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1

Perspectives: One Hundred Years of History in Britain[1]

Shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, James Bryce delivered his presidential address to the British Academy, an organization which he had helped to establish in 1902 for 'the promotion of historical, philosophical and philological studies'.[2] In the course of his long, varied and distinguished career, Viscount Bryce (he was ennobled in 1907) was a lawyer, journalist, historian, explorer, Liberal MP, cabinet minister, British Ambassador to the United States, chairman of Royal Commissions, and holder of the Order of Merit. In the language of our own time, he was a fully paid-up and card-carrying member of the 'great and the good', and like many of those who belonged to the Liberal intelligentsia, he regarded history as both a demanding academic discipline and also as an essential component of the national culture.[3] Their age, Bryce told his audience, with evident approval, had seen 'an immense expansion' in historical studies and an unprecedented specialization in 'the various branches of historical inquiry': so much so, indeed, that all 'the main lines of human activity' were now recognized as coming within the bounds of those scholarly endeavours being directed towards the past. 'This widening of our field', Bryce went on, 'may be primarily due to a larger conception of history, which we have now come to regard as a record of every form of human effort and achievement' – efforts and achievements which he insisted were no longer exclusively restricted to the political activities of a privileged elite, but encompassed the deeds and doings of ordinary people.[4] In a subsequent lecture, Bryce would reaffirm this view, asserting that traditional political history was but 'a comparatively small' part of what contemporaries now

understood as 'the past', and that more time was being spent studying the history of religion, industry, culture, nature, scientific discovery and the human mind.[5]

In calling for, and celebrating, such a wide-ranging and accessible approach to the study of the past, Bryce was not alone. Indeed, the first book defining and advocating something called the 'new' history had been published in America in 1912, edited by J.H. Robinson, scarcely a year before Bryce delivered his own presidential address. Yet such claims to innovation and expansiveness were at best programmatic, at worst premature: for on neither side of the Atlantic were there sufficient historians working, researching and writing, in universities or beyond academe, to realize the ambitious and broad-ranging agenda that Bryce and Robinson had sketched out for their subject. Not surprisingly, then, many later scholars, preoccupied with what they saw as the exciting and belated creation of their own version of the 'new' history in the buoyant and heady decades following the end of the Second World War, persisted in regarding the first half of the twentieth century as a dark age, and paid scant attention to what their predecessors hoped to achieve, or realistically might have expected to accomplish.[6] Such exaggerations are a salutary reminder that we should give careful and sceptical attention to the statements that practising historians often make – about themselves, their work, and their subject. For many of them make assertions concerning the novelty or importance of their own type of history which are at best over-stated, at worst incorrect; and we should assess their claims and manifestos about history with that same sort of critical acumen, contextual scrutiny and long-term perspective that we bring to bear on other forms of evidence from and about the past.[7]

In any case, such assertions of originality and significance are not the only avowals that historians make about themselves and their sub-fields which should be treated with healthy scepticism. Consider the very different view, which is widespread in many quarters, that the practice and profession of history has for some time been in a crisis so deep and so divisive that it may prove terminal.[8] According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, it has been ruined twice-over, by the sixties generation in thrall to Marx and the social sciences, and by the post-modernists no less in thrall to Foucault and Derrida: but this is little more than ignorant and paranoid ranting, not least because political history remains indestructibly alive and well. According

to Peter Novick, 'the discipline of history' as 'a community of scholars, united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes' has 'ceased to exist': but this exaggerates both an earlier (and largely mythical) golden age of consent and consensus, and also the true extent of present day divisions and discontents.[9] According to Francis Fukuyama, history had come to an end with the global triumph of liberalism and democracy: but even before 9/11 in 2001, this was an implausibly parochial and naively optimistic view of human nature and world affairs. And according to Christopher Andrew, 'no period in recorded history has been so persuaded of the irrelevance of the past experience of the human race': but this is a generalization of such cosmic scope that it is impossible to see how it could be either verified or disproven.[10]

Indeed, it would be fair to say that during virtually every decade of the last one hundred years, some historians have been urging that history must be made completely anew, while others have insisted that what they regard as such modish and ephemeral fashionability threatens everything that is good and noble and decent and traditional about the discipline. But it should scarcely be a surprise that both these progressive and paranoid modes have persisted, for in scholarship, as in politics, they feed off each other: one historian's great leap forward is another historian's terminal crisis, and what is presented as an improvement and enhancement by some is regarded as a threat and a disaster by others.[11] Depending on which scholars you read, history now (as throughout the whole of the twentieth century) is either doing (and being done) very badly – or, alternatively, it is doing (and being done) very well. Paradoxically but appropriately, the only antidote to such Manichean attitudes and over-simplified perspectives is to turn back to history itself. For the way in which the study of the past evolved in Britain during the last one hundred years tells us more about what history has been – and about what history is now – than we are generally inclined to allow.[12] More precisely, much discussion of history during that period was indeed structured around deep and often bitter polarities, which turn out on close investigation to be at best exaggerated and at worst fundamentally misleading. Indeed, it is only by getting a clear picture of the practice of history and the polemics of historians during the twentieth century that we can obtain a surer and steadier perspective on the tasks which face historians today, and on the challenges which will face historians tomorrow.

