theorising; it is an indispensable first step in understanding how to do ancient history. However, the problem of the definition of history can be understood in two ways: there is the problem of determining what history is, and the problem of the act of definition itself. The purpose of definition is to set up boundaries and limits, above all between history and other ways of talking about the past. Definition seeks to privilege certain kinds of writing and to exclude others from the category of 'proper history'. Ostensibly, this is for the sake of convenience, to ensure that the

discussion covers everything that is essential and doesn't bother with inessential or irrelevant matters. In practice, the decision on what is to be considered essential is always a matter of opinion, and it is always, I think, connected to issues of power and authority. There is no such thing as a neutral, unproblematic definition of history; all definitions are working to someone's advantage at someone else's expense. To the question 'What is history?', we must always add: 'Who decides? On what grounds, and to what end?'

The invention of history

I do not think that one will be far wrong in accepting the conclusions which I have reached from the evidence which I have put forward. It is better evidence than that of the poets, who exaggerate the importance of their themes, or of the logographers, who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked and whose subject-matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology. We may claim instead to have used only the plainest evidence and to have reached conclusions which are reasonably accurate, considering that we have been dealing with ancient history

And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy

to discover: different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories. And it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element

Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC), 1.21-2

History, like so many other intellectual activities, was invented by the ancient Greeks. The word itself comes from the Greek *historiai*, inquiries, which Herodotus used as the title of his account of the wars between Greece and Persia, written in the mid-fifth century BC. Herodotus is often called the Father of History (though also the Father of Lies, for his habit of recording outlandish stories about giant ants and flying snakes). His work offered the deeds of men, not of gods or heroes, as a fit subject for study, and he sought to explain *why* the Greeks and Persians had fought one another rather than simply describing events. Although by our standards he can sometimes seem naive and credulous, he did display a critical attitude to his sources: 'So much for what Persians and Phoenicians say ... I prefer to rely on my own knowledge, and to point out who it was in actual fact that first injured the Greeks' (1.5).

The work of Thucydides, writing a generation later, was still closer to what most modern historians would regard as proper history. He explicitly noted his intention of assessing the credibility of different sources and rejecting the fabulous in search of a true account of past events. Thucydides excluded the supernatural altogether from his account,

explaining everything by reference to human actions and intentions, where Herodotus had left some scope for divine intervention in the course of events. Finally, Thucydides established that the proper subjects of historical enquiry should be war and politics, whereas his predecessor had included lengthy passages on ethnography, geography, natural history and climatology as well.

Why the Greeks should suddenly have started to think about their past in a critical manner, weighing up the plausibility of different stories, is unknown. It is surely connected in some way to the contemporaneous development of philosophy, the practice of critical enquiry into the nature of society and the workings of the natural world. Some scholars have linked both these intellectual innovations to the spread of literacy, others to the emergence of a new form of political unit governed by its citizens, the *polis*. Whatever the explanation, and for all the differences in aims and methods between the Greek historians and those of the modern world, the writings of Herodotus and especially Thucydides are generally identified as the first examples of history as we understand it. Before the fifth century, there were only myths, traditions and lists of the great deeds of kings; thereafter, the past was studied (by some, at least) in a properly critical, analytical and disinterested manner.

The idea that Thucydides' work is something new and different is not simply one which modern scholars have developed – though it suits them to be able to claim a long, distinguished history and a prestigious founding figure for

their subject. Rather, Thucydides himself emphasised the novelty of his approach to the past, and argued for its superiority: people should accept *his* conclusions about what happened. He gave history a distinctive identity, above all by contrasting his work with the works of others who had written about the past. His account is better than that of the poets (who always exaggerate), or the logographers (who are more interested in dramatic effect than truth), or popular tradition (which is simply unreliable). His work might lack a romantic element, and fine literary technique – but that just shows that it offers the reader a true, unvarnished record of events.

Thucydides presented his account as being superior even to other works of history, above all that of his predecessor. It is notable that he described his enquiry as a *zetesis* (an inquiry or investigation) or a *suggraphe* (a writing-down, or simply 'a book'), not a *historie*, and he implicitly rejected Herodotus' model of history by choosing to concentrate just on politics and war. He commented sarcastically about people who are 'inclined to accept the first story they hear', giving as an example some erroneous beliefs about Sparta which just happen to appear in Herodotus' account. Since the two men were writing about different periods of history, their accounts rarely conflict with one another; indeed, Thucydides began his account where Herodotus left off, taking the latter's account of the Persian Wars as read. Nevertheless, despite this implicit compliment to his predecessor's work, Thucydides was concerned to persuade his readers that he

was the more reliable reporter and that his way of enquiring into past events was more accurate and trustworthy.

