



# The SPECIOUS PAST

HISTORIANS AND OTHERS

Pardon E. Tillinghast

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*Historians and Others*

*PARDON E. TILLINGHAST*

*Middlebury College*



*ADDISON-WESLEY PUBLISHING COMPANY*

*Reading, Massachusetts*

*Menlo Park, California · London · Don Mills, Ontario*

This book is in the  
ADDISON-WESLEY SERIES IN HISTORY

*Consulting Editor*  
Robin W. Winks

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This book is not so much about history as about historians and their readers. More specifically, it is concerned with why some people have troubled to spend their lives writing history and why others spend their leisure, despite many other claims on their time, in reading what the historians write. Because this approach limits the field somewhat, there are several things I have not attempted. One is the history of historiography, on which there is already a bulging corpus of material. Another is philosophy of history, which bulges even more, but which has become an area increasingly closed to historians, most of whom have neither the necessary epistemological and semantic equipment to handle the field nor the interest to acquire it. I am concerned not with whether historical knowledge is possible but with whether it is useful—and if so, to whom. Nor am I offering here a personal confession or apologia as a historian: one's autobiography is the place for that. The book does not say how history ought to be written; most of what can be said on that subject has been said already, at great length and with (by now) tedious repetition. Finally, it does not try to capture that chimera “all history.”

What I have done is to ask and try to answer a series of questions, most of which have been asked before. Above all, my wish was to examine what assumptions historians have been making in studying the human and, more specifically, the Western past. The particular questions that are discussed follow.

1. Is there any point in studying the past “for its own sake”? Since the past, by definition, no longer exists, doing so seems to be a somewhat profitless enterprise.

2. If the past is not studied for its own sake, it must be examined for the sake of the present or the future. Not, however, for the whole of either of those very complex entities, but rather for certain aspects of them. The problem is: why were some aspects of the present or future rather than others chosen as reasons for studying certain aspects of the past?

3. What kinds of present or future problems, if any, can trained professionals solve by describing certain kinds of past events in a highly technical and analytical way? Or indeed is problem-solving by specialists what history is really about? If it is, why have so few problems, apart from authenticating documents and rearranging series of events, ever been solved by historians? If not, why is history presented as an analytical discipline? Does careful, informed, sophisticated description of past human actions, placed in impeccable order and replete with learned references to earlier laborers in the vineyard, constitute solving a problem? If so, what sort of problem? Is the *kind* of past that professional historians have been presenting a specious one or not?

4. Who reads histories, and why do they read them? What enlightenment do readers expect to attain by doing so, and for what purposes? What has the relationship been between the historians and their restive audience, and what has made it change, particularly during the last few decades? It is meaningless to assert that history is declining, but it is not meaningless to suggest that the influence of academic historians seems somewhat on the wane. Can satisfying reasons be given for this decline in influence? Does the speciousness consist not in what historians have been presenting but in what the audience, perhaps illegitimately, expected to gain from it?

5. Why have so many specialists in other disciplines moved in to help historians solve their problems? Are historians too timid to solve them themselves? Or has their training made such an activity impossible for them? By what standards should the success, or lack of success, of such incursions be judged?

The book is divided into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1 through 5) deals with the relationship between historians and their audience. Part II (Chapters 6 through 9) discusses raids on what is allegedly historians' territory by outsiders, semioutsiders, and even insiders, as well as some results of the skirmishing. Part III (Chapters 10 through 12) suggests some of the ways in which the historians and the others

have attempted to come to terms with the implicit, rather than the explicit, demands that have been made on the field. Since a major position asserted is that implicit issues are usually much more important than explicit ones, these arguments conclude the discussion.

### *Acknowledgments*

Many people have helped me in preparing this book. I should like to thank particularly Mr. J. W. Hunt, of London, for reading the manuscript both critically and kindly. Professor Travis Jacobs, of Middlebury College, made helpful comments on the part of it dealing with the New Left. I am grateful to the President and Fellows of Middlebury College for the leave during which the book was written, to the President and Fellows of Clare Hall, Cambridge, for a place of great stimulation and charm to participate in while I was writing it, and to Professor Geoffrey Elton, of Cambridge, for proposing my name to Clare Hall.

*Middlebury, Vermont*  
*December 1971*

P. E. T.

## *The Argument*

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## *Part One*

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### *HISTORY AND ITS AUDIENCE*

Historians do not write in a vacuum; we try to clarify specific parts of the human past within a particular present society and at a particular present time. But the audience for these efforts has changed at a different rate than we have. This has led to a gap, which has been partly filled by “pop historians,” to the disgust of the professionals, and to a growing doubt over the relevance, here and now, of what the professionals are doing. The question historians have been asking is, “How do I present a picture of a part of the past that is as sensible, as intelligible, and as scientifically accurate as possible?” But the question that needs debating is “For *what* present are historians writing about the past in the way they are?” This issue was not a serious one a century ago. It is now.