I

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the past occupied a very equivocal niche in British life and British culture. There was a powerful Victorian legacy of great writers such as Lord Macaulay, J.A. Froude, Thomas Carlyle, J.R. Green and S.R. Gardiner, who wrote national, narrative histories, which reached a wide and general audience; and that reading public became yet broader after W.E. Forster's Education Act of 1870, and the expansion in public schools and grammar schools during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which ensured that the study of the past became an essential part of what we would now call the national curriculum. At the same time, degree courses in the subject had recently been established at Oxford and Cambridge, in the Scottish universities, and on the new civic campuses of Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield.[13] Here was a new, young, mass audience for history, avidly devouring the new, multi-authored series of text books published by Methuen, Longmans and Macmillan; and here also was a new professional activity, exemplified by the setting up of the Royal Historical Society and the *English Historical Review*, and by the presence of Stubbs and Freeman in Oxford, and Seeley and Acton in Cambridge. The result was that, by the early twentieth century, knowledge of the past was deemed to be essential, not only for exercising British citizenship, but also for practising British statesmanship.[14]

In all these ways, and at all these levels, history was an institutionalized element in Britain's post-Victorian national culture to a greater extent than had been true before, and there was also widespread popular engagement with the past as evidenced by (among other things) the proliferation of historical pageants, the expansion of historical tourism and the popularity of historical novels.[15] But this was only one side of the picture: for in other ways, Britain in the 1900s was seen by many to be a worryingly ahistorical nation, with little deeply-rooted or seriously-developed or widely-shared sense of the past at all. According to Professor C.H. Firth, the teaching of history in primary schools was carried on by staff with virtually no training in the subject, while at secondary level, instruction was 'neither thorough nor systematic' – anxieties and criticisms which, across a hundred-year chasm, still retain a curiously contemporary resonance.[16] This, in turn, meant that as the twentieth century opened, many Britons seemed indifferent to the past, and it was in a (largely vain) effort to counter this pervasive ignorance of history that a whole variety of preservationist

societies and proselytizing enterprises were established, most of them within a decade, either side, of 1900. Among them were the National Trust, the *Victoria County History*, the *Survey of London*, the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, and the Historical Association. Here were some first, faltering steps towards the promotion and practice of what we would now call public history: but they were undertaken with limited membership and precarious finances, and they were not so much a sign that history was flourishing in Britain, but rather an indication that it needed all the help it could get – and it was not getting all that much.[17]

Nor was serious, academic, university-based history exactly thriving. In 1900, only two hundred graduates from Oxford and Cambridge had taken their degrees in the subject, and the total number of graduating historians in Britain can barely have been in four figures. Across the whole of the national university system, there were scarcely one hundred people teaching history, and most of them were lowly tutors and instructors, with no first-hand experience of research, scholarship or writing. (Indeed, the main reason why the same handful of names keep cropping up at this time – Tout, Firth, Stubbs, Maitland – is that there were so few scholars of any real distinction.)[18] How, indeed, could it have been otherwise, given that there was very little systematic training available in historical research? There was Tout in Manchester, Pollard in London, and there were pockets of activity in Oxbridge. But there was no national research culture or structure: of seminars, of training in source criticism, of graduate programmes or research degrees. Compared to the position in France, in Germany, or on the eastern seaboard of the United States, professional history, as those contemporaries understood it, scarcely existed in Britain. Accordingly, when Lord Bryce urged that the whole of past human experience was a fit subject for historical inquiry, he was more expressing a hope than describing a reality. For in practice, there were insufficient trained and university-based scholars to carry out so broadly-defined and labour-intensive an agenda. Indeed, when some British historians urged that their subject must be recognized as a branch of scientific inquiry, they were seeking to gain an academic recognition and professional legitimacy which at that time it conspicuously lacked.[19]

