Documentary Enlightenment

The death of Edward II and the principles of historical methodology

A public lecture delivered at the National Archives, 28 June 2018.

On 3 May this year I was listening to *Free Thinking* on BBC Radio Three and heard the celebrated Canadian poet Gary Geddes interviewed about his poem 'Sandra Lee Scheuer'. Sandra Lee was one of the four students killed on 4 May 1970, when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on 600 anti-Vietnam War protesters at Kent State University. I was particularly struck by something Geddes said at the end of the interview. First, he quoted the Italian historical philosopher, Benedetto Croce, who declared that 'without narrative there is no history'. Then, immediately afterwards, Geddes added this: 'What people – a lot of people – don't realise is that history is just a series of subjective narratives about the past. And I love that notion. There's something liberating about that.' This caught my attention, in the way that one sometimes inadvertently stubs one's toe – except that I felt I had just stubbed my mind. Was Croce right to say that 'without narrative there is no history? And if he was, does it follow that history 'is just a series of subjective narratives'? After all, there are many photographs and documents that attest to the killings at Kent State. Many witnesses are still alive today. Such testimonies limit how much subjectivity others can apply to an account of what happened. But if history is '*just* a series of subjective narratives', then it follows that all we can hope to know about that day is a series of individual perspectives. There's no objective truth available to us – and this is the case even when we are talking about an event that we might have seen with our own eyes. This would not only confirm Hayden White's assertion that 'we are free to conceive history as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will', it would also endorse the postmodern scepticism of history: that it is infinitely re-describable, and therefore cannot be guaranteed to contain any degree of objective truth.[1]

Journalists tell us regularly that we live in a post-fact, post-truth world. What that actually means is difficult to determine. People in power have always told blatant lies, distributed untruths about their opponents, and denied atrocities and misdemeanours. What has changed is that we now have a facile, catch-all term, 'fake news', to describe politically motivated duplicity. It's a phrase that also reflects beliefs in alternative realities. We may find ourselves confronted by right-wingers who deny that the Holocaust happened; and flat Earthers who dismiss the mathematical evidence that the world is a globe spinning in space with the phrase 'that's just scientism'; and countless conspiracy theorists who declare that Elvis Presley and Hitler are still alive and that the Mafia were behind J.F. Kennedy's assassination. To say that the past is 'just a series of subjective narratives' is to take your first tentative steps along the same road that all these groups march up and down, day in day out. They claim to be freethinking sceptics of the mainstream media but are more accurately described as credulous believers of their own collective delusions. The danger is not that you or I might join them; it is rather that more people will come to think that historians are *like* them in that we 'conceive [of] history as we please'. It's an echo of the 1970s and 1980s, when postmodernists and critical theorists argued vehemently that we select our facts to suit our own preferences and treat evidence as so many windows on the past, pretending that through those windows we can see the reality of distant centuries whereas, in truth, they are static paintings, framed at the insistence of dead men. Ultimately there is no historical truth because, in the words of the postmodernist Keith Jenkins, 'the gap between the past and history... is such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it'.[2] Moreover, every *attempt* to bridge it can be regarded as personal, not universal, because every narrative is ultimately a subjective one.

Okay, it's a big problem. So what? What meaning can any of this have for those who study pre-modern history? We don't have to worry about those who think they can simply redesign the past to suit themselves; we have the means to judge what did and did not happen. We subscribe to standards of excellence. Conspiracy theorists don't. The only people we need to deal with are those who understand the principles governing how we may determine what happened in the past. In terms of building bridges between us and the medieval world, as long as the bridge builders have confidence that their constructions are sound, then no one need worry.

The problem is that this isn't true. History is not only of concern to historians. We build bridges so *everyone* can cross, not just our fellow bridge builders. Moreover, this isn't any old bridge we're talking about. It is how we understand our place in time: how we have developed up to now and what such developments mean for our future. It therefore needs to be reliable. As I have repeatedly stressed in my *Time Traveller's Guides* and even more in my book *Centuries of Change*, in order to understand our species we need to see ourselves in a more profound way than simply looking in the mirror of the present moment. How does humanity react when suffering a mortality crisis as great as the Black Death, or experiencing a conflict as socially disruptive as the Hundred Years War? Historians are not apart from society, enquiring into artefacts and evidence as if to do so was some sort of perversion. We exist *within* society, and in dialogue with society, partly to answer these questions about human nature and partly to explain what the artefacts around us say about life in the past. If our fellow citizens do not trust us, they will not share our values. These values support almost every historical activity – from funding academic departments and making history TV programmes to maintaining historical attractions and governing what can and can't be done with listed buildings and scheduled ancient monuments. Without public trust, historians are merely stamp collectors, arranging colourful but ultimately useless pictures on the page – in a layout designed for no other purpose than to please ourselves and our friends.