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*Immortalization and Scientism*

## I

History is in some ways the most confusing and frustrating of all academic subjects. Every other discipline has an area it can call its own; history has no home. All history, except that of historiography, is a story of someone else's field. Past politics, when it becomes detailed enough, becomes the specialty of the political scientist; past religion, that of the theologian. Intellectual history always seems eventually to shade off into philosophy, fine arts, political theory, or literature. This means that no matter how much one studies any aspect of history, he will always seem ultimately to be getting to know more and more—but never quite enough—about an area already populated by indignant specialists. He will then make mistakes that—as they will not fail to inform him—could have been avoided by any tyro with the merest smattering of proper background and technique.

In other fields it is customary to begin with some sort of working definition. With history, a working definition that would both satisfy most historians and mean something intelligible to those outside the profession is almost impossible. Part of the reason is that the word “history,” as is invariably mentioned at this point, is dual in its meaning. It is not only a story of what happened, then and there; it is also our more or less analytical account of it, here and now. The relationship between “then and there” and “here and now” is the most difficult and complex intellectual problem with which historians must grapple. There was a time when things were simpler: history was the doings of

rulers and would-be rulers, warriors, priests, and their hangers-on, with appropriate moral lessons appended. This concept satisfied the ancient Greeks and Romans, and it also sufficed for most other historians, down to about the 18th century. Incredibly, there are some it satisfies even now.

With the coming of the great intellectual historians of the 18th century, the concept widened. The development of economic and then social history in the 19th century widened it again. Today there is no definition that includes all present meanings of the word except "the totality of thoughts and actions that have affected the human race since its beginning."

But such a definition poses many more problems than it solves. Historiography, at least in the Western world, has become the attempt to discover what Leopold von Ranke in his classic phrase over a century ago referred to as "what actually happened." This approach has become accepted orthodoxy, and many historians still write as though that were their exclusive aim. The trouble, as I shall show later on, is that this approach reflects a theory of history to which most of us would by no means subscribe. To see the past as it really happened, i.e., from no particular angle, would be to see it with the eye of God, and few historians are in a position to claim such omniscience. All history is *someone's* past; there is no other way to see it. Thus it always appears to us through refraction. It is a combination of many other persons' views of certain limited parts of their experience, which we are trying to appropriate to our own point of view at a certain time in our experience. Even if we are dealing with what Ranke called "the purest, most immediate documents" exclusively, we shall still see this combination through at least two refractions: the viewpoints of the original reporters and the distortions inseparable from our own biases and those of our society.

Therefore our apprehension of history will always be entangled with the emotions, slants, and confusions of particular persons in particular societies and particular times. Although it is extreme to claim, with Croce and Collingwood, that there is no past whatever except insofar as a historian reexperiences it in his own mind, nevertheless, apart from our reconstructions, the past simply does not have any shape. We know it is there, but there is no way to find out what it was like.

All responsible historians are accordingly subjected to endless frustrations. On every important issue in our field, the evidence con-

flicts not merely occasionally but always. Sometimes there will be two or three accounts, using different sets of facts and wildly at variance with each other; for more recent events there will often be several dozen accounts—all by persons who had some reason to know the facts, and considerable reason to be biased; and such accounts are also very much at variance. Sometimes, on the other hand, the crucial evidence will be in two or three vital documents; yet when we go to the archives, we learn that these particular documents are mysteriously missing.

Under these circumstances it is not greatly surprising that historiography has neither a Newton nor a Darwin. Buckle in the 19th century was convinced that historians—at least other historians—suffered from mediocre intellectual endowment; otherwise they would have occupied themselves with a field calling for brainwork at a higher level. They would have produced, at the very least, a Galileo. But it seems that the nature of history simply does not permit, at least at present, discoveries based on the flashes of brilliant intuition associated with genius. Again and again someone has been on the brink of a breakthrough that would revolutionize all the teaching, study, and writing about the past—and then something has gone wrong: a magnificent theory slaughtered by a few mean little facts. The present position among some historians is that we are on the eve of a great historiographical revolution, but respected members of our profession have said this sort of thing before.

Thus it seems that the best available definition of history, though it is not a very good one, is not “what really happened,” but “what historians do,” with the accent on the present tense. For the purposes of this definition, a historian is anyone who writes any account of the past, including his own diary. The distinction would then be not between historians and nonhistorians, but between professionals and amateurs. Since we are all historians now, it seems as well for us to become aware of the ordinary rules of a kind of activity that will continue whether we know its rules or not; and it is usually more intelligent to know the methods of operation of a craft one is engaged in.

