

"[History] is the branch of inquiry that seeks to arrive at an accurate account and valid understanding of the past."

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"As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day."

MARGARET ATWOOD, *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

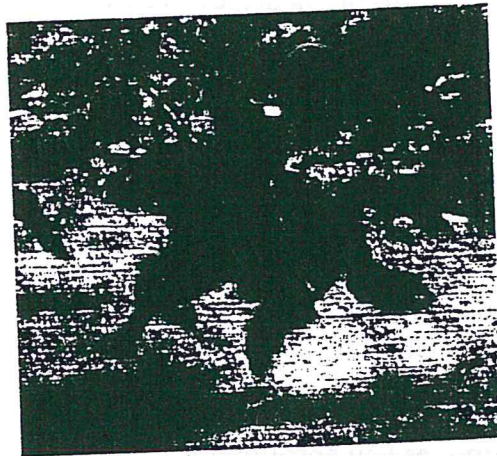


Chapter 1 discussed how the American past has been chronicled in different ways during different eras in American history. As unsettling as that discovery may be, it may be even more unsettling to discover that even within a given period of history there are significant differences between individual historians' versions of the same events. To understand why this is so, we must look more closely at the nature of history itself.

There is no single, unanimously accepted version of American history. There are many versions that often conflict with one another. For instance, Hodding Carter III, Assistant Secretary of State under President Jimmy Carter, was aware at a young age that the American history he was taught in the South differed from what was taught in the North. "It was easy for me as a youngster growing up in Mississippi to know that my eighth-grade state history textbook taught me a lot which didn't jibe with what my cousins in Maine were being taught. We spoke of

the War Between the States. They spoke of the Civil War. . . . But our texts might as well have been written for study on different planets when it came to the status and feelings of the black men and women of the state or nation."¹

The controversy over a 1991 exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American Art underscores the same point. At issue was the version of the history of the American West that should be presented to the American public. The exhibit, "The West as America: Reinterpreting



Images of the Frontier," challenged many traditional and romanticized American beliefs about the settlement of the West. The move westward, the exhibit suggested, was accompanied by many destructive environmental and social changes that had been overlooked in earlier versions of the frontier experience.

Critics were outraged. Ted Stevens, U.S. Senator from Alaska, fumed, "Why should people come [to the Smithsonian] and see a history that's so perverted?" Daniel Boorstin, an eminent and widely read historian, said the exhibit was "historically inaccurate [and] destructive."²

1 "Viewpoint," *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 23, 1982).

2 "Time to Circle the Wagons," *Newsweek* (May 27, 1991), 70; "Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian," *The New York Times* (May 26, 1991, Section 2, 1.

This episode was reprised in 1995 when the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum planned an exhibit on the dropping of the first atomic bomb in 1945. A firestorm of controversy swirled around the historical narrative that was to accompany the exhibit. Planners and professional historians thought the exhibit should "encourage visitors to undertake a thoughtful and balanced reexamination" of the events in question; veterans' groups and others argued that the commentary was unbalanced and an insult to the soldiers who fought in the war.³

Why the controversy? Because people take their history seriously, and they become very uncomfortable if history challenges cherished beliefs and values. The situation can become explosive when historians attempt to record and explain the more unpleasant or even embarrassing episodes in one's own national past. In the early 1980s, for example, the Japanese government ordered a change in their textbooks that played down Japan's record of aggression and war crimes in the 1930s and 1940s, and then backed down in the face of a worldwide protest. The Holocaust is still an extremely sensitive subject in German textbooks. And, in the United States (again, according to Hodding Carter III), "those in charge of such things wanted the textbooks . . . to reflect an American past in which error was almost as foreign to our experience as evil. There was no such thing as racism in those books, or imperialism, or even very much about economic exploitation."⁴

This brings us back to the question: what is history? History—as you encounter it in a classroom or in daily life—is not the past itself, but an account or version of the past. History is the book we read, the lecture we listen to, the television show or film that we watch—or, the museum exhibit we attend. It is also the evening newscast or the daily newspaper. (Philip Graham, the late publisher of the *Washington Post*, said journalism was "the first rough draft of history.")⁵

But history has another meaning besides being an account of the past. There is an ambiguity in the English language that confuses the

issue. People sometimes use the word history to mean the past itself—every event that has actually occurred over the centuries. Barbara Tuchman, one of the most accomplished historians of our time, was quite right when she defined history "as the past events of which we have knowledge."⁶ However, since we cannot directly study what actually happened, we have to rely on records of those events written by eye-witnesses or participants. These records, called original or primary sources, are the materials that historians use to write their accounts—the books and articles we read. Thus, as James Davidson and Mark Lytle put it, "History is not 'what happened in the past'; rather, it is the act of selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past. It is something that is done, that is constructed, rather than an inert body of data that lies scattered through the archives."⁷

HOW HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS ARE CREATED

History, then, involves an act of creation, but the process is not a simple one. The historian's intellectual task is challenging for two reasons: first, an immense gulf separates the present time from the past historians try to reconstruct and understand; and second, the available evidence is flawed and incomplete.