Thus history in Britain in the years from the turn of the century to the outbreak of the First World War: compared with what had gone before, it might seem unprecedentedly flourishing; compared with what would come after, it was not, in retrospect, doing especially well.[20] How, then,

do we move from history as practised and perceived in Britain in 1900 to history as it is practised and perceived in Britain in our own time, a century further on? These days, historians are very wary of their capacity to explain anything, but on any hierarchy of causation, the expansion of higher education must surely be given pride of place, resulting from unprecedented commitment by successive governments to supporting a national, university-based intellectual class in both the sciences and the humanities – something that had never happened before, in the long history of this country (or, indeed, in the long history of anywhere else). One sign of this has been the successful establishment of graduate research in history, the absence of which was so much lamented before 1914. Most universities, beginning with Oxford, Cambridge and London, introduced the Ph.D. dissertation and degree between the wars, and the foundation of the Institute of Historical Research in 1921 gave a further fillip to such scholarly endeavours; but even in 1940, there were scarcely three hundred graduate students registered for research degrees in history at all levels. Since then, the number of research students in history has shot up: to 1,200 in 1960, to 2,400 in 1970, and to 3,000 in 1975 where, with slight variations, it has since remained.[21]

Here, then, was an extraordinary transformation, which could not have been foreseen in 1900, or even in 1945: the appearance during the last four decades of the twentieth century of *thousands* of qualified history Ph.D.s, and thus of potential authors and university teachers, where scarcely any had existed before. Tout and Firth and their few contemporaries would surely have been delighted, not only at this development which they had so devoutly desired (though little expected), but also at the corresponding rise in the number of learned articles and academic monographs which these young professional historians produced, thereby further (and fundamentally) transforming the academic landscape after 1945. Part cause, part consequence of this increase in the numbers of scholarly people and in the number of scholarly publications at a junior level has been a corresponding (and a correspondingly recent) explosion in the numbers of historians paid and employed to teach the subject in British universities. Even as late as 1949 there were only 548 of them, but thereafter, an expansion began which has been virtually exponential: in 1960, 800; in 1970, 1,500; in 1980, 2,000; in 1990, 2,100; in 2000, 3,000. Never have there been so many academics teaching history in universities in this country: indeed, the number in post now may be greater than

the sum total of all their predecessors put together, and it cannot be too strongly emphasized just how recent and how extraordinary this change has been.[22]

It has also been transformative for history in many ways beyond the merely numerical. To begin with, it has resulted in the full-scale professionalization of the subject, following closely the model already established by the experimental sciences: with a career ladder going from post-doctoral fellow via lecturer and reader to professor; with journals, meetings, conferences and specialist societies; and with major grants, funding councils and large-scale collective research projects. A second sign of change has been the growing diversity, in the sociological sense, of those studying and teaching history in British universities: initially their backgrounds were overwhelmingly public school and Oxbridge (as recounted by Noel Annan in *Our Age*); they were followed, after the Butler Education Act of 1944, by the 'scholarship boys' who won places at Oxford, Cambridge and London (and it is that generation, which is my generation, which is now in charge); and we in turn are training and recruiting a yet more diverse cohort, many of whom have been educated at comprehensive schools and at universities far beyond the golden triangle (and of whom an unprecedented number are women and from those who are termed ethnic minorities).[23] Moreover, the combined effects of increased numbers, growing professionalism, and widening access help explain why history in practice has evolved and expanded into the wider and more varied subject that Bryce and his contemporaries had (in retrospect) prematurely anticipated; and also why, since the 1960s, there has been in existence a ready and growing market for books explaining and justifying academic history, of which those by E.H. Carr and G.R. Elton were the first and remain the most famous.[24]

These are some of the broader consequences of the numerical expansion and institutional growth of history in British universities during the twentieth century, and especially since the Second World War. But we should also see that efflorescence in terms of generational dynamics and shifts in fashion, as successive age-bands and cohorts of historians, often influenced by contemporary events, and with their own intellectual (and political?) agendas, have sought to assert the primacy and novelty of their particular approach to the past: the political history of the nation state during the 1900s; diplomatic and economic history during the inter-war years; social and women's history during the 1960s and 1970s; and cultural and global history since then.[25] Time and again, the young turks have insisted that their

hidebound forbears did history narrowly and badly; that their own new and original approach provided the one essential key that unlocked the whole of the complexities and processes of the past; that conferences, journals and societies were necessary to proclaim and assert this good news; and that all future departmental appointments must be made so as to help further this exciting and innovative agenda. Yet each such novel approach has invariably gone the way of its predecessors, being in its turn superseded, downgraded and marginalized, from being the all-powerful, unifying insight insisted upon by its protagonists and propagandists, to being one additional sub-specialism among many. Depending on your point of view, the cumulative effect of these successive 'new' versions of the past, piled one on top of the other, has been either a growing enrichment of the subject, as ever more sub-specialisms proliferated, or its fatal fragmentation.[26]

