

→ What Is History?

In English the word *history* has two distinct meanings. First, history is the sum total of everything that has actually happened in the past—every thought, every action, every event. In this sense, history is surely one of the broadest concepts conceived by the human intellect. History, broadly defined, encompasses the entire scope of the human experience on this planet. And this meaning of the word—things that happened in the past—is what most people have in mind when they use the term in daily conversation.

But it is the second meaning of the term *history*, that is more central to this book. If history is the past, it is also *an account* of the past—i.e. books, articles, and lectures. It should be clear with just a moment's thought that the past (all of the thoughts and events that actually happened) is lost forever, as Ash noted in the quotation above. Our only contact with the past is through the relatively scant records left by those who lived before us and through the accounts written by historians on the basis of those records. It is this history—created accounts of the past—that we read, think about, and study in school. And, it is history in this sense—history as a creation of human intelligence—that is the subject of this book. As historians James Davidson and Mark Lytle put it, "History is not 'what happened in the past'; rather, it is the act of selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past. It is something that is done, that is constructed, rather than an inert body of data that lies scattered through the archives."²

The Nature of History

History, then, is both the past and the study of the past. In order to appreciate better the vast intellectual distance that separates the past-as-it-actually-happened (history in the first sense) from historians' accounts of that past (history in the second sense) we ask you to take a brief journey of the imagination. Try to visualize yourself walking at night amidst a rugged landscape punctuated by dramatic peaks and valleys. As you walk a companion turns on a powerful searchlight that illuminates some of the recesses and promontories that were formerly veiled in darkness. As the light moves, the previously lighted objects disappear from view and new features of the landscape appear. You want to see the entire landscape spread before your eyes, but the beam of light, narrow and imperfect, lets you see only a tiny fraction of the reality before you at any given time. When the light is turned off, you can see nothing at all. The

¹ Timothy Garton Ash, "On the Frontier," *New York Review of Books*, November 7, 2002, 60.

² James Davidson and Mark Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, 4th ed. (New York: Knopf, 2000), xviii.

peaks and valleys and forests are still there, and remain there, awaiting other beams, projected from other angles, to reveal their features.

In this allegory the peaks and valleys of the landscape represent the “past-as-it-actually-happened”—history in the first sense. The person with the searchlight is the historian who, by using the beam, reveals some of the outlines of the landscape. Essentially, the historian “lights up” some segment of the past that we cannot perceive directly, just as the person carrying the searchlight illuminated a feature of the landscape hidden in darkness. The glimpse of the landscape provided by the beam, as transient and incomplete as it is, is analogous to an account of the past written by a historian.

This analogy is imperfect in that the historian cannot even shine a weak beam of light on the real past as if it were a mountain or a valley. The past, unlike any existing geological feature, is gone forever. To the extent we can know anything about the past-as-it-actually-happened, that knowledge must be based on surviving records. Still, the analogy is useful. Just as a landscape can be real, so, too, is the past that historians study. The actual events of the past are gone forever, but they were just as “real” as all the human activities you see around you every day. Further, as inadequate as the beam of light was in illuminating the totality of the landscape, it did provide useful glimpses of reality. Similarly, historians’ accounts can and do provide useful, if partial, glimpses of the past.

To reiterate the central point: Even though a relationship exists between the past-as-it-happened and the historian’s account of a segment of the past, the historical account can no more show past events as they actually took place than the narrow beam of light can illuminate an entire landscape. The historian can reveal a tiny piece of the past, can present us with an individual version of a segment of the past, but no one can present the past as it actually was.

This leads us to another point: All historical accounts are reconstructions that contain some degree of subjectivity. Whether written or spoken, every piece of history is an individualized view of a segment of past reality—a particular vision, a personalized version based on incomplete and imperfect evidence. Writing history is an act of creation or, more accurately, an act of *re-creation* in which the mind of the historian is the catalyst. Any piece of history that we read or hear ought to be treated as an individual creation. In fact, one might even say that any history we read is as much a product of the historian who wrote it as of the people who actually lived the events it attempts to describe!

Reconstructing the Past

The subjective, reconstructed, nature of written history becomes clearer if we look more closely at the process whereby the historian bridges the chasm between the past being studied and the historical account that is the product of that study. Actually, the intellectual task of the historian is as challenging as any on earth. Unlike the scientist who can experiment directly with tangible objects, the historian is many times removed from the events under investigation.

