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## **Part One**

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# 1 The Scope of History

People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backwards to their ancestors.

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

## 1.1 Introduction

Most people see history in terms of separate periods (whether, for example, classical, medieval or modern), with each typified by a different way of life. At the same time, the study of history is often characterised as solely concerned with recovering facts about the past. Seen in this way, history is like a book, with each chapter charting a different phase or epoch of human development of Europe: the rise and fall of Greece and Rome; the emergence of the Catholic Church; the heraldry and Crusades of the Middle Ages; the Renaissance and Reformation; or the technology and social change of the Industrial Revolution; although the periodisation is very different elsewhere. In similar fashion, popular perceptions of the process of historical change are founded on the idea of progress, a belief that each new era brings to human society a more sophisticated sense of being.

History is also about roots. It provides societies and individuals with a dimension of longitudinal meaning over time which far outlives the human life-span. It connects us with our past. This is why, in recent times, memory has become such an important feature of historical study. Indeed, for some authors, heavily influenced by postmodernism and the undermining of historical objectivity and authorial certainty, memory has become a form of history distinct from the history of which it was once merely a part. The use of memory becomes particularly powerful and important in tragic or vicious aspects of the human past. Holocaust survivor memories would be one very clear example. Memory also becomes important for connecting divergent or warring communities to different interpretations, or differing aspects, of a shared past. The history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland provides a case in point.

History also has a function beyond the remembrance or recollection of, or writing about, our past: it allows us to peer into the future by providing precedents for contemporary action, forewarning against the repetition of past mistakes. From its sense of continuity, history offers apparent form and purpose to past, present and future. There is seen to be a need for history. It

has social value, and its study is both important and rewarding. But many of its certainties have been challenged in more recent times.

The popular view tends to smooth out the contours of the past, brushing away its inconsistencies. As students of history will find out, the past is not simply a collection of distinct ages or a hotchpotch of facts. History is extremely complex and historians disagree on exactly what it is. Particularly since E. H. Carr, in *What is History?* (1961), suggested that history 'is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and past' (thereby implying it was changeable), there has been a steady stream of attempts to provide satisfactory answers, a process encouraged by the interest in methodology as an aspect of teaching and studying history. So keen are historians to find new explanations that, though Carr's work remains a masterful exposition on the state of history, it is now some way off the pace of current trends. More recent general studies of the practice of the discipline, by authors such as Arthur Marwick, John Tosh and Ludmilla Jordanova, demonstrate how influential Carr's book was, but how far the discipline has developed.

Recently, the very notion that history is a fact-based discipline has come under scrutiny. The idea that history is a branch of the humanities has been consistently undermined by its growth as a social science. Over the past thirty years or so, innovative work in sociology, psychology, anthropology and many other disciplines has been brought to bear on the practice of history. More recently, pressure has been applied to the old certainties of history by philosophers of the discipline, such as Alun Munslow and Keith Jenkins, who, drawing inspiration from French philosophy and from the important American writer, Hayden White, have popularised the view that history is a fictional enterprise created in the minds of historians.

The seemingly revolutionary developments in history over the past generation or so have been underpinned further by the systematic development of areas of historical inquiry which might once have seemed marginal: class and gender; ethnicity and race; culture and custom; immigrant or minority groups; women and children. Although factually orientated political history has never gone away (not that it should do so), there has been a decided shift, at least in the teaching of the subject, towards what Peter Burke calls 'new perspectives' in historical writing. Historians today are much more receptive to the theories of social science. The methodological implications of new discourses have also been considerable, with historians now looking well beyond the official government-type documents which fuelled most nineteenth-century scholarship.

This book offers students a route across the shifting and often confusing grounds of historical inquiry. The principal task is to present a clear overview

of the most important of these changes and to note their impact upon scholarship. However, apparent continuities must also be highlighted. The first part (Chapters 1 to 3) provides a broad-ranging introduction to the study of history. Here we examine the changing nature of historical inquiry, considering how each generation has produced different kinds of history. In so doing, we will see where the major approaches to historical inquiry, which students encounter, actually came from. The second part (Chapters 4 and 5) goes a step further by providing readers with a discussion of the sources and methodologies of historians, as well as an examination of the theories and concepts upon which have been founded the most recent innovations in historical discourse. The third part (Chapters 6 to 10) is much more concerned with the student's own practice of history. It is hoped that by making useful suggestions about reading, preparing papers, writing essays and working on longer research-based assignments, this part of the book will help aspiring historians to engage more clearly, confidently and effectively with their chosen discipline.

Before going on to discuss these issues, this chapter begins with the assertion that the nature of historical inquiry forces us to understand numerous problems of conception and approach. This chapter challenges the notion that history is simply a neutral discipline founded upon an immutable body of facts. It rejects the idea that historians can claim the same degree of objectivity which nineteenth-century scholars saw as their hallmark. History, we shall see, is far from simple. The past is often contested ground, perceived differently by competing groups and ideologies. In terms of methods of research, we will also discover in later chapters (especially Chapter 4) that history is only as good as its sources, and that no source is ever perfect or impartial.

## 1.2 The uses of history

History clearly has a broader utility and a deeper social meaning than is represented by the writing of books. The past is our heritage; although it is gone, we feel a part of it. Today, historians, students and the lay readership know that there are many kinds of history. Indeed, the sub-division of the discipline is so great that no one could ever master its entire historiography (the systematic study of what historians have written about the past). Currently, professional expertise among historians is actually quite narrow. Doctoral theses are often written around very dense sets of records covering very narrow areas of specialism, as the annual bibliographies published by the Institutional of Historical Research, or some leading international journals, attest. As far as the educational process, with its demand for Ph.D.s

completed in three years, is concerned, the mystery of those huge subjects tackled by such great historians as Gibbon, Macaulay, Acton or Trevelyan has largely become lost in the quest to evaluate sources, to know their veracity, rather than to write history itself. Moreover, the development of new technology, by making publishing easier, threatens to increase the minute specialisms of academic historians, which will in turn lead to a further separation between the academic writer and the general reader and, indeed, writer.

Historical scholarship has become an industry that reflects the wider needs and desires of the nation, of the people and of society, as well as those of the practitioners. This need to tell the national story has, however, always been seen as a function of history, and long predates its emergence as an overwhelmingly state-funded profession. Even prior to the mid-nineteenth century, when history emerged as a distinctive discipline in its own right, the writing of history was not simply the remit of gentlemen scholars, clerics, philosophers and Enlightenment thinkers, most of whom were removed from the 'market' pressures of selling books. In the eighteenth century, alongside reflective works by writers such as Bolingbroke, Gibbon and Hume, appeared the endeavours of a variety of 'hack' historians.