This deepening scepticism of history should force us to reflect on what we do. Why *should* the public trust professional historians? Indeed, what *are* 'the principles governing how we may determine what happened in the past'? Why doesn't someone articulate them? Hayden White observed more than half a century ago that historians are open to 'accusations of bad faith on account of their claiming the privileges of both the artist and the scientist while refusing to submit to critical standards currently obtaining in either art or science'.[3] As a writer of books for the public, the artistic side of history is naturally of great interest to me, and I have written and spoken about it on several occasions. However, the information-science side is even more important. It underpins everything we do. So why do historians not subscribe to critical standards?

Oh, but we *do* subscribe to them, I hear you say. Respectable scholars demonstrate excellence in all they do. Unfortunately, that is not always true. They

may lay claim to the highest standards of scholarship but they do not consistently apply them, especially when it comes to political history. Indeed, one of the main points of this talk is to demonstrate how some of the most respected historians in this country sometimes fall short of the mark that you, I and *they* would deem 'professional'.

My starting point is the news of Edward II's death. At those words, certain people will think 'Dr Mortimer, you're sounding like a stuck record. You've been going on and on about this since 2003.' Yes, I have. Since 2001, actually. And I am completely and utterly unapologetic about it. The reason is that Edward II's death serves as a magnifying glass on professional practice. It allows us to see how academics behave individually and collectively when their ability to talk about the past is questioned. As you will see, it exposes much that is wrong with our profession. But at the same time, the magnifying glass shows us how we could do things better. And *that* is why I am not going to shut up about Edward II's death. Pinpointing how the finest minds can make mistakes is the best way to see how we could *all* do things better.

Briefly to remind you of the essentials. On 21 September 1327 two letters from Lord Berkley were taken from Berkeley Castle to Lincoln via Nottingham – a distance of 150 miles – to let Edward III and his mother know that Edward II was dead. These letters arrived during the night of 23 September. The following day the lords and clergy who had been attending the parliament at Lincoln were informed of the death. That same day, the 24th, letters to the lords guarding the border with Scotland were sent out repeating the news, as we know from the survival of an original example.[4] In other words, news of the death was accepted at face value by the young king and the royal household and disseminated *immediately*. It could not possibly have been checked. Three months later, an embalmed body wrapped in waxed cloth and said to be that of Edward II, but which was viewed 'only superficially' on its bier by the public, was buried in Gloucester Abbey. Two years after that, in March 1330, the king's half-brother, the earl of Kent, who had attended the funeral, was executed for trying to rescue Edward II from Corfe Castle. Dozens of men were implicated in the plot, including the bishop of London and the archbishop of York, from whom an original letter survives communicating news of Edward II's survival to the mayor of London. Later in

1330, after Edward III took power into his own hands, Lord Berkeley admitted in parliament that he had not previously heard of the ex-king's death…

Stop there. That last detail is critical. As I pointed out in 2005 in an article in the *English Historical Review*, all of the evidence for Edward II's death ultimately rests on the information sent by Lord Berkeley to the court.[5] It was accepted at face value and disseminated immediately, as we have seen. So, if Lord Berkeley declared three years later in parliament that he had not previously heard of the death, it follows that his initial announcement is highly dubious and may well have been a lie. Any impartial consideration of later events, including the earl of Kent's trial and execution for trying to restore Edward II, has to take into consideration the possibility that Edward II was still alive in 1330. The bottom line is this: in order to maintain that Edward II died in Berkeley Castle, and deny that his half-brother attempted a genuine rescue in March 1330, you need to know better than Lord Berkeley what actually happened in his castle on 21 September 1327. Clearly no one today does.