This is what is at stake in the question 'what is history?', whatever the detail of the answer. 'History' is contrasted with other ways of talking about the past, such as myth, fiction or even other kinds of history, so as to establish it as the preferred way of talking about the past. Differences are emphasised, similarities are ignored. History is contrasted with myth; myth is associated with the fabulous, hence history becomes associated with the real. In time, the idea that history is a true (as opposed to mythical, or fictional) account of the past becomes fixed in people's minds. It then becomes vitally important to decide what is and isn't history, what is and isn't to be recognised as having the prestige and authority of a historical account. It is also important that the boundary between history and other sorts of account should be seen to be clear and unbridgeable, for fear of calling into question history's claim to sole authority over the past. This is not to say that there *are* no differences between these different ways of talking about the past – we shall be examining some of them in the course of this chapter – but the differences may be exaggerated, and the similarities suppressed, for polemical purposes.

Thucydides was one of the first to write something which we wish to identify as history: an account of the actions of people in the past, based on his interpretation of the available evidence. He sought to persuade his audience to accept his conclusions about events, but his account had to compete

with other kinds of stories, many of them far more prestigious and authoritative – for example, the works of Homer, which were read not just as poems but as sources of knowledge and guidance and a foundation of the Greeks' sense of identity. This may well account for the polemical way in which Thucydides 'invents' history by attacking the credibility of his rivals, even Homer. Modern historians, in contrast, operate from a position of power; it is widely accepted that history has a monopoly on truth in accounts of the past (the real problem comes from the fact that the past is simply felt to be irrelevant, hence the prestige of 'present-centred' disciplines like economics and sociology). Nevertheless, both modern and ancient historians employ the same methods to establish the authority of *their* accounts, contrasting 'proper' history (in other words, their sort of history) with other ways of talking about past events.

Fiction

Thucydides first contrasted his work with that of the poets, who also wrote about the deeds of men in the past. He didn't accuse them of lying – and he was quite willing to make use of Homer's work as a source for the early history of Greece – but he did note that they tended to exaggerate the importance of their themes. In other words, they were prepared to go beyond the evidence for the sake of entertaining their audience. Other ancient writers echoed this opinion. The philosopher Aristotle argued in his treatise on poetry that

historians relate actual events whereas poets relate the kind of things that *might* occur (*Poetics* 1451b). Lucian claimed in his essay on *How to Write History* that history and poetry have different aims and rules: 'in the latter freedom is absolute and there is one law, the judgement of the poet' (8). Modern historians seek in a similar manner to distinguish their work from that of the historical novelist, who draws on the same evidence as they do to reconstruct the past.

'Poetry' comes from the Greek *poieo*, I make or do: it is something which is made, produced by the imagination of the poet. 'Fiction' comes from the Latin *finco*, I shape, arrange, devise, represent, imagine. History is neither poetry nor fiction: hence (so the contrast implies) it is not something made or imagined by historians but a true representation of the past. Historians do not invent things, they base their conclusions on the evidence alone. The past is something which is real, existing outside their accounts of it; historians play no part in shaping or creating this past, they merely let the facts speak for themselves. The purpose of the contrast with fiction is clear, to privilege history as the only true account of what really happened. Novels may be entertaining, they may even draw on the same evidence as the historians do, but they are not history and so are not to be believed.

We usually distinguish between history and fiction on the basis of the form in which these different accounts of past events are presented to us. From the title of the book, its cover design and its location in the library or bookshop to

the style in which it is written, we receive a series of signals designed to identify it as a particular kind of account. We have learnt to recognise these signals, to associate one style of writing with history and another with fiction. We know that proper history rarely if ever includes passages of dialogue, and that novels rarely if ever have footnotes and bibliographies. Moreover, novelists are usually identified by their name alone, or perhaps also by a list of their previous works; historians normally make sure that their professional standing is prominently displayed on the back cover or the title page. Finally, only one sort of writing is likely to appear on essay bibliographies. On the basis of such clues we determine which accounts are to be read as authoritative and factual and which ones should be read just for entertainment.