The historian, as noted before, cannot study the past directly, but must rely on surviving records. It should be obvious that surviving records, compared to the real

Alfred R. Waud, artist for *Harper's Weekly*, sketching on the battlefield of Gettysburg (July 1863). Historians are not the only ones who seek to "reconstruct" the past. *Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, (LC-DIG-cwppb-00074).*



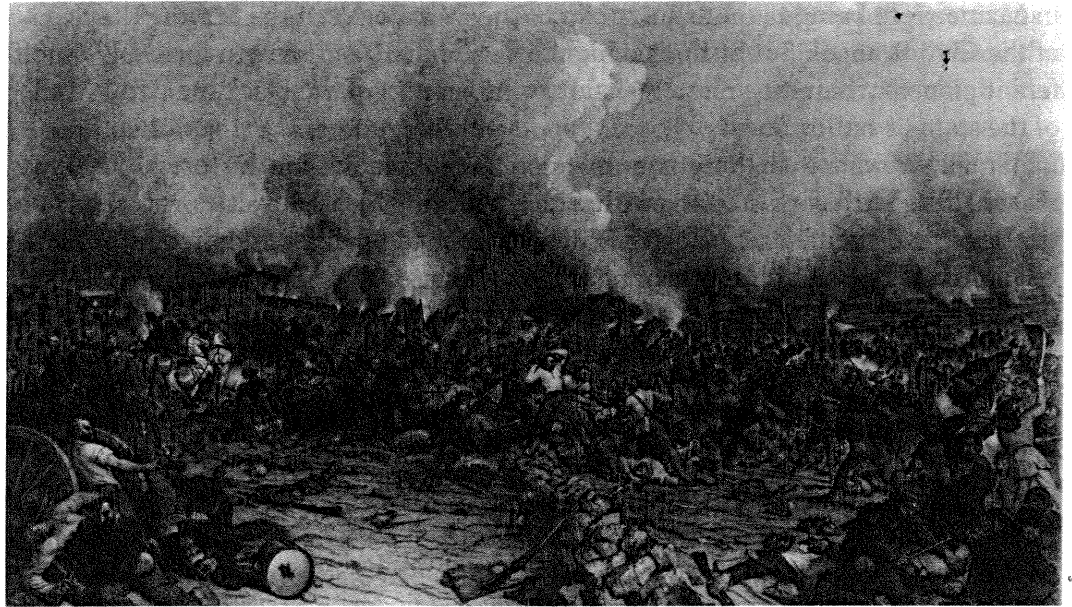
past they reflect, are like a few drops of water in a large bucket. For instance, most past events left no records at all! Think of the number of events in your own life for which there is no record but your own memory. Multiply those unrecorded events in your own life by the billions of human beings who inhabit the earth and you get some idea of the number of events each day that go unrecorded. That is only the beginning of the problem. In the words of historian Louis Gottschalk:

Only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to the historians' attention; only a part of what has come to their attention is credible; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian. . . . Before the past is set forth by the historian, it is likely to have gone through eight separate steps at each of which some of it has been lost; and there is no guarantee that what remains is the most important, the largest, the most valuable, the most representative, or the most enduring part. In other words the "object" that the historian studies is not only incomplete, it is markedly variable as records are lost or recovered.³

Clearly, then, the historian can never get or present the full truth about a given past. The best the historian can provide, even under ideal conditions, is a partial sketch of a vanished past. "Even the best history," said historian Bruce Catton, "is not much better than a mist through which we see shapes dimly moving." Or, in the words of W. S. Holt, "History is a damn dim candle over a damn dark abyss."

If all this were not enough, the historian is also a factor in the equation. Not only are historians fallible and capable of error, but personal biases, political beliefs, economic status, religious persuasion, and personal idiosyncrasies can subtly and unconsciously influence the way in which they interpret existing sources. We all have a unique "frame of reference"—a set of interlocking values, loyalties, assumptions, interests, and principles of action—that we use to interpret daily experience.

³ Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (New York: Knopf, 1950), 45–46.



Artist Peter Rothermel's rendition of the Battle of Gettysburg (1863) created ca. 1872. Like historians, artists often attempt historical reconstructions long after the original event. *Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, (LC-DIG-pga-03266).*

Suppose a newspaper publishes a photograph of the president of the United States playing golf at a country club on a Sunday morning under the headline “President Relaxes.” A variety of reactions would be likely, each of them reflecting a different frame of reference:

- A political opponent: “I wonder if he’s as bad on the course as he is in the Oval Office.”
- A party loyalist: “Good for him. He deserves a break from the political wars he’s been fighting.”
- A physical fitness guru: “Why doesn’t he spend his free time in a more physically demanding activity?”
- A clergyman: “As a role model for all of us, he shouldn’t be playing golf on a Sunday morning.”

Same newspaper, same headline, same photograph, and four different responses.

A frame of reference is like a lens through which we view the world around us. It leads us to make certain conjectures, to classify individual items in a certain way, to ask certain kinds of questions, and to develop certain interpretations. Conservative Republicans often read and interpret the political history of the United States in a very different way than do liberal Democrats. Protestants and Catholics frequently disagree when writing about the religious upheavals known as the Reformation. And Northerners and Southerners are notorious in their differences concerning the history of the American Civil War. For example, Hodding Carter III, assistant secretary of state under President Jimmy Carter (1977–81), was aware at a young age that the American history he was taught in the South differed from that taught in the North. “It was easy for me as a youngster growing up in Mississippi to know that my eighth-grade state history textbook taught me a lot which didn’t jibe with what my cousins

in Maine were being taught. We spoke of the War Between the States. They spoke of the Civil War. . . . But our texts might as well have been written for study on different planets when it came to the status and feelings of the black men and women of the state or nation.”⁴

Small wonder that there is an element of subjectivity in historical accounts, inasmuch as we have historians with widely differing ideals, loyalties, interests, motivations, and even biases, each of which are shaped by different ethnic experience, religious allegiance, political leanings, and class interests.