But what, meanwhile, of the broader world of popular history (or, as we would now say, public history) that had also seemed in such a parlous (if potentially promising) state at the beginning of the twentieth century? Across the inter-war years, there was some growth in preservationist activity, as the National Trust and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments were joined by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and the Georgian Group; and during the same period, writers such as G.M. Trevelyan, Lytton Strachey, John Buchan and Winston Churchill reached a large public audience. But once again, it was in the post-war era that popular history took off as never before. The wireless, film and (especially) television, brought history alive in new, vivid and exciting ways, from Kenneth Clark and Alastair Cooke in an earlier generation to Simon Schama and David Starkey in our own day. Conserving what now became widely known as the national heritage became something of a secular religion, urged on by (among others) the Victorian Society and English Heritage, and the new procedures for listing and preserving historic buildings. For a time, and thanks to the National Trust and Mark Girouard, the cult of the English country house became almost a national obsession.[27] Museums expanded, not only in London but in the provinces, and were given over to new subjects, from the Industrial Revolution to rock and pop; and the fashion for memorials, for anniversaries and commemoration, as well as for local history and family history, shows that the popular desire to remember things past is both powerful and insatiable.[28]

This necessarily abridged account of the rise and rise of public history in Britain closely parallels the rise and rise of history in British universities,

and such a conjunction and coincidence makes it difficult to share the pessimism of those authorities quoted earlier, who insist that the subject is once again in a state of terminal decline. Today, there are 15,000 sixth-formers taking A Level history, 30,000 undergraduates reading history, 3,000 research students studying for higher degrees, and a similar number of university teachers. Today, history is described as the 'new gardening', the National Archives at Kew can barely cope with popular interest in family history and census data, and politicians remain obsessed with what they believe will be the 'verdict of history' – even though no simple, single, monolithic judgement is ever likely to be forthcoming.[29] Today, more history than ever before is being taught, researched, written and read, and (in belated corroboration of Bryce) it is concerned with a larger part of human experience, and embraces a wider spread of the globe, than ever before. But it bears repeating that this is a wholly unusual and unprecedented state of affairs, and that most of this explosion has happened very recently, in the sixty years since the end of the Second World War.[30]

II

Across the last one hundred years, then, the doing of history in Britain, both within universities and far beyond, has changed, evolved, developed and expanded to such an extent that those seemingly vain hopes expressed in Bryce's day, both for rigorous training in graduate work, and for a broad conception of the subject, are now accepted practices and widespread commonplaces. Much that has happened to the discipline during the second half of the twentieth century, especially the widening of its scope and the proliferation of its sub-fields, may best be explained in terms of the unprecedented amount of state funding that has been made available for the subject via universities, and the unprecedented numbers of people who have thus been able to become professional historians and none of this could have been foreseen in 1900 – or even in 1950. But while there is thus a fundamental transformation to report, there is also considerable continuity that should be recognized, for many of the controversies concerning the nature and purpose of history, over which scholars disagree now and have disagreed during the intervening hundred years, remain essentially the same, despite the changes that have taken place elsewhere in the scale and substance of the subject. 'Professors' quarrels', G.M. Trevelyan once

observed, are 'always ridiculous and unedifying.' Maybe so: but that has not prevented them from happening, and although they have sometimes been concerned with very specific topics, they have often polarized around similar general issues.[31]

During the first decade of the twentieth century, British historians were particularly exercised as to whether their subject was a science or an art. Indeed, one of the reasons for establishing the British Academy in 1902 was to encourage 'the exercise of scientific acumen' in the humanities, so they might take their rightful place beside the 'sister sciences' represented by the Royal Society. And in 1903, in his famous inaugural lecture at Cambridge, J.B. Bury pronounced history to be 'not a branch of literature', but 'a science no less and no more'.[32] Those claims have been regularly re-stated by historians of Rankean persuasion and pretensions, they were reasserted by the founders of *Past & Present*, who insisted (at least to begin with) that theirs was a journal of 'scientific history', and they have been repeated more recently by the quantifiers and self-styled 'Cliometricians', who urged they were bringing unprecedented statistical rigour to the subject. But there has also been the alternative tradition, harking back to Macaulay, and represented across the twentieth century by (among others) G.M. Trevelyan, J.H. Plumb and Simon Schama, that has rejected what they see as archival fetishism and arcane self-absorption, and has stressed instead the literary and imaginative side of the historian's art. These are venerable disagreements, still unresolved; yet on closer inspection, they turn out to be nothing of the kind. For most historians readily concede that history is *both* a science *and* an art. There was, as even Trevelyan himself long ago admitted, no point in them 'forever abusing each other as Dry-as-Dusts on the one hand, and shallow featherheads on the other'. 'Let us guard', agreed Marc Bloch, 'against stripping our science of its share of poetry.'[33]