Aristotle remarked that 'Herodotus' work could be put into verse and would be just as much history in verse as in prose' (*Poetics* 1451b). Few modern historians seem to be so confident about this; at any rate, they resolutely cling to the conventional style of historical writing, so that their works could never be confused in any way with fiction. At the same time they hold firmly to the view that the significant difference between history and fiction is not form but content. History, it is argued, is written in a particular style because this is the most appropriate way of presenting a reliable, factual account of the past. Fiction is not intended to provide a factual account, and so novelists can afford to indulge in literary flourishes. Once again, we return to our culture's basic assumption that history and fiction are entirely distinct

and that history provides us with the only true account of what happened in the past. Upon closer examination, however, the boundary between the contents of historical and fictional accounts becomes rather more blurred and uncertain.

As far as subject matter is concerned, fiction almost invariably focuses on the actions and thoughts of individuals, while most (though not all) history is more concerned with abstractions such as 'society' or 'slavery'. However, novelists can't ignore the wider context within which their characters think and act; and historians can't ignore the fact that the history of an institution like ancient slavery is made up of countless individual histories, of slaves, slave-owners and commentators on slavery – even if there isn't enough evidence to say anything much about the lives of each of those individuals. Something similar can be said of the aims of these different kinds of writing: both seek to persuade their readers of the truth of their representation of past events, even if fiction places more emphasis on entertainment and history stresses its educational role.

The key difference between historians and historical novelists lies in their methodologies, the ways in which each uses the available evidence to produce an account of past events. Above all, it lies in the role generally allowed to the writer's imagination. The historian, it is said, should never go beyond the evidence, and must as a consequence present an incomplete, fragmentary account of the past if the evidence is incomplete and fragmentary. The novelist is at liberty to

invent people, dialogue and even events if the story demands it. Indeed, many historical novels portray the involvement of entirely fictional characters in scrupulously researched historical events. In other words, some of the things that novelists tell us about the past may have no basis whatever in the evidence; we can trust that historians will always be able to offer some justification for everything they relate.

This distinction is certainly significant. It is also potentially misleading, in so far as it tends to imply that historians never use their imaginations in reconstructing the past. In fact, as I shall argue in the next chapter, imagination plays an indispensable role in the interpretation of evidence, helping the historian to make connections, fill in gaps and build up a wider picture of the period being studied. The methodological differences between history and fiction are therefore only a matter of degree: historians are not supposed to let their imaginations get too carried away. This is then reflected in the conventional forms of the different accounts: historians are expected to 'show their working', so to speak, to cite the evidence they have used in footnotes and bibliographies and to explain their reasoning, rather than just presenting their final conclusions as a seamless narrative. Finally, we should note the extent to which novelists are generally praised for their use of imagination whereas historians try to conceal their dependence on it.

The French historian Paul Veyne argued, paradoxically and provocatively, that history was 'un vrai roman', a true novel. The differences in form between history and fiction

are a matter of convention and convenience, the differences in methodology are a matter of degree. History could be described as a type of fiction, governed by a particular set of generic conventions (including restrictions on the unbridled use of imagination). Indeed, before the nineteenth century history was seen as a genre of literature, a place for fine writing and rhetorical set-pieces as well as factual accuracy. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian regarded history as a kind of 'prose poem'; the reputations of historians like Sallust, Tacitus and Gibbon depend at least as heavily on their literary brilliance as on their reliability as reporters. Modern historians, however, emphasise the contrast between history and fiction in the hope of concealing the fictive nature of their own writings. The prestige of history would, it seems, be lessened if it was mistaken for fiction, something invented by the writer, rather than accepted as an objective account of the past in which the historian merely reports the facts.

Myth

Thucydides also contrasted his work with that of the logographers, compilers of stories about the past (among whom he probably included Herodotus). Such writers were more interested in pleasing their audience than in seeking out the truth; their authorities could not be checked, and the stories they collected were basically mythical and so not to be trusted. Thucydides stuck for the most part to contemporary history, which was not tainted with mythology, and based his

account only on trustworthy sources (his own experience and the reports of eye-witnesses), which he subjected to critical analysis. The invention of history by the Greeks is often presented as the victory of *logos* over *muthos*, of a new form of rational enquiry over the old myths.