That said, we must express a certain caution. Historians are justified in viewing an event from any perspective they wish, and from that perspective explain how and why that event happened as it did. However, there is a danger involved in allowing one’s singular frame of reference to shape completely a historical inquiry. Excessive focus on one’s own viewpoint closes the mind to the legitimate insights residing in alternative perspectives and, equally troublesome, to evidence that contradicts one’s own view. Some call this tendency *Procrustean*, the term referring to an ancient Greek brigand who strapped his victims to a bed—if their legs were too long, he cut them off till they fit; if too short, he stretched them to the proper length. In the realm of ideas this describes a tendency to make the evidence fit the theory.

The Question of Truth

At this point you might be asking, “Why study history at all if historical accounts are so far removed from the past they attempt to understand?” What happens to the search for “truth” if we acknowledge that historical accounts are by nature subjective and incomplete? How can we justify the pursuit of knowledge that appears so shallow and fleeting?

This entire book addresses this question, but for now it is sufficient to note that an element of subjectivity by no means invalidates the importance or substance of historical studies. First, it is worth reminding ourselves that the past did happen. Even though the records of past events are inadequate and difficult to interpret, they do constitute a tangible link between past and present. And even though historians can never completely escape their personal frames of reference, that does not preclude their writing credible and convincing accounts firmly grounded in the existing evidence. As Stephen Jay Gould, the Harvard paleontologist and historian of science, put it: “We understand that biases, preferences, social values, and psychological attitudes all play a strong role in the process of discovery. However, we should not be driven to the opposite extreme of complete cynicism—the view that objective evidence plays no role, that perceptions of truth are entirely relative, and that scientific [or historical] conclusions are just another form of aesthetic preference.”⁵

This is an important point: history is not fiction. Different historians will interpret the past differently for many different reasons. But in all cases their accounts must be based on all the available relevant evidence. A version of the past that cannot be supported by evidence is worthless and will quickly be rejected by other historians. Thus one opinion (no matter how strongly held) is not as good as another, and the student

⁴ “Viewpoint,” *The Wall Street Journal* (September 23, 1982).

⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life, The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 244.

of history, whether beginner or seasoned professional, must learn to discriminate closely between reasoned claims supported by the available evidence and those that fail this basic test. (Don't panic right now if you don't know how to make this kind of determination; it is something that this book intends to teach you.)

Finally, history is not unique in its subjectivity, nor is it the only discipline in which conclusions are tentative and constantly open to revision. No field of study is ever static. All research is, to some degree, conditioned by the "climate of the times" and the values and attitudes of the researchers themselves, not to mention the discovery of new evidence. Even theories in the so-called "hard sciences" are subject to the vagaries of time, place, and circumstance.

Conclusion

The realization that history involves the study of individual interpretations or versions of the past can be unsettling. Many of us yearn for the security afforded by unchallenged, definitive "answers" to a limited and manageable set of "questions." To find out that historians are always asking new questions, and continually offering new answers to old ones, eliminates the possibility of discovering the absolute and singular truth about the human past. At the same time, this is also what makes history so intellectually exciting. History is not the lifeless study of a dead past; its purpose is not the memorization of dates, names, and places. History is a living and evolving dialogue about the most important subject of all—the human experience. And all of us are capable of taking part in that dialogue.

The remaining question is: How do *you* do this? Simply by learning how historians think and by sharpening the analytical and communication skills essential for success in college and professional life. This is what we mean by the methods of history.

And the methods of history are not especially complicated or confusing. Most of them are based on common sense and can be learned without a great deal of specialized or technical training. Still, "doing" history is not altogether easy. (One historian compared writing intellectual history to trying to nail jelly to the wall.) Nonetheless, with some time, effort, and enthusiasm even beginning students can become historically literate.

EXERCISES

SET A *Exercise 1*

The following statements use *history* in one or the other of its two meanings: (1) the past itself or (2) an account of the past. (See page 12.) Your task is to decide which meaning of history the author of each statement intended. Use "P" (for "Past") to indicate passages that use the word "history" to mean the past-as-reality, and "A" (for "Account") to indicate passages that use the word "history" to mean an account or accounts (a reconstruction) of the past. Be prepared to defend your conclusions orally.⁶

⁶ Many of the quotations in this exercise, and the companion exercise in Set B, were drawn from an extensive list compiled by Ferenc M. Szasz, *The History Teacher*, "The Many Meanings of History," Pt. I, 7 (August 1974); Pts. II and III, 8 (November 1974 and February 1975). The quotations in Part IV of the series, 9 (February 1976), were contributed by subscribers.