Unlike historical scholarship in many other countries, that in Britain has been dominated by certain key continuities. Since the emergence of the Whig interpretation of history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the historiographical tradition in Britain has tended to stress a linear notion of historical development. The Whig interpretation, most famously expounded by Lord Macaulay, held that the history of Britain since the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 had been the story of continuous progress, the bedrocks of which were constitutional monarchy, parliamentary government, Protestantism, tolerance, freedom and liberty. Moreover, these values were seen, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to define British history as different from that of those continental countries where Catholicism and absolutism were believed to hold firm. The key emphases of the Whig view were British distinctiveness and British progress.

Although it is commonly supposed that the Whig interpretation came to an end with the scientific approach to history evinced (as we shall see in the next chapter) by Lord Acton (1834–1902), Whiggish attitudes are far from entirely absent from our conception of historical progress. As Raphael Samuel has argued in 'Grand Narratives' (*History Workshop Journal*, 1990), although the Whig interpretation of history has long been removed in academic scholarship, 'put to the axe, some sixty years ago by Sir Lewis Namier . . . the idea of progress shows a vigorous afterlife in other spheres – the history of the household and family, for instance, as epitomised in the work of

Lawrence Stone, or that of welfare, still measured by stepping-stones to social security'. Such approaches are not limited to the field of political history, and, indeed, derive much of their weight from their wider resonance and applicability. Whiggish attitudes remain very important in more popular, non-academic writing.

### 1.3 History and the national myth

For centuries, history was generally accepted as a morally exemplary tale, a feature of the nation's identity and values that was of political worth. The first great Whig work was *The Constitutional History of England* (1827) by Henry Hallam (1777–1859). Never was the Whig view more clearly expounded, however, than in the *History of England* (1848–55) by T. B. Macaulay (1800–59). Politics and morality were not separated in this approach; the works of Hallam and Macaulay were a form of party propaganda. The relationship between politics and history was strongly focused, not least because of the obvious political importance of a small number of individuals and because of the notion of kingship and governance as moral activities. As the relationship appeared timeless, it seemed pertinent to apply admonitory tales in a modern context. History was seen as a lesson, a warning with which to remind politicians and citizens alike of their responsibilities.

Yet there is an undercurrent to the longevity of this feature of British historical scholarship. The violence and problematical nature of recent discontinuities, not least the pace of economic change summarised by the term 'globalisation', renders the universally felt need to claim continuity with the past even more compelling for many. Furthermore, as Britain's world role diminished, the desire of many to cling to images of the past has become more acute. A society in the grips of technological change is surprisingly reverential of, and referential to, the past, not least when there is a lack of confidence in the future. The role of television and the popular press in presenting symbols of our heritage cannot be gainsaid. For example, in Britain a strong republican movement exists only among the Catholics of Northern Ireland, and that itself is a consequence of history. Different historical traditions and myths, kept alive in anniversary marches and regalia, help to define and sustain the warring confessional groups in that province on which the weight of history is all too heavy. Furthermore, the non-violent but still important expression of Welsh and Scottish identity has made the idea of Britain or a United Kingdom much less firm than it once was. Devolution and the creation of the Welsh Assembly and a Scottish Parliament has arguably strengthened independence movements in those countries, making the final

break-up of the United Kingdom more likely than at any time in the past two centuries.

In reality, there have been sharp discontinuities in British history, constitutional, political and religious. The Reformation, the break with Rome in the sixteenth century, was one such, despite attempts to disguise it by arguing that it represented a return to the primitive church. Similarly the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–9, by which William III replaced James II (of England and VII of Scotland), was presented as a revolution, in the sense of a return to a desirable past situation after a period of unfortunate instability and papist despotism. The word 'revolution' did, before 1789, ordinarily bear the connotation of 'wheel-like' motion, a rotation back to the original point. 'Revolution' only came to mean 'overthrow' after 1789. In practice, the invasion, and the *coup d'état*, that brought William of Orange to the throne as William III represented a violent discontinuity. His usurpation of the throne was not accepted by many in England and, even more obviously, Scotland and Ireland. It had to be enforced through violence. The 'Glorious Revolution' led not only to civil war, a War of the British Succession (1689–92), and major constitutional changes, but also to a new established church in Scotland and the violent destruction of the Catholic Church and degradation of the position of Catholics in Ireland.

And yet this series of events is perfectly illustrative of the power of historical myth, and its importance for national consciousness. Moreover, every country has its versions of this kind of heroic history, interpreted to suit the apparent needs of the spirit of a nation. The Williamite succession was generally presented, except, of course, in Catholic circles, as part of a progressive move towards liberty, an integral part of a seamless web that stretched back to Magna Carta in 1215, and the constitutional struggles of the barons in medieval England, and forward to the peaceful extensions of the British franchise (right to vote) in the nineteenth century, as well as to the allegedly benign and benevolent acquisition of imperial territories in the same period. This teleological, optimistic and progressive conception of British history was the dominant account in academic and popular circles, a comforting and suitably morally sound historical vision for a nation which, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, came to dominate the world in terms of commerce and empire.

To some extent, this publicly held myth of Britain's unilinear historical development is still upheld in the new millennium. The 'Glorious Revolution' is seen by Ian Paisley, First Minister for Northern Ireland (2007–) and a leading spokesman for Ulster loyalism, for example, as not simply a war of succession but as a victory for European religious rights against the authoritarianism of papal dictatorship. For even less strident camps, these events

have a broader utility. Amongst those opposed to the process of European convergence, presented by the growing authority of the European Union, Magna Carta, the historic struggles against arbitrary monarchical injustices and the emergence of an allegedly unique, evolutionary parliamentary democracy are used to counter the seepage of central power to Brussels, not least by Tony Benn, a prominent socialist.

#### 1.4 Competing histories

On the Left, historical continuity is expressed largely in terms of a specific view of national history shaped by changes in productive relations, and expressed through the medium of class consciousness and struggle. This is a history primarily focused on the last 200 years, on a history that began with the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution, although attempts are made to extend this vista by examining earlier instances of apparent class consciousness, as with the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. This type of history, most obviously seen in the work of the British Marxist medievalist Rodney Hilton, has elicited criticism from the Right on the grounds that it represents a backward projection of later views, and subsequent historical change, on to earlier times.

