

# History *and* Historians

*A Historiographical  
Introduction*

FIFTH EDITION



Mark T. Gilderhus

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## *A Historiographical Introduction*

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## ≡ Preface ≡

This book is a brief survey of Western historical thinking from ancient times to the present and also an introduction to some of the main issues and problems in historiography, philosophy of history, and historical method. It seeks to strike a balanced coverage and to make such concerns accessible to beginning students. Novice historians need to encounter questions of theory in order to grasp the nature of the discipline, but many probably lack the prerequisites to take on R. G. Collingwood straight. This small work may ease the transition.

I want to express my thanks to former colleagues who shared some of these interests, notably George M. Dennison of the University of Montana and Harry Rosenberg, Manfred J. Enssle, Thomas J. Knight, and James E. Hansen III of Colorado State University. D. Clayton Brown, my department chair at Texas Christian University, aided in the process of putting together this fifth edition by providing support and encouragement. I also wish to thank those who reviewed the manuscript for this edition: James P. Krokar, DePaul University; Douglas W. Richmond and Jerome Rodnitzky, University of Texas at Arlington; and Maxine N. Lurie, Seton Hall University.

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# Aims and Purposes

Why bother with the study of history? What possible connections exist between an increasingly remote past and our own predicaments in the present? Can stories about other peoples in other places and other times have any meaning in an age of vaulting technology and traumatizing change? Is it reasonable to think that anyone can benefit from the experiences of others in presumably unprecedented and perilous times? These questions hold more than rhetorical importance and require serious answers. College and university students in all programs of study need to know what they can hope to learn and how their educational experiences will affect their capacity to think and act creatively in the future.

Doubters have often argued that knowledge of history will not provide much help. American industrialist Henry Ford characterized history as “bunk.” Although his observation probably says more about the limitations of Ford’s mind than about the nature of history, other luminaries have expressed similar reservations. In the seventeenth century, French scientist and mathematician René Descartes worried that undue curiosity about the past would result in excessive ignorance of the present. Another Frenchman, François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, a philosopher and historian, described history as “a pack of tricks we play on the dead.” Admittedly, he intended his comment as an appeal for more accurately written history, but nonetheless, a misreading might support the skeptics, some of whom in a classic putdown have divided historians into

three camps: those who lie, those who are mistaken, and those who do not know. Even so powerful a thinker as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a nineteenth-century German, feared that the only thing we can learn from history is that no one learns very much from history.

Recently, more optimistic commentators have expressed greater faith. In the summer of 1989, for example, Francis Fukuyama, a State Department planner and a Harvard-trained expert on the former Soviet Union, created a stir in political and academic circles by arguing that the termination of the Cold War really constituted "the end of history." Drawing upon a kind of "philosophy of history" as a means of comprehending the significance of contemporary events, Fukuyama averred, "There is some larger process at work . . . that gives coherence and order to the daily headlines." For the twentieth century, he characterized the process as "a paroxysm of ideological violence" in the developed world, pitting the values of Western liberalism first against "the remnants of absolutism, then bolshevism and fascism, and finally an updated Marxism that threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war." But now the end had come, culminating in "the triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*." According to Fukuyama, "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." This grandiose, provocative, and controversial affirmation elicited diverse responses from enthusiasts and critics. During the subsequent decade of the 1990s, the magnitude of racial, ethnic, and religious conflict, often violent, sometimes genocidal, raised serious doubts. Nevertheless, Fukuyama properly suggests that observers of and participants in the events of the present day will have trouble understanding much about their world unless they possess a solid grasp of history.<sup>1</sup>

A similar point emerged early in 1991 from a discussion "The Uses of History" by Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Pointing specifically to the debate in the U.S. Congress over the question of whether to wage war against Iraq in the Persian Gulf, Shanker noted that the speakers filled their arguments and counterarguments with references to history:

Members talked about Socrates and Abraham Lincoln; the Mexican-American War and the Peloponnesian war. . . . They cited St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, James Madison and Winston Churchill. Some talked about the appeasement of Hitler at Munich and Mussolini in Ethiopia; others about the Tonkin Gulf resolution that led to our deep entanglement in the Vietnam War.