'Myth' is, if anything, even more difficult to define than 'history' – though that does not lessen the force of the contrast. We 'know' that a myth is a fabulous story, the sort that begins 'Once upon a time ...', involving heroes and monsters. History must therefore be a true story about the real past. However, scholars hoping to understand the meaning and function of myths have attempted to devise more precise definitions. The problem is that they disagree on which stories are to be counted as 'proper' myths, depending on their view of the function of myths in society. Thus, Geoffrey Kirk wishes to distinguish between myths and legends on the grounds that legends (such as King Arthur or Robin Hood) are too historical, whereas others would happily class Arthur as a mythical figure *regardless* of whether he existed or not.

The most helpful definition is that devised by Walter Burkert: 'a myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance'. A myth is a story, told and retold but retaining the same basic form, handed down from generation to generation; but a story with some deeper significance, embodying the values of the community, forming part of people's sense of identity, legitimising some practice or institution. Every culture has

such myths, and any story – including historical stories – may become a myth. The Greeks had stories about heroes, monsters, gods and Amazons (culture *versus* nature, the place of humans between beasts and gods); the English have the Spanish Armada, Trafalgar, Dunkirk and the Blitz (Britons as plucky and freedom-loving despite adversity); Americans have the Mayflower, Washington and the cherry tree, the frontier and Manifest Destiny.

History can become myth; myth can become history (see Thucydides' attempt to reconstruct the early history of Greece, 1.2-19, and more sophisticated modern attempts to reconstruct the mental world of the Greeks through their myths). How far is it possible to draw a clear line between them? Once again, the obvious but unhelpful answer is that we usually do it on the basis of form and context: we simply don't expect to find myths masquerading as history (as opposed to myths being the subject of historical enquiry). The idea that the history we are taught might in fact be a myth is very unsettling; yet this is precisely what is argued by Martin Bernal. He claims that European classicists have promoted a particular view of the development of Greece, despite all the evidence that contradicts it, because it confirms their feelings of superiority over other races. Bernal's argument that Greek culture was in fact derived from Egypt can be seen as an attempt to popularise an alternative, non-racist myth of the origins of European civilisation.

Myths are often, though not always, decontextualised, set in the past but not a very specific past: 'once upon a time',

'ancient times', 'the Middle Ages', 'the War'. History is firmly tied to a chronological structure, and so we can make statements about precisely when an event took place. More importantly, there is a clear contrast in the ways in which each kind of story is produced, the intentions of their creators and the expectations of their audience. Myths are not created by an individual but by the retelling of stories in different contexts – bedtime stories, public performances, visual representations – until they become part of the 'cultural heritage' of society. History is created by a historian, who examines stories from the past so as to assess their reliability, criticising and comparing them. Myth is about the telling of stories for pleasure, even if those stories also have a deeper meaning; history ostentatiously claims to be concerned with the truth of what happened, regardless of whether it makes a good story or has any deeper meaning.

Clearly there are grounds for making some distinction between myth and history in terms of their attitude to stories about the past: history is consciously critical, myth is not. However, this contrast should not be pushed too far; above all, it must not be interpreted as saying that history is automatically true and myth automatically false. Another misleading implication of the contrast is that, because myth is clearly bound up with the values and institutions of society, history is therefore in some way independent, neutral and objective.

In investigating past history, and in forming the conclusions

which I have formed, it must be admitted that one cannot rely on every detail which has come down to us by way of tradition. People are inclined to accept all stories of ancient times in an uncritical way – even when these stories concern their own native countries

Thucydides 1.20

Thucydides twice discussed the 'historical myth' of the Athenian tyrannicides (1.20 and 6.54-9). He pointed out that the tyranny had actually been overthrown by the Spartans; that Harmodius and Aristogeiton had killed the tyrant's brother, not the tyrant himself, and only because they had panicked; that the whole affair arose out of sexual jealousy and pique rather than any higher motive, and that the death of Hipparchus actually led to greater oppression for the Athenians. All of this was designed to undermine one of the charter-myths of the Athenian democracy, which embodied the key ideal of resistance to tyranny. This was an overtly political and subversive act, but one which Thucydides could excuse by claiming that he was really only interested in the facts, whatever they turned out to be.