These criticisms are not without foundation. The overriding theme of discussions of class centres on conflict – the vested orders versus the people. It can be applied to past and present, for example, in the search for historical parallel in the debate over the popular hostility aroused by the Poll Tax, introduced by the Conservative government of Mrs Thatcher in the late 1980s. Left-wing opponents of this tax drew attention to past episodes of popular opposition to taxation, all allegedly exemplifying the ongoing struggle between popular will and abusive power. This interpretation is both historical, in that it looks for evidence of continuity, and ahistorical, in that it underrates, if not denies, the specificity of particular episodes. This question of relativism (which is discussed later in this chapter) – of time frozen or time in continuum – might be seen as a metaphor for problems of historical inquiry. Thus a sense of the past, as constant reference point, is of major importance. History is a battleground; an ebbing and flowing of styles, approaches and ideologies; a metaphor for 'this' or 'that' cause; a sharp and at times dangerous tool.

This competition for the past can be seen clearly in a number of fields. It might appear to have but a minor role in international relations. Britain's position in the 2000s is very different from that of fifty years ago, let alone sixty years ago. The empire is lost, and the nature of military strength has altered dramatically with the development of nuclear weapons. Even within

the life-span of an adult of seventy the changes have been dramatic. Despite this fact, historical allusions to earlier times continue to be heard in contemporary debates. While earlier generations determined to shrink the range of British military policy with the expression 'no foreign policy east of Suez', this has been changed, and politicians have been reminded of the change, with British involvement in the two Gulf Wars against Iraq. References to past foreign policy thus become part of contemporary debate. This was also true of the parliamentary discussion over the likely response after the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands/Malvinas in 1982, when politicians made numerous references to the consequences of appeasing aggressive powers, noting the example of the Munich Agreement of 1938. The then leader of the Labour Party, Michael Foot, who had bitterly criticised Tory appeasement of Hitler in 1938, was undoubtedly influenced in his response to the invasion of 1982 by earlier formative experiences. Suspecting that the government of Mrs Thatcher would appease the Argentinian dictatorship – that, in short, the Conservatives could not be relied upon to stand up to right-wing aggression nor to defend national interests – he called for firm action and thus divided his party when Mrs Thatcher did indeed respond firmly.

### **1.5 History and ideology**

The past has considerable political leverage. For this reason history is a contested terrain: between 'high' historians and the 'low'; Whigs against Tories; the Left versus the Right; nation against nation. History is not a subject to be trifled with or taken lightly. It is extremely dangerous in the wrong hands, though a source of enlightenment too. In the political arena, history's worth is well known. Political parties are aware of their own past, and are usually anxious to conceptualise the collective past in their own vision. Each party has its favourite historians; many politicians, from Lord John Russell to the last French Prime Minister, Dominic de Villepin, have written histories.

Politics, of course, has many meanings; its definitions certainly go beyond mere political parties. For the purpose of opening up a discussion of the role of history as politically charged, the definitions offered by Joan W. Scott, the prominent feminist historian ('power', 'the strategies aimed at maintaining power' and 'ideology') will suffice. Those who reclaim aspects of that past, historians, are themselves both the perpetrators and, at times, the victims of the ideological battles that consume their chosen subject. The past is an inheritance that we all share, but its interpretation varies according to how it is viewed in terms of political and social utility. It is naive, for example,

simply to see history as an accumulation of facts and figures, or as a series of colourful little stories which enliven human knowledge. Instead, political suppositions have often played a major role. In the Soviet Union, history was shamelessly and repeatedly rewritten. As crucial figures, such as Leon Trotsky, the Russian Revolutionary leader, were expunged, so their part in the Communist Revolution (October 1917) was at first written down, then written out, and later written back in some negative, counter-revolutionary role. In Nazi Germany, history was utilised as a tool of social control (defined broadly) in an attempt to sharpen the masculine, heroic history of the fatherland and of the German *Volk* (people), evinced in the propaganda of Joseph Goebbels, one of Hitler's henchmen. Great store was set by the fables of German history and so emerged a renewed and reinvigorated imagery of Valkyrie and German eagles; a mytho-history in which the characters of the *Nibelungenlied*, such as Siegfried, who played a major role in Richard Wagner's operas, took centre stage. This was the equivalent of drawing direct analogies between modern English history and Arthurian legend.

The ideological importance of history is not only rooted in the machinations of men like Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and Francisco Franco (1892–1975). The implications for history of an ideological treatment of the past are not solely the remit of undemocratic or authoritarian societies. History, as was argued above in the case of the 'Glorious Revolution', is often about the creation and perpetuation of national myths. Once in the realm of myth-making, we perhaps approach an ideological treatment of the past. Therefore, the ideal of students and scholars might be to study history by endeavouring to separate myth from reality; to clear the ground of the dead wood of many disingenuous interpretations and to develop a more meaningful, systematic and less biased assessment of what constitutes a reasonable knowledge of the past. Yet certain attitudes to the past are welded on through common sense or by personal development and experience. While no one can objectively know all of the past, the incremental development of skills, and a simultaneous awareness of pitfalls, might improve the kind of history we write. In the eyes of some critics, however, such a view is a positivistic myth that exaggerates the potency of historians, and 'post-modernist' writers argue that myth is central to the historical process and cannot be separated from reality. These questions of 'bias' and 'objectivity' in the study of history will crop up time and again throughout this book.

The frequent controversies in states which have national education systems over what constitutes a proper national curriculum in history indicate the contentious nature of the subject and its importance as a tool for politicians' use. No other subject arouses the passions like history; when it

comes to deciding what our children should learn about the national past, debate can be zealous. In Britain in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, questions arose about the future of history teaching: should we teach a national history, or does membership of the European Community require a European dimension to the child's learning; does the nature of Britain's economic heritage necessitate exhaustive treatment of the Industrial Revolution; are the towns in which most of us live suitable vehicles for learning about past societies; should the National Curriculum primarily concentrate on the greatest examples of British endeavour – kings and queens, eminent statesmen and great generals as well as scientists, entrepreneurs and national heroes? In the USA, in the 1990s, the National Standards controversy was similar. British debates over such subject matter are history themselves. Today, the National Curriculum reflects a broad range of interests, from the Greeks and the Romans, through antiquity and the Middle Ages, to modern British, European and American history. Politicians still habitually pop up with suggestions as to what constitutes proper history, and some would say they should, because politicians are the elected representatives of the people. Politicians and leaders in any country, then, have a vested interest in the past. Whether driven by a self-serving or narcissistic desire to connect themselves to the glories of their predecessors in high office or by a need to revive and mould the national spirit, politicians use history.