According to Shanker, they did so not simply as "a way of fancying up their speeches . . . in a Congressional version of Trivial Pursuit" but rather "to help them think about and explain the decision they were making—to each other and to the American people." Different delegates drew different conclusions, but they all used history as "a tool . . . to reason and think about the crisis . . . to frame the debate . . . to make clear exactly where they stood." As Shanker observed, "No one could have followed the debates or had an intelligent opinion about the wisest course of action . . . without at least a basic knowledge of history." For this reason, he assigned a large measure of public significance to the discipline.<sup>2</sup> A plausible line of speculation similarly suggests that United States General H. Norman Schwarzkopf in his conduct of the war benefited considerably from his study of military history. Without it he might not have been able to think of ways to defeat his enemy at minimum cost through the use of a vast flanking movement, referred to in some circles as "Schlieffen Plan Left," a successful approximation of the German move against France in 1914.

More recently on 15 February 2001, Senator Richard Byrd of West Virginia issued an appeal for the study of history, specifically of the United States. While lamenting the deemphasis on the subject in the nation's public schools, he argued on patriotic grounds that American students, "regardless of race, religion, or gender," must know the story of their nation, its ideals, successes, failures, and inequities. Otherwise in the future, "this wonderful experiment with representative democracy" might lapse into disuse. Invoking a famous quotation from Marcus Tullius Cicero, Byrd stated that "to be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child."<sup>3</sup> This view, of course, identifies knowledge of history with civic-mindedness and public responsibility.

Undoubtedly, the study and writing of history have serious and risky implications. While faced with large and daunting responsibilities in their work, historians must confront their intellectual shortcomings, their incomprehension of the workings of the



world, and their limited capacity to interpret their evidence, which is almost always messy, incomplete, and susceptible to different forms of understanding. As humble practitioners, they should look upon their findings as tentative, subject in many cases to revision or rejection in the future. At the same time, they should take joy in the quest, confident that on occasion they fulfill a useful and important function.

Most historians regard the study of history as a way for human beings to acquire self-knowledge. Edward Gibbon, the great English historian of the Roman Empire, sadly described the historical record as consisting of "the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." Though certainly indicative of a wretched and dismal state of affairs, his remark also held forth the possibility of escaping from such conditions through rational inquiry. Transcendence over the past could come about only through knowledge.

Other historians have invoked their discipline as a kind of ethical sanction. Lord Acton, a Victorian Englishman and a devout Roman Catholic, insisted on maintaining "morality as the sole impartial criterion of men and things." He called upon historians to act as arbiters, defending the proper standards, out of an expectation perhaps that the threat of disapproval in the future might discourage incorrect behavior in the present. In other words, historians should hold malefactors accountable for their misdeeds. Tacitus, a historian of the Roman empire, took such an approach with Tiberius and Nero, and in all likelihood others will do the same with Richard M. Nixon and Bill Clinton.

Sometimes historians have presumed the existence of links between the past and the future, suggesting that comprehension of what has taken place might well prepare people for what will come about. How to get ready for the unknown has always been a problem. George Santayana, a Harvard philosopher, asserted early in the twentieth century that people who forget about the past are condemned to repeat it. This utilitarian conception saw in the discipline a way of developing workable strategies for survival. History comprised the recollections of all people. Santayana's belief affirmed that lessons learned from experience could aid in the avoidance of mistakes, pitfalls, and catastrophes in the future.

As a body of knowledge, history has a long and honorable tradition in Western civilization. Although definitions and points of

emphasis have changed from time to time, written narratives have always centered on human affairs and purportedly set forth truths. The claim to truth means merely that historians have some good reason in the form of evidence for believing in the validity of their accounts. Contemporary American historian Paul Conkin has provided a succinct description: a history "is a true story about the human past."<sup>4</sup> Obviously the adjectives "true" and "human" are crucial. The quality of truth distinguishes history from legend, fable, and myth, which admittedly may be valid in some ways but usually not literally. The concern for the human past requires that historians pay attention to events in nature primarily when they affect the activities of people. Volcanic eruptions, for example, hold an interest mainly when they bury cities such as Pompeii.