Myths are regarded as stories told by the ignorant and credulous masses: history is expert knowledge for the educated and intelligent, and is therefore clearly superior, at least in the eyes of historians. The contrast between them is significant, since history certainly aims at offering a more critical account of the past. However, it also serves to conceal the extent to which historians may themselves be dependent upon myths or even involved in producing or justifying

them (think of Bernal's critique of the dominant nineteenth-century view of the Greeks). Myths are always bound up with the values and institutions of the society that produces them – but so too is history, however much historians may try to pretend otherwise.

Propaganda

Something similar can be said of the contrast between history and propaganda, or other sorts of 'official' history. Countless historians over the centuries have stressed the need for objectivity and freedom from partisanship in writing about the past. Thucydides talked of the partiality of some of his sources for one side or the other, implying that he was free from such bias. Sallust insisted that history should be free from hope, fear and partisanship; Tacitus vowed to avoid the twin pitfalls of flattery and invective. According to Lucian the historian should, among other things, be 'in his books a stranger and a man without a *polis*, independent, subject to no king, not reckoning what this or that man will think, but stating the facts' (41). Modern historians often mention with horror the re-writing of history at the command of authoritarian governments in Hitler's Germany and the old Soviet Union.

History should, according to this view, be an objective account of the facts, free from any external interference or influence. Whether this is actually possible, or even desirable, will be discussed at greater length later in this book, but on

the whole the answer appears to be no. Historians cannot escape the fact that they have been formed by a particular set of external influences; a Russian ex-communist will see the world (and its past) in a rather different way from a Sikh, men and women will have different ideas about history, and so forth. Historians cannot prevent their personalities and opinions from 'distorting' their view of the past, unless they confine themselves to the most basic (and boring) discussions of the evidence. The contrast between 'proper' history and propaganda nevertheless serves to suggest that such detachment is possible: since history is not so blatantly biased, it must therefore be entirely neutral and bias-free, and hence more reliable.

This is quite clearly a rhetorical device, intended to persuade the reader to accept the historian's conclusions; this account is tainted by flattery, that one is clearly inspired by hatred, trust *me*. The Byzantine historian Procopius (sixth century AD) made this sort of claim both in his oleaginous and adulatory account of the emperor Justinian's wars and in his vicious and salacious *Secret History* of the same period. This has naturally disturbed later historians enormously: these accounts cannot both be true, so which one did the author really want us to believe? The *Secret History* is obviously unreliable, with its stories of the emperor's demonic powers and the empress's sexual exploits, but its mere existence calls into question Procopius' sincerity when he asked us to believe his more sober version of events in the *History of the Wars*. The only sensible conclusion seems to be that we

cannot accept either account at face value. It is at least conceivable that this is the conclusion that Procopius intended us to draw. History is not a special, intrinsically unbiased account of the past to be contrasted with official propaganda or unbridled polemic; all such accounts are equally compromised, equally implicated in structures of power in society, competing with one another to persuade readers to accept their version of events.

Science

The vast majority of historians would agree, rightly or wrongly, that history is qualitatively different from myth, fiction and propaganda. There is far less agreement, at least in the English-speaking world, over whether or not history should be described as a science. Part of the problem is inevitably due to disagreement over the definition of science. The word derives from the Latin *scio*, I know. In many other languages, the words used to translate 'science' (*science*, *sapienza*, *wissenschaft*) cover 'knowledge' in general, and so happily incorporate history along with economics, biology and particle physics. The philosopher and historian R.G. Collingwood took this line in his definition of history:

Every historian would agree, I think, that history is a kind of research or enquiry. What kind of enquiry it is I do not yet ask. The point is that generically it belongs to what we call the sciences; that is, the forms of thought whereby we ask questions and try to answer them.

In English, however, the word science is far more closely associated with the natural sciences – physics, chemistry, biology. A subject like economics is classified as 'social science' rather than just 'science'. Collingwood's definition of history as science tends to look like philosophical sleight-of-hand: Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* making words mean what he wants them to mean. It ducks the real issue of how history does in fact relate to these familiar forms of knowledge.