### **1.6 Ideology and the historians**

The charge of making ideological use of history does not only rest at the door of politicians or those who design curricula. Historians themselves are often driven as much by considerations of ideology as by the nature of historical evidence, although it can be argued that the attempt to distinguish them is naive. This division between theoretical and empirical approaches is considered in later chapters in greater detail. For now, it will suffice to sketch out some of the main arguments concerning the way in which historians' ideological positions might affect the history they produce. In the nineteenth century, when the empirical mode and positivist ideology (with their emphasis on facts or grand scientific explanations) were ascendant, historians, driven by the desire to use sources objectively and impartially, sought to appear neutral and unbiased. By contrast, Marxist historians, with their concentration upon historical materialism (the changing history of an evolving world), with its primacy placed upon the rise and fall of productive systems, seemed, to some traditional historians, to offer a teleological and

ideological type of history. However, not all those seduced by Marxism were left-wing; nor were (or are) all left-wingers Marxists. Empirical approaches are sometimes criticised from the left as outmoded. In addition, it is suggested that objectivity is a myth and that empiricism was just as ideological in its own way as other approaches.

For the most part, controversial areas of historical study are always the most likely to elicit charges of ideological bias. In recent years, feminist historiography – a development in historical writing which has in many respects mirrored the emergence of the women's movement since the 1960s – perhaps provides the most salient example. Today, women's history is very much at the vanguard of the 'new history'. As the question of women's equality is being addressed by women's groups, women have begun to conquer the traditional male preserves of many professions, including academe. In this respect, developments in women's history are marching alongside other non-traditional histories, for example those focusing on class, labour and race, which also seek to rescue neglected themes. As is the case with most new developments in history, women's history has surfaced out of some perceived inadequacy in existing arrangements for historical study and, unlike many new developments, claims to represent the largest chunk of the past (50 per cent or more of the population) which has remained, to borrow Sheila Rowbotham's phrase, 'hidden from history'.

Women's history also broke new boundaries, but within the context of wider social changes. More women have entered universities and do so in larger numbers, both as students and teachers. This has meant a great demand for women's history and the means by which to write it. Joan W. Scott's logical interpretation of what women's history is about, presented in her essay, 'Women's history' (in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives in Historical Writing*, 1993), seems self-evident and acceptable: 'Most women's history has sought somehow to include women as objects of study, subjects of the story. It has taken the axiomatic notion that the universal human subject could include women and provided evidence and interpretations about women's varied actions and experiences in the past.' While this is true, there has also been criticism of certain sorts of women's history, especially that which has been considered tendentious. It is here that the question of ideology leaning was again raised. This is the case, Scott argues, because traditional historians exercise powers of guardianship over history, by which is implied their 'mastery of history'. This they do, she says, by 'invoking an opposition between "history" (that knowledge gained through neutral inquiry) and "ideology" (knowledge distorted by considerations of interest)'.

### **1.7 Ideology and sources**

Many of the problems associated with this question of ideology stem from the sources which historians use, for many of the things historians wish to write about are not well documented. The comparative dearth of sources for the everyday history of ordinary women in the Middle Ages is one example; indeed, the further back we go, the harder it is to find material on any aspect of the common life. The picture, of course, is not all bleak; indeed, historians 'from below' such as George Rudé, and members of the *Annales* School, such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, or cultural historians, such as Robert Darnton, have long argued that creativity and immense hard work can reap rewards. We shall say more about sources in Chapters 4 and 5.

For now, let us consider one final illustration which is addressed much more directly at this question of ideology. Even when writing of comparatively modern times, historians face a struggle with the documents. It is common, for example, for historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to make much use of newspapers, for the advent of the popular press has left for posterity a huge amount of material concerning the way in which contemporaries saw their world. Newspapers, then, are both makers and reporters of opinion; yet even in times of sharp media polarisation, we know very well the limitations of newspapers as purveyors of bias, rather than recorders of news. Questions of efficacy and veracity, questions of historical 'worth', can be asked of newspapers reporting any historical event. Take, for example, the observation of George Orwell (1903–50), the writer and critic, on reportage of the Spanish Civil War (1936–9). His words, first published in 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War' (*New Road*, June 1943), are a savage indictment of the newspaper's worth as an historical artefact, although, like most critics, Orwell underrated the problems of reporting war. Orwell knew that newspapers often published things which were incorrect, but it was in Spain in the 1930s that he noticed for the first time publications which bore no relation to the facts as he knew them. 'I saw', he alleged, 'great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards, and others who had never fired a shot hailed as heroes of imaginary victories.' Even back in London, Orwell recounted, there were newspapers 'retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that had never happened'.

### **1.8 History and time**

What is time – whether past, present or future? This question is central, on

many different levels, to our understanding of what history is. The historian who fails to conceptualise time, its variable speeds in different contexts, and its varying impact upon past or present societies, will be somewhat disadvantaged. Students must not view time as an inflexible or unchanging entity but as a relative phenomenon. Certain things about time do, of course, remain static. However, when we as historians concern ourselves with time it is not to ask: has the number of hours in a day changed over time? Time itself is an interesting category of historical inquiry. As a measure of work, or as the period required to execute a particular task, time already has a sizeable literature associated with it.

E. P. Thompson's essay 'Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism' (*Past and Present*, 38, December 1967) is about time, or, more properly, the way in which perceptions of time have changed over time. As Thompson (1924–93) tried to show, time came to mean something different with the emergence of factory labour and industrial capitalism (although critics have said that much of Thompson's work revealed a limited grasp of pre-industrial society that reflected his own critique of modern society). Time altered from something that was measured by the seasons, or the sun and the moon, to another that was more harshly prescribed by the foreman's fob-watch or the chimes of the factory bell. Notional time became regimented time. With industrial modernity, time came to have new meanings. For late medieval society, time was wholly different from our own notion of time. For example, J. R. Hale, in *Renaissance Europe, 1480–1520* (1971), averred that in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, 'Emotionally, the year began with the first flowers, the lengthening of the day, the first judgement on the winter-sown grain', while 'Only those concerned with legal or diplomatic documents thought of the year as beginning on an official rather than a seasonal date.' Equally, as Carlo M. Cipolla demonstrated in his *Clocks and Culture* (1967), while timekeeping and clocks have heavily influenced the nature of life in Europe, not all societies have clocks; not all societies follow the chimes of bells as the West has done.