The approach was innovative. It examined the flow of information contained within various pieces of evidence rather than taking that evidence at face value. Twelve years later, no one has dented its logic – although several people have tried. Their attempts have resulted in a catalogue of methodological errors that are hugely revealing of how erratic modern scholarship can be. You would have thought that a meticulous examination of how people knew about a historical event would have been welcomed by the scholarly community. But in the case of Edward II's death, it was (and is) treated by most scholars with scepticism (at best) and scorn (at worst), even though it explains why so many powerful people believed that Edward II was still alive in 1330, and why the earl of Kent in particular was executed for trying to rescue a supposedly dead man. My analysis also permitted a re-evaluation of the Fieschi letter, which contains a considerable amount of verifiable information about Edward II's custody and his later peregrinations on the Continent under the protection of his kinsmen, the Fieschi family. Until my work was published, this document had remained an inexplicable oddity. Now it appears it may well be what it claims to be. But do academics want to understand it for what it is – or even what it *might* be? Do they want to explore its many important implications? No. They clearly want it to disappear and no longer haunt their neat narrative.

In the twelve years since my *EHR* article appeared, the most common academic response has been reductionism. And this is true even of the very best scholars. No one will deny that Professor Nicholas Vincent is one of our most distinguished academics: a Fellow the British Academy, no less. Yet in a history magazine in 2017 one of the arguments he marshalled in urging readers to discount the idea that Edward II did not die in Berkeley Castle was that 'the Fieschi letter… [fits] all too neatly into a wider pattern… the legend of the hidden or undying king.'[6] This is not good logic. If story A has something in common with stories B, C, D and E, most of which are false, it does not follow that story A is false. A penguin is a bird, and most birds can fly, but it does not follow that penguins can fly. Similarly, Professor Seymour Phillips has resorted to reductionism in his otherwise excellent Yale University Press study of the reign of Edward II. In that work he declares that 'the simplest explanation is surely the best one: that Edward II did die at Berkeley on 21 September and that he was murdered or helped on his way to death'. What makes this narrative 'simpler' than my analysis? It leaves unanswered the questions of why the earl of Kent was executed and why and how the Fieschi letter was written – neither of which Professor Phillips has managed to explain. Professor Phillips is good enough to say in an endnote that the questions I have raised need to be answered but then he, our leading scholar on the reign, does not answer them. Presumably he would have done, if he'd been able to: what is 'simpler' about that? I would suggest that the only thing 'simpler' about the traditional narrative is that it makes the lives of senior academics 'simpler' – in that they don't have to unpick decades of research and examine it all over again in the light of a new finding. Now *that* I do understand and sympathise with: it would completely upset the integrity of everything they had produced to date. But denying it is not historical analysis.

This is where the Edward II-death debate takes on a surreal, extraordinary character. I have been compared to Dan Brown and Agatha Christie and all sorts of conspiracy theorists over the years, as well as an Italian opera. While checking that 2017 magazine piece quoted above, I noticed that Professor Vincent wrote therein that 'it has not been proved that Edward II cheated death in 1327 any more than Elvis Presley can be proved to be alive'. Seriously? Elvis? Oh, I must be 'The Great Pretender'! Reductionism is not an answer to this or any other historical question. You might win a political debate by mocking your adversary but that's

not how things should work in scholarly circles, especially when we are trying to win back public trust.

As you can see, the debate about the death of Edward II is only partly about the events of 1327. Yes, it *is* about understanding what happened to the man who ruled England haphazardly from 1307 to 1326 but it is much more about how we can determine what happened in the past. It is about how scholars reach a consensus and how they behave when that consensus is threatened. Ultimately it is about the integrity of our profession. That is why I am still engaged with it, after so many years of bashing my head against the walls of ivory towers. If the reductionists are allowed to get away with peddling their nonsense, we may as well all give up on trying to restore public confidence in our discipline – because there *is* no discipline. If we wish to win back public trust, we must collectively demonstrate that we apply the highest critical standards consistently, even when reputations are at stake. *Especially* when reputations are at stake. We need to show we can rise above personal interest and objectively determine what did and did not happen in the past, and why history is not 'just a series of subjective narratives'.