It is easy enough to distinguish between history and the natural sciences on the basis of their institutional organisation (different faculties in the university) and the style of their writings. Traditionally, there was thought to be an obvious difference in their chosen subject matter, since scientists studied the natural world and historians studied people, but the boundaries have been confused in recent decades with the development of environmental history and ecology. The key argument has always been over the question of methodology. The standard view of science is that it proceeds by formulating hypotheses and then testing them, above all by the use of experiments. The scientist is a detached observer who uses objective systems of measurement; the scientist aims at discovering the laws which govern the physical world, and using these laws scientists can not only explain things which have happened but also make accurate predictions (for example, plotting the future course of a comet).

Some historians have concluded from this that, while history is clearly not identical to the natural sciences, it is

sufficiently similar to be classed as a science – and should perhaps be made more like a science. History too proceeds by formulating hypotheses and testing them against the evidence. Historians are not able to make use of experiments (re-running the Fall of the Roman Empire under slightly different conditions to see what difference it would make), but then neither can certain branches of the natural sciences like geology or cosmology. The historian is of course always detached and objective, just like the scientist. Some writers have indeed tried to uncover the laws which govern human behaviour, but all historians make generalisations about the way in which societies work. It is only in the field of prediction that history is an unqualified failure in comparison to science.

Indeed, it could be argued that history is not scientific enough. Its theories should be formulated and tested explicitly; historians should concentrate on the sorts of data that can be measured objectively without recourse to subjective evaluation, like price series or demographic records (hence the branch of economic history known as Cliometrics); they should strive to be ever more detached and ‘scientific’, even adopting the terminology and style of scientific writing in place of the woolly literary style in which most history is written. The ‘social sciences’ like economics and sociology have gone furthest in adopting scientific methods and style, hoping to study society in exactly the same way as one might study the structure of DNA or the atom. Historians have tended to be consumers rather than producers of laws,

applying the insights of the social sciences to particular historical events rather than formulating propositions about human behaviour in general on the basis of their studies – but that is no reason why they should not change their practices, and contribute a historical perspective to the project of understanding the workings of society in scientific terms.

Other historians have reacted with horror to this approach to history, and to the idea that history has anything in common with the natural sciences. They emphasise the impossibility of doing historical experiments and the failure of historians to predict the future with any success. They stress the differences between the sorts of evidence used by geologists and cosmologists in reconstructing the past (products of natural processes like volcanoes and the Big Bang) and that used by historians (products of human activity, above all human thought). Above all, they reject the idea that there are laws of history (or of human society). Human beings, it is argued, are not predictable; their actions are not wholly determined by their own biology or by their society or environment, but they have some measure of free will. The scientific approach to history is anti-humanistic and fatally flawed – as seen in the failure of historians (and other social scientists) to predict the future, even though they claim to have uncovered the laws of human behaviour. History is an art, not a science, since the historian has to try to understand the actions and thoughts of other human beings rather than simply measure them – although of course it is a special kind

of art, based on the rigorous interpretation of evidence and not at all dependent on the subjective judgement and imagination of the historian.

What is once more at stake in this debate is the prestige of history, the attempt to privilege the historical account (or a certain type of historical account) over other accounts of the past. Scientific language is an enormously successful and prestigious way of describing the world: the methods and products of natural science have enabled us over the last two centuries to dominate and change our environment and even our own selves. The scientific account of a phenomenon is, with a few exceptions (UFOs, perhaps), generally accepted in our society as true: scientists are seen as highly qualified experts who are neutral and disinterested – ‘scientific’, even – in their search for truth. If history can claim to be a science, it can buy into this image.

Science has been very successful in pushing alternative ways of describing the world – for example, the Judaeo-Christian story of the Creation – into marginal positions, but it has not succeeded in replacing them altogether. Plenty of arguments have been put forward against the scientific world-view, above all against the assumption that human beings can be understood wholly in terms of their genetic, psychological or social inheritance. Some historians have joined in this reaction, rejecting the scientific model of understanding human society as anti-humanistic and politically dubious (especially as Marxist accounts of the past were so keen to describe themselves as scientific). An absence of

method and the repudiation of any kind of explicit theorising are hence considered to be virtues in writing history. Historians, it is said, can give a better account of the past, and even of the present, precisely because they have not fallen for the illusory certainties of scientific methodologies (unlike practitioners of competing subjects such as economics and sociology ...).