There are similar, over-stated disputes between those who favour analytical history, which stresses static structure, and those who prefer dynamic narrative, which tells a story – alternatives exemplified and polarized by those friends-turned-enemies Sir Lewis Namier and A.J.P. Taylor. Namier excelled at structural investigation, as in his studies of English politics during the 1750s and 1760s, and in his analysis of the European revolutions of 1848; but he was constitutionally incapable of creating an animated, mobile story of past events unfolding across time. Taylor, by contrast, was the most fluent writer of his generation, who produced scintillating chronicles of the nation state and international

relations, but had little feel for the deeper forces of historical change.[34] Throughout the twentieth century, the battle between these two ways of doing history ebbed and flowed; but once again, these extreme positions were exaggeratedly opposed. This was partly because, as most historians recognize, analysis without narrative loses any sense of the sequencing (and unpredictability) of events through time, while narrative without analysis fails to convey the structural constraints within which events actually take place. And it is partly because, as Peter Burke has reminded us, there is in practice a long continuum extending from 'pure' narrative to 'pure' analysis, which means that the best history is situated somewhere between these extremes, seeking simultaneously to animate structure and contextualize narrative, as well exemplified in Garrett Mattingly's *Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (London, 1959), or Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), or Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1992), or Christopher Clark's *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (London, 2006).[35]

This excessive polarization between the narrative and analytical modes has also fed into another long-standing debate, between those scholars who prefer to stress transformations and those who lay greater emphasis on continuity. 'If history is not concerned with change', Lawrence Stone once observed, 'it is nothing.' But much of what seemed like change was, according to Fernand Braudel, no more than the ephemeral trivia of political events, while at the deeper level of geography, climate, resources and demography, things moved very slowly, if at all: and '*l'histoire événementielle*' was far less important than this '*l'histoire immobile*'.[36] To be sure, both approaches have their advocates. For some historians of seventeenth-century England, for instance, that was a time of fundamental, revolutionary upheaval; for others, it was a period when very little changed. And while some scholars see the eighteenth century as an epoch of progress and modernity, of self-made entrepreneurs and secular enlightenment, others insist that it was an old regime, dominated by the traditional triad of monarchy, aristocracy and established religion.[37] But this merely reminds us that historians are better employed trying to establish a balance between continuity and change, rather than insisting on the importance of one to the exclusion of the other. Striking that balance is not easy, and it no doubt differs from period to period: indeed, since 1986, an entire journal, named *Continuity and Change*, has been devoted to the subject.[38]

Yet striking a balance, like recognizing a continuum, is something which many perennially disputatious historians seem extremely reluctant to do. Consider, in this regard, the further distinction which is often drawn between those scholars allegedly described by LeRoi Ladurie as parachutists and those he called truffle hunters: the former surveying the broad historical landscape from a great and Olympian height, the latter grubbing around in dense thickets of local detail.[39] This distinction, too, endured for the whole of the twentieth century: at the beginning, between those who wrote general surveys and those who were antiquarian scholars; in the middle between admirers of the *Annales* school and adherents to traditional English empiricism; and at the end between such practitioners of micro history as Robert Darnton, Carlo Ginsburg and Natalie Davis, and such advocates of global history as William McNeill, John Roberts and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto.[40] But once again, these are excessively polarized positions. Micro history only works if there is a sense of the broader context which particular events illuminate, and are themselves illuminated by; global history loses its edge without concrete detail and local specifity. Now, as always, one of the most important tasks of the historian is to make connections, as Ranke long ago urged, between the particular and the general. Of course, there are many different ways of doing this: but again, the matter is best resolved by envisaging a continuum of expositional strategies, rather than by launching offensives from hostile and opposing camps.[41]

The same conclusion suggests itself if we examine another familiar Manichean formulation, that between high and low, elite and popular, be it in politics, society, culture or anything else. Those who concern themselves with the doings of the elite rightly insist that we cannot understand the past if we ignore those people who were in power, made the rules, possessed the wealth, and set the tone. Those who wish to rescue humbler figures from what Edward Thompson memorably described 'the enormous condescension of posterity' reply that it is more important to recover the lives of that far greater number of ordinary people who were the victims of history rather than those in charge who were the makers of it.[42] It is also sometimes (though not always) the case, that those on the right prefer to study people in authority, within the confines of the nation state, while those on the left are more interested in people lower down the social and political scale, and have a more internationalist outlook. But for all the admirable work which these two approaches have generated, they

pay inadequate attention to the *inter-connectedness* of things: partly by failing to explore how elites are invariably circumscribed in the exercise of power; partly by giving insufficient attention to the framework of law and authority by which the lower classes were constrained; and all too often (and from both perspectives) by giving insufficient attention to the complexities of social structures and the significance of social interactions. For all its alliterative appeal, few societies in practice have ever been polarized – politically, economically, socially or culturally – between two hermetically-sealed and mutually-antagonistic collectivities labelled the 'patricians' and the 'plebs'.[43]