The key challenge faced by any historian is that the past is lost forever. Unlike scientists who can experiment directly with tangible objects, historians cannot study the past directly, for instance, they can't repeat the Civil War to see if it would come out differently if Robert E. Lee had not made a fatal error at Gettysburg. They will never be able to interview the delegates to the Constitutional Convention, nor visit the Roanoke Island colony founded by Sir Walter Raleigh to find out why the colonists disappeared from the face of the earth. These things did happen, and yet the individuals involved are as inaccessible to the historian as Pharaoh or Julius Caesar. Because of this, the past can only be understood indirectly and imperfectly, and only in terms of the evidence available.

3 *The New York Times* (February 5, 1995), E5.

4 *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 23, 1982).

5 Quoted in Ken Burns, "The Painful, Essential Images of War," *New York Times* (January 27, 1991).

6 Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 27.

7 James Davidson and Mark Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (New York: Knopf, 1982), xvii.

Although the past is forever lost, remnants survive as guideposts to those distant events. As Margaret Atwood wrote in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, "the past is a great darkness . . . filled with echoes,"⁸ and those echoes are all that historians have to work with as they try to reconstruct and explain the human experience. The echoes take many forms: surviving buildings, works of art, weapons, pots, monuments, photographs, recordings, even human remains. But, overwhelmingly, the study of history is based on written records that have survived into our day.

In one sense, too many written records have survived. So many documents are available to

beings who inhabit the earth and you get some idea of the number of events each day that go unrecorded. That is only the beginning of the problem. In the words of historian Louis Gottschalk:

Only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to the historians' attention; only a part of what has come to their attention is credible; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian. . . . Before the past is set forth by the historian, it is likely to have gone through eight separate steps at each of which some of it has been lost; and

FROM EVENT TO EVIDENCE: THE FUNNEL OF DIMINISHING RESOURCES

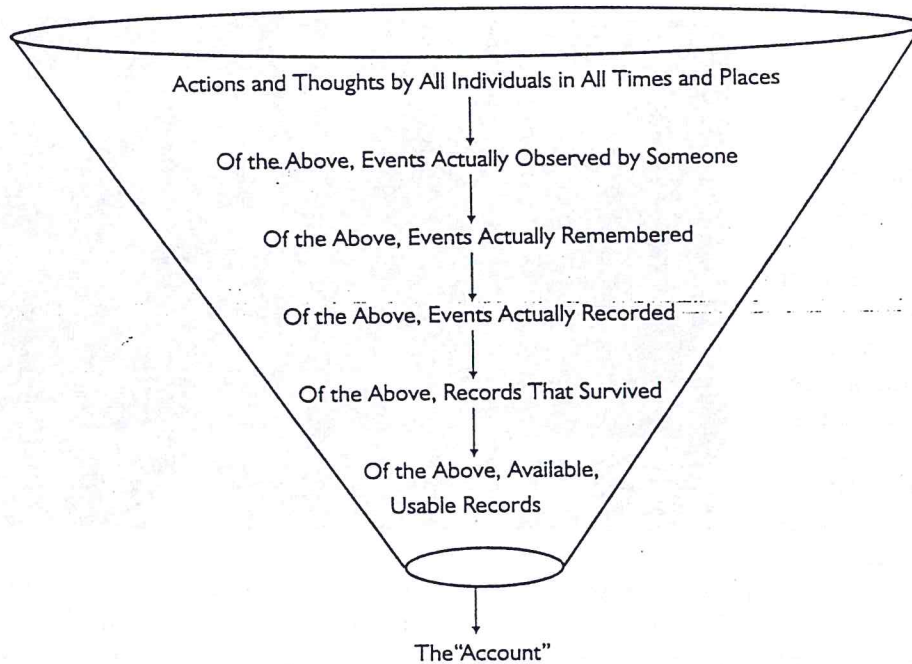


Figure 1

historians that an individual would be hard pressed to read everything relevant to a single topic. But compared to the immensity of the past itself, the surviving records are like a very few drops of water in a very large bucket. For instance, most past events left no records at all! Think of the number of events in your own life for which there is no record but your own memory. Multiply those unrecorded events in your own life by the billions of lives of human

there is no guarantee that what remains is the most important, the largest, the most valuable, the most representative, or the most enduring part. In other words the "object" that the historian studies is not only incomplete; it is markedly variable as records are lost or recovered.⁹

The historian, then, is at the end of a distillation process in which the immensity of the human experience is reduced to a few, sometimes unrepresentative, fragments of the original. (See Figure 1.)

⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), 394.

⁹ Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (New York: Knopf, 1950), 45–46.

SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN THE STUDY OF HISTORY

The immense chasm that separates historians from the past they study and the incomplete and flawed evidence they have to work with leads to the conclusion that all historical accounts are somewhat subjective. Since historians can never get at the full truth about a segment of the past, the best they can do is provide a partial sketch. There is, of course, a relationship between the past-as-it-happened and the historian's account, but the account can never be definitive or complete. "Even the best history," said Civil War historian Bruce Catton, "is not much better than a mist through which we see shapes dimly moving." Or, in the words of W. S. Holt, "History is a damn dim candle over a damn dark abyss."

The historian is also a factor in the equation. Personal biases, political beliefs, economic status, religious persuasion, errors, and idiosyncrasies can subtly and unconsciously influence the way in which sources are interpreted. Conservative Republicans often read and interpret the political history of the United States in a very different way than liberal Democrats. Protestants and Catholics have written distinctive versions of the religious upheavals known as the Reformation. Northerners and Southerners, as mentioned earlier, continue to have their differences concerning the history of the American Civil War.

Writing history, then, is an act of personal creation, or more accurately, an act of re-creation, in which the mind of the historian is the catalyst; and, whether written or spoken, every piece of history represents the scholarly and creative effort of a single individual. One might even say our history is as much a product of the historians who write it as the people who actually participated in the events it attempts to describe. Small wonder written history is subjective.

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

History students should be aware that an element of subjectivity does not invalidate the importance or substance of historical studies. Even though the records of past events are inadequate and difficult to interpret, they do constitute a tangible link between past and present. And, even though historians can never completely eradicate their personal frames of reference, they can still write credible and convincing accounts that are firmly grounded in the existing evi-



dence. As Stephen Jay Gould, the Harvard paleontologist, puts it: "We understand that biases, preferences, social values, and psychological attitudes all play a strong role in the process of discovery. However, we should not be driven to the opposite extreme of complete cynicism—the view that objective evidence plays no role, that perceptions of truth are entirely relative, and that scientific [or historical] conclusions are just another form of aesthetic preference."¹⁰

This is an important point: history is not fiction. Different historians will interpret the past differently for many different reasons. But in all cases their accounts must be based on all the available relevant evidence. A version of the past that cannot be supported by evidence is worth-

¹⁰ Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 244.

less and will quickly be rejected by other historians. Thus one opinion (no matter how strongly held), is *not* as good as another, and the student of history, whether a beginner or seasoned professional, must learn to discriminate between accounts that are supported by the evidence and those that fail this basic test.

Finally, history is not the only discipline in which conclusions are tentative and constantly open to revision. No field of study is ever static, since all research is, to some degree, conditioned by the climate of the times, the values and attitudes of the researchers themselves, and the discovery of new evidence. Even theories in the so-called hard sciences are influenced by the context of time, place, and circumstance.

CONCLUSION

The realization that history involves the study of individual interpretations or versions of the past can be unsettling. Many of us yearn for the security afforded by unchallenged, definitive answers to a limited and manageable set of questions. To find out that historians are always asking new questions and continually offering new answers

to old questions eliminates the possibility of an absolute and singular truth about the human past. At the same time, this is also what makes history so intellectually exciting. History is not the dead study of a dead past; it is not about the memorization of dates, names, and places. History is a living and evolving dialogue about the most important subject of all—the human experience. And all of us are capable in taking part in that dialogue.

The remaining question is, how do you do this? The answer is simple: by learning how historians think and by sharpening the analytical and communication skills that are essential for success in college and professional life. These skills and thought processes are what we call the methods of history.

The methods of history are not especially complicated or confusing. Most of them are common sense, and can be learned without a great deal of specialized or technical training. Although doing history is not altogether easy, with some time, effort, and enthusiasm even beginning students can become historically literate.

Reading Questions: Historiography

“The Nature of History”

1. What does the author mean when he states that “history is an act of personal creation, or more accurately, an act of recreation in which the mind of the author is the catalyst” (p. 19)?
2. If, as the author suggests, history is merely subjective, why should we bother studying it? What value is there in the study of history?