Whether different historians consider that history is a kind of science will clearly influence the way in which they write history: the sorts of questions they ask, the way in which they interpret evidence (whether or not they make use of theories from other disciplines, for example) and even their style of expression. The comparison between history and science can also tell us a great deal about attitudes to science in our society – though historians’ reactions of adulation or suspicion seem to be equally based on an erroneous idea of what science is and how it works. It does not seem, however, that the comparison tells us very much at all about the nature of history. History and, say, physics are similar in some ways and very different in others; the same might be said of history and stamp-collecting, except that no historians have yet felt that they would enhance the prestige of their accounts by making such a comparison.

Fringe’ history

Although history has not succeeded in raising itself to the status of a full science (and many historians would resist such

a move even if it were possible), it has established itself over the last two centuries as a respectable academic discipline whose authority is guaranteed by its place in universities and in the school curriculum. Despite the fact that many historians prefer to ignore theoretical issues or explicit discussions of their methodology, history has come to be accepted as a form of expert knowledge; only properly trained historians have authority to say what the past was really like. History is seen to offer a superior account. Fiction may be more evocative and entertaining, myth may be more comforting, but history is (or rather, is taken to be) true.

Of course, historians disagree, at inordinate length, about almost every aspect of the past, but this does not undermine the authority of history as a whole. The real problem for historians lies in deciding what should be allowed to call itself history. What is to be done with books that claim to be based on the critical analysis of evidence and are written in something resembling the accepted scholarly style, and yet are not (at least in the eyes of historians) 'proper' history? Erich von Däniken concluded from his researches that extraterrestrial beings constructed the Pyramids and the statues on Easter Island. Iman Wilkens analysed Homer's *Iliad* in great detail and concluded that the Trojan War took place just outside Cambridge. Books like these, on subjects such as the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant and other Great Unsolved Mysteries of the World, are extremely popular, and far more widely read than academic history; television programmes on similar subjects reach millions.

A few historians and archaeologists respond, or are forced to respond, to this 'fringe history' by becoming professional sceptics, called in to play the voice of the establishment on television documentaries. The vast majority simply ignore the existence of such books; they are clearly not worth taking seriously. This is, I think, a very short-sighted attitude, for a number of reasons. In the first place, any historian must surely be concerned about the growing influence of this sort of history on popular perceptions of the past. Secondly, there is the more immediate problem that those reading such books include many students and potential students. I find myself at least once a year trying to mark a student assignment that is heavily dependent on sources which I consider to be quite plainly unreliable and bizarre. Students have to cope with the fact that their teachers may, apparently at random, turn out to be violently prejudiced against a particular book or author, with the resultant reduction in marks.

There is a case in favour of historians thinking more carefully about how they go about distinguishing 'fringe' or 'pseudo-' history from 'proper' history, and trying to teach this to their students. The critical evaluation of secondary texts is no less important a skill for the historian than the analysis of primary sources. This does, however, raise another problem. All too often, I suspect, certain books are rejected simply because their authors are not part of the historical establishment; history is defined as what historians accept as history. The works of writers like von Däniken and Wilkens are not published by respectable academic publish-

ers (who ask established historians to vet manuscripts submitted to them); they are not reviewed in the respectable academic journals; they do not appear on the shelves of university libraries or on students' reading lists. Their authors are not offered academic posts – and the fact that they are not professional historians is often seen as the clinching argument that their views should not be taken seriously.

I do this myself all the time; my initial considerations in evaluating a book would certainly include its publisher, its cover blurb and its author's academic credentials, and these would certainly prejudice my reading of it. Up to a point, the approach works, if only as a guarantee of minimum standards; the work of someone who holds an academic post or is published by a reputable academic publisher has, at some time or another, been scrutinised by other ancient historians. Clearly, however, this is not a test of the reliability of the work but of the author's position in relation to the scholarly establishment. It is easy to see how the assumptions which allow the unthinking dismissal of von Däniken as a crank could easily be turned against other sorts of writings about the past. Indeed, they have often operated in this manner, justifying the rejection of Marxist history, feminist history, black history. Bernal's argument that the whole of ancient history has been contaminated by a racist myth can safely be ignored because Bernal is an expert in Chinese politics, not a trained classicist (as becomes all too clear when he moves on from historiography to writing about the ancient world).