Yet despite these counsels of compromise and consensus, the same entrenched positions have often been taken up when historians have turned from their activities and their approaches to their audience. Those of a 'scientific' persuasion, often invoking Maitland as well as Ranke, insist that their work is of considerable technical complexity, requiring specialized language, concepts and calculations, which is only intended for fellow scholars. But for those brought up in the tradition of Macaulay and Trevelyan, the prime purpose of history is not to write for an exclusive coterie, but to reach as broad a public audience as possible. Here is the distinction, famously formulated by Hugh Trevor-Roper in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, between history for the professionals and for the laity.[44] Again, this is a long-running dispute, between those who assert the primacy of scholarly learning, and those who fear that scientific history will be lost to the general public. But it is also another exaggerated disagreement. For in practice, there is a continuum of historical writing, extending all the way from arcane technical works to best-sellers, and our most distinguished historians have invariably spanned it. Trevor-Roper himself wrote articles in the *Economic History Review*, which were read by very few, as well as *The Last Days of Hitler* (London, 1947), which was read by very many; and while G.R. Elton wrote scores of detailed studies of sixteenth-century politics, and urged his colleagues to disclaim and disavow any public, educative function, or espouse any broader social purpose, he also published *England Under the Tudors* (London, 1955), and *Reformation Europe, 1517–1559* (London, 1963), general surveys which sold in their hundreds of thousands.

It would be easy, but also wearisome, to explore other excessively adversarial formulations of the practice and purpose of history. Is the past a foreign country, where they do things differently from us here and

now, or a familiar country, where they do things the same?[45] Are historical developments inevitable, the outcome of long-term forces over which men and women have no control, or are they accidental, the result of caprice and contingency? Is history fiction by another name, in which the author makes it all up, or is it about fact, truth and certainty? And so on. Like the controversies outlined above in more detail, these scholarly disagreements raged back and forth across the twentieth century; and like them, again, the polarization is both appealing yet also misguided. In defiance of the first of these formulations, Jacques Barzun long ago observed that the task of the historian was to discover 'the familiar within the strange, without losing sense of either'. In answer to the second, Marx famously observed that men and women do indeed make their own history, but they do not do so under circumstances of their own choosing. And in answer to the third, Trevelyan rightly noted that the very essence of history was not 'the imagination roaming at large, but pursuing the fact and fastening upon it'.[46] All of which leads to the conclusion that throughout the twentieth century, too much discussion of history by historians has been dogmatically polarized, and insufficient attention has been given to exploring the gradations, continuums and common ground where most of the best history writing has in practice always been found. In deploring, as he has recently done, the 'baneful consequences' of this excessively adversarial approach to the past (and also to the present), Stefan Collini is surely right.[47]

III

Perhaps a brief recapitulation is by now in order. First, and from a narrative perspective, it is worth repeating that the second half of the twentieth century was unique in witnessing the unprecedented state sponsorship of (and public enthusiasm for) the study of history in this country. This vast proliferation of interest in the past, and of the study of the past, is something wholly extraordinary and without precedent in Britain as, indeed, it has also been elsewhere in the west (though in the United States, the leading universities which have driven forward the study of history have usually been private rather than public institutions). Those of us who have benefited from these developments, by having been able to sustain lifelong academic careers as a result, are naturally inclined to think they are right and good

and should therefore be permanent. But at the same time, we ought also to recognize that there is absolutely no guarantee that this relatively recent state of affairs will endure indefinitely. Second, and in more analytical mode, it is important to remember that when historians have described how they do what they do, and when they have written about what history is about, they have often taken up extreme and entrenched adversarial positions, when in practice there is more agreement and common ground between many of them than this might suggest. Perhaps, then, we ought to think about what history is now, and about where history is going in the future, in this more positive and nuanced way.

In seeking to survey the present historical scene, and to offer some speculations as to possible future developments, some caution and circumspection are both in order. To begin with, we need to beware the present-minded parochialism which assumes that we live in the best of all possible worlds: for, as Blair Worden has recently reminded us, 'the certainties of one age, *in historical interpretations as in other walks of life*', often have a disconcerting habit of 'becoming follies to the next'.[48] Our present approaches to the past may seem self-evidently good and right and sensible and true, and better than anything that has gone before: but it is highly unlikely that historians writing fifty years from now, let alone one hundred, will share that view. If nothing else, that should engender some healthy and humble scepticism about the claims we make on behalf of ourselves and of what we are doing.[49] In the aftermath of post-modernity, we historians constantly assert that we are more self-aware and self-reflexive than ever before, and that self-scrutiny and self-examination are the prevailing modes. But before we congratulate ourselves on being so much more wise and mature and sophisticated than our scholarly forbears, we should also recognize the accompanying dangers of self-absorption, self-regard, self-satisfaction and self-importance. Moreover (and as Joyce Appleby has recently reminded us) 'it is the conceit of all contemporaries to think that theirs is a time of particularly momentous changes' – an option which she strongly urges us to decline. And no historian should set out to engage with the future without being reminded that it never unfolds in ways that can be predicted.[50]