Our concern here, though, is not with the way that historical actors understood their own time, interesting though it is. Instead, we must focus on time in relative perspective: the relationship between past time and present time; the number of things, for example, that historical and contemporary actors could do in the same time; our time versus theirs. How far could they travel and how much work could they do; how many people could their communications reach? We are concerned to ask: how far could an Elizabethan travel by road in one day, given that we can cross the Atlantic in hours? This is the point about the variability of time and it is worth bearing in mind, for such things are crucial for us to frame the past.

Seen from the perspective of contemporary society, history is commonly characterised by the increasing number of tasks which can be completed in a given amount of time. The people of today believe that their stressful, fast-moving world of new technology and high-speed communications differs greatly from the languid and slow-moving character of life in past ages. Today, we think of telephones, supersonic air travel, space missions and the Internet; 250 years ago, when the first modern Western canals were being built, people travelled by horse-power, under sail or else on foot; and they communicated by word of mouth or by letter. The contrast, then, seems clear. It is not for nothing that historians have traditionally emphasised the role of change in history. For to understand, or even to discover, change, from era to era, is to understand how we are different from past peoples.

### **1.9 The relativity of time and change**

How far is our analysis based on a conception of time that is anachronistic when applied to the past? Herbert Butterfield wrote in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) that 'The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistry in history, starting with the simplest of them all, the anachronism.' The charge of relativism, or 'present-mindedness' (sometimes called 'presentism'), is often levelled at historians, and it is worth some consideration here. Keith Wrightson, in *English Society, 1580–1680* (1982), observed that 'social change in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was slow. Nevertheless contemporaries knew that they lived in a changing world, however blurred might be their perception of the nature and cause of social change.' The further back we go in time, the slower change seems to us, and the more people found unremarkable things (to us) remarkable (to them). Jan Huizinga, in the preface to his classic study, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), offered posterity this reminder of the nature of the medieval world: 'We, at the present day, can hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine, were formerly enjoyed.'

Such perceptions seem to set us apart from past societies because the sentiments which Wrightson or Huizinga convey concern things; consumables which are taken for granted by a society like ours which is driven by consumerism and supplied by mass production of just those items. Yet features of our own society, parts of our own lived experiences, are comparable to those of the past. Take, for example, warfare. Those who do not know the past would, not unnaturally, consider that the Middle Ages (c. AD 400–1500) were bloodier and more violent times than our own. Perhaps in

many ways they were. Sickness, disease, even the mere thought of dental work, struck greater fear into the medieval person than it does into us; and were there not many wars waged in the Middle Ages, across the world from Scotland and Ireland to the Holy Lands? Yet the twentieth century, which saw the deaths of 50 million people in the Second World War alone, is the bloodiest on record. Try to imagine the changes witnessed – even only at second hand – by someone born in 1900, who lived a long and healthy life: two world wars, the rise of Communism and Fascism, the invention of the atom bomb, the first man on the moon – the list is endless. Then let us cast our minds back to the seventeenth century, a time when, historians admit, social change was slow but events (like the English Civil War) had a deep effect on society. Take the example of John Okey (1608–84), cited by Jim Sharpe in *Early Modern England: A Social History 1550–1760* (1987). When Okey died in Bolton his friends, rather unusually, recorded the key events through which Okey had lived. Germany, they reported, was ‘wasted 300 miles’ and Ireland had witnessed the murder of 200,000 Protestants. England, they averred, saw ‘the crown or command’ changed eight times between the 1640s and 1680s, while the Great Fire of London, they believed, had been caused by ‘papists’. These were indeed troubled times: even Okey’s own town of Bolton was ‘thrice stormed’ during the Civil War.

These things are, of course, relative; but perceptions of change can be compared between one generation and another. There are continuities in history which must not be ignored. When we consider, for example, the notion of the rise or emergence of different ways of life, we are then very close to the periodisation of the past with which historians seem so concerned. George Orwell’s remembrance of childhood experiences, in ‘The Rediscovery of Europe’ (1942), makes a useful, if tongue-in-cheek, point about his childhood classroom experiences which made him ‘think of history as a sort of long scroll with thick black lines across it at intervals. Each of these lines marked the end of what was called a “period”, and you were given to understand that what came afterwards was completely different from what had gone before.’ Orwell likened each change of epoch to a clock striking. Thus, in 1499, Orwell exclaimed, ‘you were still in the Middle Ages, with knights in plate armour riding at one another with long lances, and then suddenly the clock struck 1500, and you were in something called the Renaissance’.

This emphasis upon seemingly overnight change is common. Orwell’s sardonic rendition of the transformation from one age to the next, or one century to another, is important. The idea that each age is unique and different is called Historicism (from the German *Historismus*), and has been very popular among writers of all hues and tendencies since the nineteenth

century. Historicists emphasised this idea that time changed society; that, as John Tosh wrote in *The Pursuit of History* (4th edn, 2005, with Séan Lang), 'each age is a unique manifestation of the human spirit, with its own culture and values'. He adds: 'For one age to understand another, there must be a recognition that the passage of time has profoundly altered both the condition of life and the mentality of men and women.' This succinct statement seems to stand as the ultimate warning against 'present-mindedness', or anachronism. However, it also reflected the secularisation of history in Western thought, and a substantive shift from providential ideas which dominated the Middle Ages, wherein history (in this sense human development) was the expression of God's (unchanging) will on earth.

Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), the prominent Italian liberal historian and social theorist, once wrote that 'all history is contemporary history'. In other words, each generation rewrites history in the light of its own time and experiences. These prescient words are still relevant. For historians and students of history today, the point about the passage of time – and, with it, the charges of anachronism and historicism – is that we must strike a balance between judging the past by our own standards and entirely stranding the past in its own frozen compartment of history. The problem, then, is one of extremes. If, on the one hand, we adopt a present-minded stance in our approach, we risk overplaying continuities, or indeed manufacturing continuities, between us and our past which do not actually exist. If, on the other hand, we adopt a historicist position, or posit the hermetically sealed epochal approach to history (as evinced in Orwell's telling passage), we risk removing any thread which might connect our past and our present. This notion of time, of change and continuity, or similarity and difference, is the hardest balance to achieve; yet it is central to our understanding of the nature of history and the dynamics of social developments.