From ancient times to the present, all peoples have told stories about themselves, their ancestors, and their origins. The Assyrians carved into stone monuments the names and deeds of their kings for everyone to see. The inscriptions also contained warnings, indeed curses, threatening to punish transgressors who might deface the artifacts and violate the integrity of the record. The earliest tales usually dwelt upon extraordinary occurrences characterized as unusual, wonderful, fabulous, terrible, or miraculous. They told of spectacular events, often featuring displays of supernatural power in which the gods and the goddesses participated in human affairs and sometimes determined the outcomes. In the present day, such renditions confuse us because, by our standards, they seem to mingle the true with the untrue and the believable with the unbelievable. However, they are not necessarily evidence of overwrought imagination or low intelligence in ancient times. Rather, they bear out the historians' truism that different peoples in different times and places literally saw and experienced the world differently. It may also be that very divergent conceptions of truth and believability have separated the present from the past.

A view of history more consistent with our own developed in the ancient world when iconoclasts announced their disbelief in traditional, oral accounts and insisted on setting the record straight. In Greece, early in the fifth century B.C., Herodotus of Halicarnassus composed some of the first "critical history" in the Western tradition by writing "the truth" about the Greek wars against the Persians. In putting together *The Histories*, Herodotus employed

verifiable information, using eyewitness accounts, some official records of state, and his own observations. To his admirers, he was “the father of history.” Ever since Herodotus, historians have tried to tell true stories about the human past.

For two and one-half millennia, the study of history has satisfied many aims and purposes. In all likelihood, various students of the subject first acquired an interest out of simple fascination. As curious and inquisitive beings, they enjoyed the sheer fun of vicarious experience while asking, “What was it like?” Through the exercise of imagination, they could take part in times past, such as the Punic Wars or the Renaissance. Some reveled in the possession of odd and esoteric pieces of information, such as the kind of armaments used in battle during the Hundred Years’ War or the lineage of Swedish kings, while others found in history a source of instruction, that is, a way of making the course of human affairs, or at least some portions of it, intelligible. As noted by a European folk saying, people are not lost until they don’t know where they have been. Historians seek to keep us from getting lost by locating us in time and figuring out where we have been.

Although simple curiosity is a sound reason for embarking upon historical studies, professional scholars usually bring additional incentives to their work. Many are impelled by a strong sense of psychological necessity to make things intelligible, a consideration that undoubtedly operates in most other areas of intellectual endeavor. Scholars want to bring some measure of order and predictability to the world. They dislike disorder and unpredictability because random and haphazard events defy comprehension and may signal danger. Such vulnerability implies futility and the possibility of extinction. Scholars want to know what is likely to happen under various sets of circumstances. Most academic disciplines strive to make accurate predictions about probable outcomes. Such is the case in physics, chemistry, sociology, and political science. It is also true in history, except that in this discipline the process takes place backward in time instead of forward. On the basis of fragmentary and imperfect evidence, historians make retroactive predictions, or “retrodictions,” about what probably happened in the past and, in so doing, seek to define cause-and-effect relationships that make the flow of events understandable. Whenever historians make cause-and-effect statements—for example, “Americans

moved west because of the Panic of 1837"—they affirm their belief in the intelligibility of events in the human world. Things happen for reasons, and inquiring minds can grasp them.

Such assumptions are deeply engrained in the traditions of Western civilization. Whether they are actually true is perhaps less important than the historians' conviction that they are. For historians, the identification of cause-and-effect relationships establishes meaning and comprehensibility even though those can never be proven as literally true. They have to be taken on a large measure of faith. As an example of an alternate view, Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* contains an intriguing vignette. The central character, the remarkable Billy Pilgrim, has the capacity to move around in time and space. He can travel into the past, into the future, and also beyond the confines of Earth. In one episode, he is kidnapped by extraterrestrial beings from the planet Tralfamador. They put Billy Pilgrim on public display, locked up in a transparent geodesic dome with another captive, Montana Wildhack, a voluptuous movie starlet. The Tralfamadorans enjoy watching the two cavort about and also engage them in philosophical discussions. Billy Pilgrim amuses and awes his captors by affirming his belief that cause-and-effect relationships govern the course of events. Things happen because other things make them happen. The Tralfamadorans have a different notion. For them, things happen merely because they happen—randomly, haphazardly, inexplicably, chaotically. The adoption of any such world-view would make the work of historians next to impossible.