Nevertheless, having sought to anticipate such objections and head off such criticisms, it is time to offer some predictions and prescriptions, which draw on arguments already advanced and suggestions already made. To begin with, historians need to emancipate themselves from the spurious

thralldom of dichotomized modes of thinking, both about ourselves, and about the way we approach the past. If we are to think more creatively and constructively about what we are doing, we should be more concerned with gradations, continuums and nuances than with postulating mutually-exclusive alternatives. For example, instead of seeing our audience as being either professional or lay, we might consider what Stefan Collini calls the 'academic public sphere' which is neither exclusively academic, nor inclusively generalist, but something in-between.[51] And when we look at the past, perhaps we should consider more critically those beguiling binaries of religion, nation, class, gender, race and civilization, built around the notions of collective categories eternally in conflict. They are, to be sure, a significant (and often depressing) part of the human story. But they are only a part. Throughout history, Christian and Infidel, Briton and German, 'us' and 'them', men and women, black and white, 'the west' and 'Islam' have also got by, done business, rubbed along, co-existed, and in so doing have often embraced a sort of common humanity, and we urgently need to find a way of writing about the past from this important but neglected perspective.[52]

But if we are to do so, then a related issue that we are going to have to address is what we think our chief (though not sole) concern, namely humanity, actually was and is. In writing about this subject, many of us follow David Hume: 'Mankind are so much the same in all times and places, that history informs of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.' But *are* the principles of human nature thus constant and universal?[53] Thanks to psycho history, we know a great deal more about the importance of the unconscious in human behaviour and motivation: but most history writing disregards it. Thanks to cultural history, we know that people in past times saw both their world, and themselves, differently from how we see our world and ourselves: but we understand very little about how human outlooks and human nature actually connect and change.[54] Nor have historians yet begun to engage with the work being done by geneticists, neuro-scientists, evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists, which insists that human minds, human behaviour, human artefacts and human culture, in short everything we understand by human nature, and everything we write about as human history, are all biologically determined. The cross-disciplinary debate about what it means to be human, both in the physical and the social sense, has barely begun, not

least because historians have been so unwilling to intrude themselves into it. It is time we did: for we can no longer take an unproblematic, Humean notion of humanity and human nature for granted.[55]

In addition to rethinking our notions of humanity, we are also going to have to address the vexed question of the changing territorial and political units within which men and women have operated and organized themselves. Much of the history that was written during the twentieth century, especially when concerned with high politics and international relations, unthinkingly took for granted the existence of the nation state. But now, in the early twenty-first century, that collectivity seems altogether more precarious and problematic, which means that we are going to have to rethink the sort of history that we write and teach – not by disregarding the nation state completely, but certainly by laying more stress on its contingent and constructed nature, as historians have increasingly been doing since the 1980s.[56] Yet we shall also need to de-parochialize it – partly (in the British case) by doing more to address international interconnections and by re-integrating metropolitan and imperial history, but also by engaging with the issue of what is termed globalization. To be sure, the phenomenon of globalization has been around for a long time, but only in the 1990s did it become a buzz word, and historians need urgently to connect with this issue: partly to provide the beef behind the buzz, and partly to emphasize that globalization has non-western as well as western origins, aspects and implications.[57]

One reason why the nation state looks significantly less secure than it did has been because of the transformative and subversive impact of the revolution in IT during the last two decades, and it has had, and is still having, a correspondingly transformative and subversive effect on the way in which history is being written and taught. Thanks to the net and the web, academic history is a much less exclusive and hierarchical enterprise than it once was: witness the debate, hosted on the IHR website, in response to Richard Evans's book *In Defence of History* (London, 1997) – despite its title, a book more in defence of historical method than a justification of the importance of history itself.[58] At the same time, massive data bases are now being assembled which are widely available, which in turn means that information about the past can be globally co-ordinated and globally accessed on a scale and in ways that were literally unthinkable a quarter of a century ago.[59] Of course, it is not only history, but the whole of the humanities, which are being transformed in this way; but the impact on

the researching and writing of history may well turn out to be the most significant, and it has not yet run its course. Indeed, it may well be that it has scarcely begun, and that we are only at the beginning of the process whereby unprecedented quantities of information about the past are going to become electronically (and thus internationally) available. Within a decade, it also seems highly likely that the pattern of academic publishing will be altered, certainly as regards journals and monographs. If this is so, then the whole enterprise of historical research and writing may be further and fundamentally transformed in directions that at present it is impossible to foresee.[60]