### **1.10 History as 'problems'**

The preceding discussion clearly suggests that the past is problematic. The fact that history is difficult should lead historians to address challenging questions. At the same time, historical inquiry should be problem-orientated. In the 1920s, Lucien Febvre of the French *Annales* School (which is discussed at length in the next chapter) highlighted what he dubbed '*histoire-problème*' as the way forward for all historians. While Febvre was reacting against history written as a sequential story (narrative), it is arguable that all history – short of propaganda, of course – is concerned with knotty problems and the desire to explain phenomena; as opposed to the form of public history that

simply asserts answers. Thus Gibbon's essentially narrative eighteenth-century classic, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), was as much problem history as *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), which was written by Febvre's disciple, Fernand Braudel. Both men were concerned with the 'problems' of great empires; each wanted to explain historical change and process through the particular vehicle they chose, whether the Roman or the Spanish empire. In addition, even seemingly straightforward textbooks – a history of America or of France – are at root concerned with problems: how did the American people develop; what were the dominant ideas of France under the *ancien régime*; which controversies dominate those countries' historiographies? Even the simple stories of the past, which the *Annalists* decried, uncover problems and perspectives which are often difficult to resolve, or which throw light on unknown areas of knowledge.

Equally, however, historians only know a limited amount about the past. Very little of all that happened in history is known to our contemporary world. Even that which we do know is often debated furiously. Apart from a few uncontentious dates, for example, little of the past is definitely known or agreed upon. Even dates become problematic as soon as we add texture to them. If we say that Harold was shot in the eye at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, most historians would concur, and only a pedant would point out that Harold's demise occurred at nearby Senlac Hill. This, of course, hardly constitutes a debate. If, however, we ask 'what is the significance of Harold's death?', then a debate might well begin.

The problems of historians' approaches are, of course, analogous with students' experiences as they struggle to get to grips with new material in their studies. The dynamics of history, once we move from the listing of a few unquestioned facts, are considerable. Let us consider some examples.

### 1.11 The problem of description and analysis

Important questions in history are not centred around description, but concern analysis. When Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage, 1500–1700* was published in 1977, it received critical acclaim in some fields, but serious and sustained criticisms in others. Stone's book was attacked as a 'Whig history' in which the family is the hero. Stone argued that family life shifted from the deferential, distant and patriarchal ways of medieval times to what he sees as the more 'affective individualism' of emerging capitalist relations. Stone also described the flourishing of the patriarchal nuclear family in this period, with a concomitant decline in communal ties and

increased allegiances to the nation, monarch and Church. He noted that, from the mid-seventeenth century, there emerged a 'closed domesticated nuclear' family which eventually became dominant in the eighteenth century. Stone's work emphasised the development of individualism and the recession of more communal forms of social organisation.

Stone's work was, on some levels, related to the earlier work on family and personal role by Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (1961). Ariès, whose main interest was in the relationship between nature and culture, argued that a sense of childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages, that children went from infants to miniature adults at the age of seven or so. Ariès also wrote about death and was generally concerned with cultural representations of natural phenomena. Both Ariès and Stone challenged demographers with their 'sentiments' (non-statistical, non-quantitative) approach to family and social roles. More recently, demographers have consistently challenged the notion that families changed over time with the rise of capitalism (for this seems central to the sentiments approach). Applying complex and painstaking quantitative methods of family reconstitution to a breathtaking array of long-run records (from parishes and the poor-law guardians, etc.), they have demonstrated that the family remained overwhelmingly nuclear throughout the early modern period, and argue that the idea of the extended family network, while relevant in eastern Europe, was largely a myth in western Europe.

### **1.12 The problem of controversy and debate**

Historical debate is rife, and historians generate much heat in their disagreements. Stone's work is still many students' starting point, and has been pivotal to the history of the family – sentiments versus demographics – debate. Subjects such as 'the family' (like other features of social organisation) are, in a sense, bound to generate controversy because they are so important. The crisis of the seventeenth century in England, American slavery, the Industrial Revolution, the Third Reich – all have raised much controversy.

Population history, for example, is one of the most debated areas of historical inquiry. Historians, like contemporaries at any given time in the past, are concerned with the progress of population. Friedrich Engels, collaborator of Karl Marx, asserted in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) that population was central to history since it charted the most basic of social experiences: human reproduction. In his own words:

According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is again a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence . . . on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.

Looking back on population profiles in the past, we can see that from the eighteenth century the number of people in Europe began to rise dramatically. Why, then, did population stagnate, fall or else grow slowly in the Middle Ages and grow (with notable exceptions like France, where it grew slowly) on a steep upward curve in the nineteenth century? Schoolchildren's textbooks of thirty years ago, still driven by the 'Great Men' approach, tended to stress human endeavour and scientific improvement. Thus the health of nations and the growth of population was seen in terms of this or that medical improvement: smallpox vaccines, antiseptics, X-rays, the fight against tuberculosis.

Later generations of historians have moved away from this approach, again using sophisticated quantitative techniques, to look at mortality and fertility patterns, age-cohort performances – measuring, therefore, not simply growth but the velocity of growth across different regions, nations, occupations and age-groups. As a result of such work, our understanding of human performance has been changed.

Debates concerning the declining fertility rates of the post-1870s period have shed much new light on the old problem of population performance. Once it was the accepted view that the fertility decline – that is, the reduction in the number of live births and/or the size of the average family – was a uniform practice which began with the middle classes and trickled down to affect working-class practices. A crucial study by Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860–1940* (1996), shifted accepted views of a fundamental feature of human life by emphasising that the fall in fertility was not unitary, or distinguishable on class lines, as once was thought. Instead, he argued, from evidence broken down into over two hundred male and female occupational categories, that Britain (although he means, as is acknowledged, England and Wales) was actually represented by a diverse range of fertility regimes. Szreter's study examines an area of interest to historians which was no less important or debated at the time. The fertility decline led to great anxiety among commentators and politicians, and poor population growth rates were seen to threaten the position of one nation against another. Thus, the French feared that the newly unified Germany, with its greater and growing population, would outstrip France in both economic and military terms, and such fears were duplicated elsewhere.

Something as crucial as population inevitably affects other facets of life. Falling fertility in the later nineteenth century, for example, led to debates about migration being reopened. Whereas in the period 1820 to the 1870s British political economists had believed migration was a panacea for overcrowding, unemployment and population boom, the fall-off in fertility rates prompted a return to the eighteenth-century idea that migration was a drain on human resources because it prompted only the industrious and intelligent to leave. On the eve of the First World War, the fertility decline was tied into wider pessimism about Europe as a spent force, and has been linked by historians to increased militarism and aggression among European nations on the eve of the war. Thus, the related questions of family, fertility and population are obviously of enormous importance. Although they cannot be adequately covered in just a few words, the impression of their importance can still be gleaned.