## II

At present, historiography is in a kind of crisis, not so much of technique as of agonizing self-searching. After a growth from strength to strength ever since the late 18th century, enrollments in history in colleges and universities, both in Europe and in the United States, seem

to be leveling off and in some cases even declining. Since part of the development in historical study included raising its status as a more and more technical discipline, increasingly practiced by professionals rather than by amateurs, this mood of questioning and even dismay has spread in widening circles through the ranks of the professionals. Part of the trouble is that, although historians have developed very specialized techniques for dealing with their material, these techniques no longer seem sufficient to handle a cluster of new problems.

Some of the new problems have resulted from the incredible proliferation of data. The archives dealing with a single ministry of one government during a recent five-year period can occupy several miles of shelf space, and one cannot deal with such a hill of paper in the ways that were possible during ages when sources were scarcer. There are also new kinds of evidence a historian is forced to consider. For example, there have been revolutionary breakthroughs in recent archaeology. There is a different sort of problem in handling the biography of a great statesman, many of whose decisions were made in the course of telephone calls and extremely private interviews. When we must deal with men whose personalities were obviously abnormal, how much psychological background should we have mastered? If with complex voting patterns or demography, should we first become familiar with advanced statistical techniques? Whether historians' attempts to come to terms with such puzzling problems signify growth or decline—to use two favorite historical words—remains to be seen. All that is certain is that giving an intelligible account of the past has become a much more difficult business than it was even twenty years ago.

It has become increasingly clear in recent decades that historiography is not so much a thing in itself as a reflection of other things. The kinds of history that can become influential in any society depend on what that society believes to be important. For example, if in writing a history of the Middle Ages we use statistics as they were then understood, we cannot expect the kind of accuracy that would be possible if we were dealing with 19th century statistics. The term "historical accuracy" meant then something very different from what it means now. Every record of the past kept in a society was maintained because certain persons at that time and place considered the recorded activity more important than other activities that went unrecorded; certain deeds, ideals, institutions ought to be preserved for posterity.

Primarily, history is always a story, and at least before the 18th century, the story ordinarily dealt with what Hannah Arendt calls

"immortalization."<sup>1</sup> In very early societies, what needed to be immortalized were the deeds of gods or heroes—what we would today usually call myth. These stories, or events, were intended to provide inspiration for later generations, in order that they might emulate the deeds of those predecessors the historians had chosen for immortalization. It is certain that many medieval princes were spurred to greater activity by reflecting on what Caesar or Alexander had accomplished, and it is highly likely that Napoleon often thought about Hannibal.

Thus classical authors, concerned with immortalizing the most important deeds of their predecessors, knew very well why they wrote history. The same was true of writers in the Middle Ages—especially those who dealt with the lives of the new heroes, the saints. When Bede or Jacobus of Voragine wrote a biography of a saint, it was not at all in order to give an accurate rendition of that particular man's character, in our sense; it was with the idea of showing the general character of a holy man, so that the reader might imitate him, and achieve sainthood too.

But another element almost always appeared in history-writing: in addition to immortalization, there was the importance of satisfying the historian's—and the reader's—curiosity, which was as insatiable then as it is now. The need to provide what might be called high-level gossip prevented biographies and histories from becoming unduly marmoreal. As time went on the best writers learned to endow their subjects with a combination of superhuman and very human characteristics. This *mélange* pleased the audience and thus also pleased the historians. These techniques and a few others made possible what was until rather recently a very acceptable method of dealing with the immense complexities of the human past—or rather, of the minuscule part of it that historians wrote about.

During the early modern period, as scientific and pseudoscientific ideas were more and more adopted by the intellectual community, the techniques changed rather fast. In Germany especially, the demythologizing methods of the Tübingen theologians in the 1820's and 1830's were more and more applied to history—as during the Reformation, on a much smaller scale, historians had used demythologization in dealing with the vagaries of the medieval church, and early church historians with those of pagans. As the study of the past became more scientific, i.e., as it used increasingly rigorous techniques to sift and

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1. H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, New York, 1961, pp. 43ff.

discard evidence, it became more respectable; a newly-educated audience arose, eager to participate in the growth of such delightful and yet accurate and therefore improving knowledge, and all the scientific history that could be written was eagerly absorbed.