History also provides a way to study the identity of people, both individually and collectively. In some ways, this function of history parallels psychiatry and psychoanalysis in that these fields also endeavor to clarify human behavior in the present by making knowledge of the past both conscious and explicit. Just as psychiatrists and psychoanalysts seek to treat aberrant or disturbed conduct by scrutinizing repressed or unconscious memories, so historians try to arrive at a fuller understanding of the actions of people by examining their history. Robin G. Collingwood, a British philosopher and historian, liked to suggest that human beings possess no nature; they have merely history. As malleable creatures, they become whatever their experiences make of them.

Even allowing for some exaggeration, Collingwood has a compelling point. Historical experience shapes and molds the

identity of people in important ways. Most of us recognize this claim as a fact in our rituals. For centuries, Jewish people in their Passover feasts have told the story of ancient Israel and the special covenant with Yahweh, their God, and have managed, in spite of isolation and dispersion, to maintain a collective sense of group identity. In a less profound way, Fourth of July ceremonies in the United States serve a similar purpose. By invoking patriotic lore about the American Revolution, the people of the country establish a sense of solidarity by celebrating the origins of their nation. Just as a single person might explore the question "Who am I?" by thinking through life experiences, historians tell the life stories of peoples and groups. When we ask, "Who are the Kurds? or the Germans? or the Taiwanese?" or "Who are we?" the narratives of history provide one place to begin.

Another reason for studying history is utilitarian and practical. According to this rationale, history has a useful application because it helps us to better calculate the anticipated consequences of our own acts. George Santayana probably had this idea in mind when he said that people will repeat the past if they forget it. His words should not be taken too literally. The Second World War will not happen again, even if we neglect to read and write about it. Santayana meant something deeper. He knew that history is the collective memory of humankind and that the onset of a mass amnesia would have bad effects. For one thing, it would prevent the young from learning from the old. Each generation would have to find fire and invent the wheel over and over again. Without memory, we would have trouble functioning and making do in the world. What each generation transmits to the next can be understood in some measure as lessons in the art of survival.

Philosopher Karl R. Popper pointed out another facet of the problem. He believed that, above all, social scientists and historians should contemplate the unintended consequences of deliberate human acts. Sometimes things go wrong. Historical actors set out to accomplish a set of goals and actually bring about unanticipated or contrary results. Popper wanted students of human affairs to investigate the linkages between intentions and outcomes. Napoleon's attempt to dominate Europe destroyed feudal structures and cleared the way for modernization. In South Vietnam, the United States employed military force, supposedly in defense of the right

of self-determination, and facilitated the obliteration of a small country. Such ironies, sometimes tragic, sometimes comic, abound in human experience. Theologian, philosopher, and historian Reinhold Niebuhr pondered this maddening issue in his book *The Irony of American History* and warned that the actual consequences of our acts sometimes subvert our commitment to high ideals. We need to be careful in pursuing grandiose purposes because so often they go awry. If we could better reckon the relationship between aims and outcomes, we would vastly improve our chances of behaving more constructively in the world.

Historians typically compose their narratives by affirming the existence of cause-and-effect relationships and appraising the connections between the actions of historical figures, their presumed motives, and the actual consequences. The following three-stage model of historical inquiry is merely descriptive, not prescriptive. It shows how many historians carry out their work but sets forth no requirement that they must proceed in this fashion.

During the first step, historians begin their inquiry by asking, "What happened? How did the historical actors behave? What did they do?" This part is the easiest. As long as some kinds of artifacts exist, such as oral traditions, stone tablets, manuscripts, diaries, newspaper accounts, or official records of state, historians can arrive at some determinations. If no remnants of the past exist at all, then no written history is possible.

During the second step, historians must account for the actors' behavior by asking the question "Why?" The answer usually calls for an explanation or interpretation and has tricky implications because it entails an assortment of methodological and theoretical dangers. Historians traditionally have employed a "rational human" model of behavior in framing their explanations. They have assumed that most people set rational goals for themselves and then seek to achieve them through the exercise of reason and logic. In more recent times, dissenters have criticized this approach as hopelessly antiquated. Marxist scholars, for example, have argued that economic and class relationships usually determine behavior, no matter what the pretext, and that ostensibly principled and righteous actions often emanate from hidden purposes aimed at self-aggrandizement. Similarly, the advocates of psychohistory have rejected the "rational human" model. In their efforts to apply

psychoanalytical theories to history, they find the wellspring of human behavior not in reason and logic but in repressed impulses tucked away deep within the recesses of the psyche. Such disparities of understanding mean that discussions of motive are always tentative and uncertain.