Even in less controversial waters, few books are ever published without some recourse to a literature of controversies and perspectives. It is standard practice for historians to ask their students to consider debates – whether about falling prices or changing mentalities – for a number of reasons. In the first place, debates are usually important, or else no one bothers to disagree. Secondly, they are interesting. Thirdly, reading about them gives scholars insights into both the practice of history and important episodes and trends in our past. Finally, we can say that controversies, debates, problems – call them what you will – provide young historians with certain skills. Debates frequently explode on to the page in a flurry of new empirical research, revised theory and historiographical correction. They are a microcosm of the historian's work of reconstruction/deconstruction. Debates between historians, which are usually conducted through the pages of a journal, give readers a sense of participating in something important. Watching historiography in the making is never quite as exciting as when it takes the form of debate.

### **1.13 Television, mass media and history**

'Watching' history also evokes a different meaning: the idea that, in recent decades, history has moved from the page to the screen. That passage has been a remarkably important feature of the presentation of history, one which cannot be ignored. Radio of course has been an important purveyor of historical knowledge but the visual is, today, the most powerful medium of modern culture, and it is this aspect we focus upon in the final section of this chapter.

The visual is so important in our lives that it is increasingly supplanting

the literary representation of culture in the hierarchy of importance. This is true not only of Western societies but also elsewhere. By 1986, there were 195 million televisions in the USA; by 1994, 99 per cent of UK households had a television. Of course, per capita rates of television ownership vary greatly from country to country. They remain especially low in sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia. Nevertheless, because much of the Third World television viewing is a communal activity (as newspaper reading once was in the UK), with TVs in public buildings such as village halls, the impact of television is greater than the per capita rates suggest.

Television is a medium through which public history is created, sustained and reflected, and through which commercial interests could seek to profit from popular interest in the past. Due in part to state interest but also, in many countries, to cultural norms, television's historical coverage is generally in support of the established national account of the past. This is true, for example, of an optimistic, Whiggish and celebratory serialised TV history of New Zealand, entitled *Frontier of Dreams* (2005), which was made by the government's own historians at the Ministry of Culture and Heritage (which was also headed by the Prime Minister, Helen Clark). While historians from the academy were used to write some of the scripts and also appeared as talking heads, *Frontier of Dreams* was very much a public history project. Indeed, it was the largest such project undertaken in New Zealand, running to 13 one-hour episodes, each with lavish production. Even though the series was overly simplistic, and though several critics did not like it, there was relatively little public criticism of the series.

In Britain, TV history excites much more debate and criticism. For example, there was public warmth, but academic indifference and sometimes clear hostility, towards Simon Schama's *History of Britain*, a fifteen-episode tour of two millennia of the nation's history, which was first shown on the BBC in 2000. The contrast between the reception by New Zealand and Britain of these two works of TV history may be explained by the public perceptions of the role of history, public history and of government sponsorship of such programming. In New Zealand, directly or indirectly state-funded public historians appear to be consciously part of a post-colonial nation-building programme, and seem to be accepted as such. This may be why criticism of projects such as *Frontier of Dreams* is muted, or restricted to sniping from the academic margins, in scholarly journals or periodical reviews. In Britain, Schama's series was made by state TV, and thus funded by licence-payers, making it – like all aspects of BBC programming – an accepted topic for national discussion.

There are of course many more extreme examples of debates about the use of history in the media than ever are raised by programming in Britain or New Zealand. Elsewhere, public control of history can also lead to greater

international sensitivity to televised accounts of the past. This can be seen quite clearly in the complaints from the former Yugoslavia in 2004 about Italian television coverage of atrocities against Italian civilians by Yugoslav forces in 1945, as Italians in Istria were subjected to what was later termed ethnic cleansing.

Apart from the politics of programming, there are also important questions concerning emphasis and depth in TV history. The emergence of dedicated history channels, for example, has done much to popularise certain sorts of history – the sorts of history which ordinary viewers are supposed to prefer, notably studies of war, or war masquerading as biography. There has certainly been an explosion in all kinds of TV programming in history. In 2004, Britain had two such channels dedicated to this subject: the History Channel and UK TV History. The History Channel, which is available worldwide – and sometimes dubbed the ‘Hitler Channel’, because of its focus on World War II – had 125 million subscribers, 83 million of them in the United States. While the emphasis upon war is clear enough, these channels in fact present a wide range of programmes, covering most aspects of the past. They do favour themes such as war, but they range beyond that. Further, in seeking an effective hook to grab audiences, they often do focus on the past through individuals – the history of the great man or woman is very much alive and well in the televised version of the past. But this is not the sum total of their contribution. Moreover, these channels also make their own programmes, and re-run ‘classic’ programming which might not otherwise be seen by younger viewers, such as the epic 26-episode production, *The World at War* (1976), and Ken Burns’s classic study of *The Civil War* (1990). Successful big productions are also broadcast more frequently on the networks of the countries whose history they tell: *The People’s Century* and Schama’s *History of Britain* playing regularly on UK television are good examples of this. These channels fulfil a useful function in popularising history for the interested general viewer, but they have been less successful than history programmes on mainstream channels, whose audiences are far larger.

Historical documentaries present major problems for historians and programme-makers. But they also offer rich possibilities beyond the historian whose usual medium of representation is the written word. Archive footage conveys a sense of period and place, and ‘talking head’ experts are usually woven in with such material, providing usually very short vignettes for the purpose of encapsulation. Threads are maintained by adhering to a script, one important aspect of which is the overarching words of an unseen narrator, often a famous actor with a powerful or distinctive voice: Sir Lawrence Olivier was used for *The World at War*, for example.

Historical documentaries are nowadays lavish productions and often

deploy the tool of reconstruction, employing actors to recreate certain scenes. Societies devoted to historical re-enactments, such as the Sealed Knot, which regularly plays out the battles of the English Civil War, are also used to create the drama of battlefields. Much more successful modes of presentation exist and have been used. One of the remarkable features of Ken Burns's *Civil War* was the lack of movement on camera. Pictures of ordinary soldiers, still images of battle-fields, and the evocative words drawn from ordinary peoples' letters were woven into the grand narrative of the war in a way which gave the viewer a real sense of ordinary men or women and their connection to the unfolding events. Soldiers' letters to their sweethearts and wives, written prior to the days upon which they were killed or injured, added immense emotional gravity to the whole production. Such clever and innovative approaches are, however, rare. Arguably, Burns's work is yet to be surpassed.