However, at the same time that specialization was growing and scientific history was coming to consist of more and more rigorously sifted accounts of smaller and smaller areas by more and more specialized historians, the first signs of a break began to appear. While historical writing became increasingly acceptable by the standards of its own practitioners, it seemed to become somewhat less relevant by the standards of what had been its audience—the generally cultured people, whose interests remained in the fields of immortalization and curiosity to an extent that the new generations of historians seemed unwilling to satisfy. Having gained the world, historiography appeared likely to be losing its soul. The story of the past was being carefully and thoroughly written, but why it was being written at all was a question no historian seemed eager or even able to answer.

### III

This situation did not catch the historians wholly unprepared. But the narcissism that afflicts most professions has never been lacking in our own. If history was somehow losing touch, the reason was—had to be—that the message its scholars were so learnedly mediating had not been understood by the less capable, i.e., less specialized, general public. Of late, there has been much discussion in periodicals and even books on the present situation of historical studies at the universities and elsewhere. At the very apex of the profession, in presidential addresses at the American Historical Association and in professors' inaugural addresses in England and indeed throughout the world, a large literature is developing on the subject.

The cliché experts, who include some very prestigious figures, have not been behindhand, either. As usual, their positions, while firm, are less than united. They exhort us to be utterly honest with our documents—presumably by using the Ranke method, according to which the exclusive and trained use of pure and immediate sources and the rigorous suppression of all prejudices will solve our problems. These prejudices seem to consist primarily of nationalism, race and class superiority, and such lingering theological beliefs as may be still said to exist among historians. (A sense of intellectual superiority is not yet

regarded as a prejudice.) The matter of moral judgments has come in for much heated discussion: on one hand we must eschew them completely, because a scholar must be wholly without prejudice; on the other it is vital that in an age marked by such great atrocities as our own we take a firm stand.

What is far from clear is the relation between this feeling inside the profession and the seeming loss of faith, at least by nonhistorians, in present-day academic history-writing, which, as has already been noted, is always partly a reflection of the values of its society. This reflection is apparent even when an author does his very best to reject almost all its social values—as Karl Marx did a century ago and as some historians of the New Left do today. Thus, in order to understand our past, we must be aware of the real standards of value that prevail, both in the academic society in which most history is now written and among the mass of readers not in academia who formerly provided most of the audience—and still do provide some of it. Since the Western world is plainly and profoundly in crisis, it is not surprising that this upheaval is reflected, both directly and indirectly, in historical writing. What is surprising and even strange is that only parts of the upheaval have been reflected in historiography, whereas others have been ignored.

In earlier times, when at least the upper levels of society appeared stable, so did history, in the sense both of a story of the past and of the situation of a present profession. This stability is at present rapidly disappearing, and the stages of the growing crisis can be briefly traced. Modern historiography perhaps began with the great researchers of the 17th century, who made possible the great development during the next hundred years. Contemporary views stem from Ranke more than from anyone else, since it is his method (or rather, part of it) which is still taught today in all orthodox bastions. However, that method started receiving shocks just before the first World War, when younger historians began to ask whether even the purest and most immediate documents of a distant past were really relevant to the problems of their own age. Twenty years later, there followed a growing trend toward relativism: we were asked whether there was any absolute *Gegenüber*—a “history-in-itself”—to which all good historical writing could be said to correspond. Underneath these movements, growing less from Ranke than from his German Romantic predecessors, was the series of ideas grouped together as “historicism.” No conclusive definition of historicism is at present possible (although an attempt will be made to give a rough one later on). Following the second World War there was a great



burgeoning in philosophy of history. One periodical, *History and Theory*, deals solely with this topic; and not only philosophers, but some historians—in spite of the disapproval of a majority of them—are beginning to ask questions dealing not so much with the technical as with the theoretical aspects of their craft. During the last decade there has been a growing rapprochement with the social sciences, although it has been opposed by an influential but now declining group of defenders of history-as-literature, who retained more of the old beliefs in immortalization and satisfaction of curiosity.

The basic assumption on which most historiography is still built is that history's task consists in describing a closely delimited area of the past with infinite care, by using scrupulously refined techniques of documentary analysis on one hand and ordinary, common-sense assumptions about human nature and motivation on the other. Today that basic assumption is under serious scrutiny, not so much by historians as by two groups of outsiders: the social scientists and the philosophers, whose methods some of us are trying to use at second hand. There is also the problem of the ordinary reading public, who are less impressed by our brand of "scientific history" than we might wish. As a result, there are a number of confusions, the unraveling of which will take some time.

## 2

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*History and Common Sense*

## I

History is often called the study of the past. It is not really any such thing: the past is not subject to our inspection, since it no longer exists. History is rather the analysis of the observations, ideas, and prejudices of millions of people, most of whom were not historians at all, about carefully selected parts of their own past or that of others. (To avoid confusion, I shall henceforth refer to this congeries as "the past.") That is, history is the evaluation of all the assumptions that have ever