Nor is this the only way in which IT is re-making history. During the last one hundred years, the pace of change, at least in the western world, has accelerated almost exponentially, and the IT revolution is merely its latest manifestation. And so, notwithstanding Joyce Appleby's wise and prudent warning against assuming that ours is a time of uniquely momentous changes, there *is* a case for saying that our world in 2008 has far, far less in common with most of human history than our predecessors did a century ago, in the days of James Bryce. The result, as one historian has recently observed, is that 'the gulf between a liberal, democratic, secular, collectivist, feminist present, and a non-liberal, non-democratic, non-secular, non-collectivist, non-feminist past grows more impassable by the year'. Or, as another scholar remarked in the 1950s, in words which have even greater resonance today, 'previous generations *knew* much less about the past than we did, but perhaps *felt* a much greater sense of identity and continuity with it'.[61] Today, indeed, many people feel so distanced from the (even relatively recent) past that they find it impossible to 'deal with'. Hence the blanket condemnations of previous eras and societies as classist, racist, sexist, imperialist, xenophobic, and homophobic; hence the demands for apologies for past events now deemed unacceptable, such as the Irish Potato Famine and the Treaty of Waitangi; hence the agitation for tangible rectifications of historical 'wrongs', be it compensation for the slave trade or the restitution of the Elgin Marbles; and hence the increasing involvement of historians in commissions, tribunals and court cases intended to establish 'the truth' about the past.[62]

These are difficult, complex and sensitive public issues (and often difficult, complex and sensitive political issues), into which historians are now finding themselves drawn, and it is a curious irony that they are increasingly being asked to deliver an authoritative version of 'the truth' to judges and

politicians at the very same time that some post-modernists continue to insist that they cannot deliver any such thing as the 'truth' at all.[63] But then, whoever claimed that being an historian was easy or straightforward? In one guise, we are the handmaids of conventional wisdoms, explaining how we got from there to here; in another, we are the sceptics and the disbelievers, constantly in rebellion against the tyranny of present-day opinion; and in a third, which avoids yet another dichotomous formulation, we try to do both. We make our living by looking into the follies and horrors of the past, but it is also our duty to urge that people living in different centuries, inhabiting different cultures, and belonging to different civilizations, saw things and did things very differently from how we see things and do things today. And are we, in Marc Bloch's words, 'so sure of ourselves and of our age as to divide the company of our forefathers into the just and the damned', depending on how far they did, or did not, anticipate or share our own (and no less time-bound and place-specific) contemporary values?[64] More than ever, then, the justification for the study of history remains what it has always been: to teach the virtues of perspective and proportion, tolerance and humanity, breadth of vision and generosity of view – in short, to provide what is so often derided as a genuinely liberal education. For as John Carey has recently reminded us, 'one of history's most important tasks' is to bring 'home to us how keenly, honestly and painfully past generations pursued aims that now seem to us wrong or disgraceful'.[65]

IV

The following observation, by three distinguished American scholars, aptly summarizes much of what has been written and argued here so far:

> Essays on the state of the discipline [they note] often have a canonical form all their own: first a narrative of the rise of new kinds of history, then a long moment for exploring the problems posed by new kinds of history, followed by either a jeremiad on the evils of new practices, or a celebration of the potential of the overcoming of all obstacles.[66]

It cannot be denied that the first part of this chapter is very much as Professors Appleby, Hunt and Jacob describe it, and that section two also bears more than a passing resemblance to their 'long moment'. But while the third part has undoubtedly been concerned with both the problems and

the possibilities of history now and in the future, it has sought to eschew the polarities of depression and euphoria, and has offered instead a more nuanced (though not necessarily a more accurate) set of predictions. And they are certainly offered in corroboration of the view that, 'in good times or bad, critical ones, transitional ones, or normal ones, history can help human beings think better, live more richly, and act more wisely'.[67] So, indeed, it can; so, indeed, it must: and it is up to us as historians to make sure that it can and that it does.

In more ways than one, and for the worse as well as for the better, the years from 1900 to 2000 were a century of history to an extent that had been true of no earlier era – in one guise a time of unprecedented terror and tragedy, horror and holocaust, when history-writing was regularly abused and repeatedly misused; but also a time of unexampled progress and accomplishment, improvement and opportunity, one sign of which was that in some countries history flourished and flowered, both in public and in academe, as it had never done before. From one perspective, the twentieth century was indeed an age of extremes and of anxiety, in which Africa was not alone in being the dark continent; from another it was an age of affluence, abundance and achievement, for more people, in more parts of the world, than ever before.[68] Whatever else may be said, both for it and against it, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the greatest age of history writing the western world has so far seen: certainly in terms of the numbers of practitioners and the size of the public audience, and arguably in terms of the quality of writing as well. We must hope that the twenty-first century will continue to be at least as good. But as the record of the past makes plain, as does the experience of other countries in our own time, there is no guarantee that this will happen. Geographically and chronologically, this recent historical glut is 'a most restricted and unusual phenomenon, and there is as little reason to have any more confidence in its survival and spread in the future as there is in that of democracy itself'.[69] As historians should never need reminding: only time will tell. But in the meantime and for now, we should be guardedly grateful, both for what has been achieved, and for what is still being accomplished.

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