Herein lies the challenge – to you, to me and to everyone else who has a professional interest in history. What are the core principles of historical methodology? Can you describe them? It isn't an enviable task. Who wants to posit a set of principles that we should *all* sign up to? Give me ten thousand cats to herd, please; it would be far easier than persuading a group of historians to agree on a set of principles! However, the apparent impossibility of a task is a very good reason for attempting it – if only because it is unlikely that many others will have attempted it before. Even if it *is* impossible to get universal approval for the principles of our profession, it is important that we highlight those that stand scrutiny and apply them consistently. Unlike rocket scientists and brain surgeons, historians cannot be judged by results; we can only be judged by our processes.

In the rest of this talk I am going to outline eight principles to which, I think, all historians should subscribe. Some of them may appear tediously obvious but, as you will see, I consider them worth emphasising because they have *all* been ignored by scholars engaged in the Edward II-death debate. My thinking is that, if professors of history drop their standards when publicly discussing a high-profile case like the supposed death of a king, it is quite possible they will do likewise in other matters too.

Principle no. 1: Without evidence, there is no history.

Without evidence, studying the past is like studying the surface of a moon of a planet in a distant galaxy without a telescope. It is impossible. But many people fall into the trap of arguing about the past on the basis of assumption and opinion, not evidence. I recently gave a public talk about some aspects of medieval religion. I tried to explain my theory that when everyone shares the same all-encompassing faith, there are religious dimensions to life that we, who live in a predominantly secular society, cannot imagine. One woman flatly refused to accept this and stated that 'there have always been atheists'. I replied that, no, atheism is a concept that only dates back to the mid-sixteenth century in England. Even then it meant being 'against God': it did not acquire the meaning of believing in the non-existence of God until the very end of that century, and perhaps not even then. The woman would not listen. 'Human beings have always been sceptics,' she declared. 'It's in our nature.' According to her, we never change, psychologically or physically.

I disagree. You cannot proceed to determine anything *factual* about the medieval past without evidence from the Middle Ages, and we are not. It is as simple as that.

Discussing the past without employing evidence is a surprisingly common mistake in political history as well. This is especially the case when layers of historiography obscure the lack of evidence. Consider the earl of Kent's attempt to rescue Edward II from Corfe Castle in 1330. Why did he undertake this? Why was he not simply allowed into the castle to see for himself that the ex-king wasn't there? My explanation is that Edward II *was* there – a view that I might add *is* supported by contemporary evidence.[7] Jonathan Sumption, who at the time was a QC but these days is a Supreme Court Judge, offered a different explanation in 2004, namely that the earl was 'famously stupid'.[8] Professor Seymour Phillips similarly describes the earl as 'stupid and gullible'.[9] Yet where is the evidence for this stupidity? The earl was the commander of the English army in France during the War of St Sardos and trusted by Archbishop Melton (who was not stupid). In short, there is no evidence that he was anything less than normally intelligent. His supposed 'stupidity' is an inference first made by Professor Thomas Frederick Tout in the early twentieth century in order to explain why the earl attempted to rescue his supposedly dead brother from Corfe. It thus follows that there is no

evidence that he was *famously* stupid either, nor that he was 'gullible'. To make two methodological mistakes in two words is something of an achievement for any historian, but the fact that both a senior judge and an eminent professor can do so is a warning to us all. If *they* can, so can we. Although we would all wholeheartedly subscribe to the first principle of historical methodology – that without evidence there is no history – it is extremely difficult to apply it consistently in everything we do.

Principle no. 2: All historical argument must proceed from evidence.

This principle follows on from the first but is perhaps not as obvious. After all, there are plenty of theoretical approaches to reimagining the past. But I am not clinging to empiricism as if it is some sort of professional comfort blanket. Rather I maintain that all theoretical approaches have to proceed from evidence too.