As with all TV genres over the years, there has been an evolution in historical programming. Indeed, it is hard to think of the first examples of TV history as the same as recent, more sophisticated, examples. Initially, the format was staid and wooden; it usually took the form of a lecture from an historian standing rather stiffly in front of the camera. The Open University in the UK, which utilised night-time television hours to deliver course lectures, used this format for years in all disciplines, not just history. More generally, A. J. P. Taylor mastered this format for the BBC and was able to talk with great confidence, structure and content without referring to notes. Audiences were also treated to high-brow discussions, as when Hugh Trevor-Roper (later Lord Dacre) debated Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*. The key development was Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969). This lavish series enjoyed high viewing figures for an art-history-focused account of human progress. The lecture format continued with the satirical magazine, *Private Eye* commenting on the 'Kenneth Clark prize for getting in the way of the television camera'. Nevertheless, the series made very good use of a balance of the camera and the informed commentator.

Clark can be faulted for a somewhat Whiggish teleology and, more seriously, a failure to use different approaches. This continued to be a characteristic of much TV history, with narrative clarity, i.e. dumbing-down, favoured over debate. Even today, TV history provides almost no sense that historians disagree over the interpretation of evidence. Today's format is a far cry from Clark or Taylor standing in front of a camera. Instead, for *A History of Britain* (2000–2) Simon Schama was filmed walking across relevant historical terrain, looking relaxed in his leather jacket. The historian as sole storyteller was still alive and well in the presentation of Schama but, by this time, the cheapness of the Taylor approach had been replaced by budgets which

enabled the historian and his team to get out and about. The approach was undoubtedly visually impressive and enormous amounts of research clearly were undertaken; however, it was also expensive, reputedly costing £400,000 per episode. The critics may have had some reservations about the approach or style, but content is most important and for this, too, Schama's approach received criticism, especially from Scotland where historians saw Schama's account as too Anglocentric. It is certainly possible to argue that *The History of Britain* was really a history of England, with lip-service paid to the Celts of Scotland and Ireland only insofar as they contributed to the story of England's expansion. Similar things might, however, be said of a written account: criticisms of content are by no means unique to the television medium of history. Schama's series clearly met with approval as well as support from the BBC and from government: great sums were lavished on the series and he was awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 2001. Describing himself as a 'born-again Whig', Schama devoted much attention to what he called the 'soap opera' of the past, but his television series was lambasted for its approach in reviews of the series, which are generally instructive for some of the problems of televised history. In *The Times*, 28 September 2000, Magnus Linklater pointed out that Schama's approach to Britishness 'blithely ignored the entire canon of recent historical work'. Two days later, the *Economist* warned that Schama 'runs the risk of reducing the history of Britain to little more than a soap opera of blood-thirsty warring kings, jealous siblings, and revolting barons . . . [and] runs the risk of banality.' In the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 8 December 2000, Christopher Haigh found 'too much drama . . . a Hollywood version . . . a messy soap opera in costume, rich in error'.

Critics appear to accept that a more acute grasp of the past was offered by his rival, Dr David Starkey. Unlike Schama, Starkey is a British historian whose published works have all been in the subject area which he brought to the screen with undoubted expertise and knowledge. His series on the Tudors introduced viewers to the primary sources behind historical knowledge on the period. He followed this up with a lengthy series on *The British Monarchy* (2004–6) which, like all of these historical documentaries, demonstrated a seemingly endless market.

Television has the ability to collapse history by making 'them' seem like 'us'. This is an ahistorical approach that contrasts with received practice and wisdom in academic circles. Its advantage for the purveyors of TV history is that by connecting audiences with historical characters this genre serves the profitable cause of accessibility. This can be seen in re-creations of the past in reality television, for example in the immensely popular *1900 House* (1999). This was a British Channel 4 Television series in which a modern family lived

in a house restored to its 1900 state. Initially designed as a programme about domestic technology, the project was humanised by using a real family of ordinary people. However, the response of the moderns to the past could not capture the world as it was in 1900s. Instead, what we saw was the dynamics of a late-1990s family set in an alien environment. The same was true of the 2002 British re-creation of a family's experiences of World War II on the home front, although personal reflections made the consequences of rationing very vivid.

Television programmers lack the big money behind the film industry. It tends to be more factual in its intentions than the cinema and, of course, provides much more non-fiction programming. However, the lack of money also impacts on viewer reception of historical programming. Reconstructions are a case in point. In general, these appear wooden, clean-edged, and, regardless of how many extras a TV company can afford, they are never able to generate the feel of a battle in the way that even more lavish films, such as *Gladiator* or *City of Heaven*, are able to do with their combination of money, people and computers. Certainly, historians are often critical of the attempt to re-enact the past on film.

Historians in the academy have to accept that TV history is here to stay. Satellite technology has made the medium more readily available. Older audiences enjoy history programming more than the young, and they constitute a wealthy market. They have both time and money on their hands, living longer than their parents' generation. Seen in this light, the growth of the popularity of TV history is part of a larger trend. This is about patterns of popular consumption, with the History Channel, biographies, histories of war, and genealogical research and local history forming a substantial part of the lives of a new generation of retirees.

### 1.14 Conclusions

We have seen from this opening chapter that there is much controversy over what constitutes historical inquiry. The value of history, its roles and uses, have also been the subject of repeated debate. At the same time, it is important to note that history is part of our culture; it is something we all share and no individual or group owns it. Consequently, tensions often arise over what might be termed the utility of history. People from different interest groups and classes, regions and localities, religions and cultures, have seen (and will see) history in contrasting ways. Often these differences are as much concerned with ideology as with knowledge. The question of what constitutes national history was discussed because this is one of the key areas in

which controversy and disagreement arise. There are particular tensions, for example, attached to the histories of peoples or nations with their emphases upon distinctness and uniqueness. The Whig view of English history is a fine example of this.

This chapter also discussed how scholars and students of history must come to terms with a number of key ideas if they are to understand the past more effectively. Historical studies are crucially shaped by the conception of what we call 'historical problems'. Using the concept of time itself, we argued that academics today see themselves not simply as story-tellers, but as problem-solvers. We can thus conclude that, without an understanding of the problematical nature of historical inquiry and in the absence of a questioning approach to historical sources, historical inquiry lacks a crucial dimension of rigour.

In the coming chapters, when the emergence of history as a distinct discipline and the importance of methodology and theory are considered, we will see that the observations of this chapter are central to our understanding of the past.

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