In the final step, historians try to evaluate the consequences of events. They ask, "How did things turn out, for good or for ill? Who benefited and who suffered? Did the outcome make the effort worthwhile?" On such big and significant questions, historians seldom agree. The reason is obvious. Any attempt to address them will draw upon differing and rival value systems, that is, divergent standards of judgment, and no means exist by which to reconcile them. How can historians accurately measure the costs and gains of the Mexican Revolution after 1910? About one million people died out of a population of twelve million. If the great rebellion had never occurred, would "natural progress" have made Mexico a better place at less expense? No scholar has any good way of knowing for sure. Was the Second World War really "the good war," and was the use of atomic bombs necessary? Among other things, history involves its practitioners in an ongoing and sometimes unresolvable debate over the meaning of human experience.

Historians practice their craft in a kind of intellectual minefield in which all sorts of unknown and unanticipated dangers pose threats, and the best of projects can blow up before them. The evidence often is too sparse to tell the whole story. Even when it exists in abundance, the difficulties of explanation, interpretation, and evaluation are immense. Yet historians persist in their toil, seeking to render some small portions of human experience intelligible. This book is an introduction to the practices and patterns of historical thinking.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

Engaging observations and pungent definitions of the nature of history appear in Ferenc M. Szasz, "The Many Meanings of History," *History Teacher*, 7 (Aug. 1974), 552–63; 7 (Nov. 1974), 54–63; 8 (Feb. 1975), 208–16; and another piece provided by subscribers, 9 (Feb. 1976), 217–27. Introductory works considering aims and purposes include Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties*

of History: From Voltaire to the Present (New York: William Collins Publishers, 1956); Allan J. Lichtman and Valerie French, *Historians and the Living Past: The Theory and Practice of Historical Study* (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing, 1978); Carl G. Gustavson, *The Mansion of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); and Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1970). R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), although difficult for beginners, is indispensable. Karl R. Popper's essay "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences" appears in the collection edited by Patrick Gardiner, *Theories of History* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 276–85. Useful reference works with names, terms, definitions, and bibliographies include *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2000) by Alun Munslow and *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (New York: Routledge, 2000) by Marnie Hughes Warrington.

## ENDNOTES

1. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *National Interest* (Summer 1989), 2–18; idem, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Criticism of Fukuyama's views appears in Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline Is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists* (Paddington, Australia: Macleay Press, 1996), 159–73.
2. Albert Shanker, "Where We Stand: Debating War in the Persian Gulf and the Uses of History," *New Republic* (Feb. 1991), 7.
3. "Senator Robert Byrd Speaks Out on the Teaching of American History," *OAH Newsletter* 29 (May 2001), 3.
4. Paul K. Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *The Heritage and Challenge of History* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1971), 131.





## The Beginnings of Historical Consciousness

Among the traditions of Western civilization is a distinctive level of historical consciousness. This awareness developed in large measure from the legacies of the Jews, the Greeks, and the early Christians. The Jews and later the Christians imposed upon the events of the past a sense of meaning, structure, and process. For them, the past merged with the present and the future and moved inexorably toward a set of definite and knowable goals. The Greeks, meanwhile, contributed an insistence upon studying the past critically and scientifically to determine the truth. For them, the distinction between history and mythology became fundamental.

In contrast, the earliest human beings had little historical consciousness. They lived in an expansive present in which the urgencies of mere survival pressed incessantly upon them. Indeed, the terrors of the past—the recollection of impermanence, hunger, death, catastrophe, and destruction—may have created psychological barriers against the act of remembering. The trauma of mere existence drained meaning from past events, except perhaps a negative connotation. To whatever extent the earliest people conceived of a time dimension, their impressions took on a cyclical form; that is, events moved more or less pointlessly in a circle. Things occurred, went away, and then recurred, following the pattern of days, nights, and seasons. For ancient peoples, the familiar and predictable cycles of nature became a