There are some perfectly good reasons for treating the

views of someone like von Däniken with suspicion. He gets some evidence wrong (Easter Island did once have lots of trees, so it *was* possible to move the statues without the aid of spaceships), but, more importantly, his interpretation of the evidence is simply less convincing than other possible interpretations. It is not *necessary* to hypothesise alien visitors to explain how the Pyramids were constructed. I shall discuss the question of formulating and assessing interpretations in the next chapter. The key point is that von Däniken should not be dismissed because he is a former hotel manager rather than a trained historian, but because his argument is flawed and unconvincing. In the same way, a professor whose book has been published by Harvard University Press is not automatically right. All attempts at writing about the past need to be read equally critically.

What is history?

The past is important to people. As I shall argue at greater length in Chapter 4, their sense of personal, social and national identity is bound up with stories of past events, as is the authority and prestige of many institutions and customs. Different people and groups therefore seek to have their version of events accepted as the true account. Historians are inevitably part of this struggle to determine the meaning of the past. They seek to persuade their audience to accept the authority of history by claiming that their methods are uniquely unbiased and trustworthy, contrasting history with

myth, fiction and propaganda. Historians define and police the boundaries of history so as to privilege their own version of events over other kinds of account. It works entirely to their advantage that we tend to take their idea of history for granted, accepting that proper history is what historians do.

Our vague, woolly, common-sense idea of history is not universally valid, though we tend to think of it as such, and it is not actually very useful in determining what is and isn't to be considered as history. However, a precise definition of history may be equally misleading. On closer inspection, the distinction between history and fiction or history and myth is not clear-cut. If we try to define the boundary between them, we tend to exaggerate the differences and ignore the similarities. It is more productive – though less effective for polemical purposes – simply to explore different aspects of the relations between history and other accounts of the past. There are important differences between history and novels, for example, but that should not completely obscure everything that they have in common as narrative prose accounts, the products (at least in part) of the imaginations of their authors.

I have done my best in this chapter to avoid describing history as a subject, a discipline, a kind of enquiry, a literary genre or anything except 'a way of talking about the past'. A more specific description would, I think, beg too many questions and obscure too much of what history might be. If we think of history as a subject or a discipline, emphasising its place in the educational system – which is, after all, where

most of us first encounter it – we will be too inclined to discuss history only in terms of what professional historians do or claim to be doing. If we describe it as a kind of enquiry or a form of knowledge, we will tend to concentrate on historical methodology to the exclusion of all else (the style of historical writing, the institutional framework, the politics of historical interpretation and so forth). We hardly dare treat history as if it were no more than a particular genre of literature, ignoring its claims to be able to tell a true story about the past.

I find it most helpful to think of history as a particular way of talking – and writing and thinking – about the past. Alternatively, we might use the term 'discourse', understood as a network of conventions, knowledge and practices that together constitute 'history'. Such a loose definition encompasses all the different elements that constitute history as we understand it: its methodology and its literary style, its familiar institutional framework and the various forms of history found outside the educational establishment. This will nevertheless seem quite inadmissible to many historians: surely I am confusing what is essential to history (methodology) with what is secondary (style, institutional structures)? Well, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, there is no such thing as a neutral, unproblematic definition of history; all definitions are working to someone's advantage (in this case, mine, because I want to talk about all these things) at someone else's expense.

History is a form of discourse about the past. It is distin-

guished from other discourses about the past by its emphasis on the critical analysis and interpretation of the surviving traces of the past, though (as we shall see in the next chapter) historians disagree violently over how they should go about making use of evidence. History is conventionally presented in the form of a prose narrative, governed by various (culturally specific) unwritten rules and expectations about what a historical narrative should look like. In the late twentieth century, we most commonly encounter history in particular institutional contexts, in schools and universities, which play an important part in determining the ways in which history is understood and practised.

History is not myth; but that does not mean that it is automatically true. History is not fiction; but that does not mean that the historian's imagination plays no part in the reconstruction of the past. History is not propaganda; but that does not mean that it is therefore invariably neutral and objective. The boundaries between these different discourses are never clear-cut, and it is equally possible to argue that history is a kind of fiction (although governed by certain generic conventions), and a kind of myth (a story that helps us make sense of the world), and a kind of propaganda (for the historian's personal point of view, if nothing else). We know history when we see it: a particular way of telling a story about the past, which claims to offer a trustworthy account of past events.