If a theory has no evidence to support it – if, in other words, a historian just dreamed it up – it is not a theory but a hypothesis. In science the difference between the two is much clearer: a hypothesis is something you might think before you have done any experimentation; a theory is how you might explain the results of your experiments, based on the resulting evidence. In history, you may have theories but not hypotheses. We are not like scientists because we cannot test hypotheses. We cannot sit Richard III down in a dark room, shine a flashlight in his eyes and ask what happened to the princes in the Tower. If we form a hypothesis and then go looking for the evidence that supports it, we are prejudicing our enquiry. We are not investigating the past with an open mind but doing so along pre-formed lines. We are liable to fall victim to confirmation bias: the tendency to select the evidence that accords with our hypothesis, including the propensity to interpret evidence as supporting that hypothesis. Even if we look for evidence that might *negate* our hypothesis we are likely to be biased, because if we don't find any, we are liable to consider our hypothesis true. Not finding any evidence that contradicts our hypothesis, however, does not confirm it. Such evidence might not have survived. Thus when applying theory to history, we have no choice but to start with the evidence and then proceed to formulate a theory. Later, documents might emerge that force us to adjust that theory but then too, the historical argument proceeds from the evidence. In short, a theory must be designed to fit the evidence – not the evidence selected to fit a hypothesis.

Professional as well as amateur historians do not always observe this principle. In the case of Edward II's death, a good number of leading historians simply say they are 'not convinced' by my work. This is not an evidence-based argument: it is a protest. In the *English Historical Review* Professor Roy Haines stated 'I do not find his argument convincing, and in my view it lacks adequate supporting evidence.' He seems to have forgotten that the debate hinges primarily on the falseness of the news *for* the death – that is, the lack of evidence for *his* interpretation – and only secondarily on the evidence for the survival. Dismissing my argument as 'unconvincing' without any evidence does not somehow give the original announcement greater validity. With regard to the identity of the person buried as the supposed king, Professor David Carpenter admits that an image was shown in place of the body for the laying in state but declares 'many people would have certainly seen the body before that'. There is no evidence for this. The body would normally have been embalmed – and thus enclosed in cerecloth – within three days of death. No one would have seen it except those whom Lord Berkeley allowed to do so. Even Professor Mark Ormrod – probably our pre-eminent fourteenth-century scholar – has fallen short of this second principle, declaring that when William le Galeys, who claimed to be Edward II, met Edward III in Koblenz in 1338, Edward III treated the man 'as a deluded simpleton'. Once more, there is no evidence for this: all we know is that Edward III paid the man's expenses.[10] In criticising these very distinguished professors, I am well aware that it must be hard for anyone to accept that an important part of his life's work has been called into question on account of a piece of misinformation or disinformation that he has not previously noticed. Each one must think, 'dammit, it's just not fair!' I sympathise. But we can hardly applaud professors maintaining narratives that rely on discredited evidence. Everyone in our profession should be reminded regularly of the sage words of John Maynard Keynes: 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, Sir?'

Another example of the abuse of this second principle is when a historian skews a reading of a text to fit his theory. Sometimes a document can be interpreted in a number of ways but a historian declares it can *only* mean what he or she wants it to mean. For instance, in 2007 Professor Carpenter took Lord Berkeley's denial of knowledge of the death and interpreted it so it accorded with the traditional narrative. To be precise, the parliamentary clerks recorded in November 1330 that Lord Berkeley 'wishes to acquit himself of the death of the

said king, and says that he was never an accomplice, a helper or a procurer in his death, nor did he ever know of his death until in this present parliament'.[11] Professor Carpenter declares that 'when taken with the sentence as a whole, by far the most natural meaning… is that Berkeley did not know anything about the alleged circumstances of Edward's death.' This is not what the source actually says. Nor is it clear how Professor Carpenter's 'natural meaning' should differ from Professor Phillips's literal translation for *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, which I have quoted here. Professor Phillips also states that because Berkeley said he was 'never an accomplice, a helper or a procurer in his death' that 'this can *only* mean that Berkeley knew that the death had occurred but that he claimed he had no part in it.'[12] This is demonstrably incorrect. No scholar is in a position to say what it *cannot* mean: it could mean many things, and one of them is its literal meaning.[13] But which meaning is to be preferred is not the point. Properly, a scholar should explore *all* the possible interpretations of a text, not only the one that fits his thesis. Herein we have a clear case of historians trying to fit the evidence to suit their preferred narrative. This is bad practice by anyone's reckoning.

Principle no. 3: Written evidence is only as reliable as the information available to the author.

This sums up the most important methodological lesson I have learned in my years of discussing Edward II's fate. What I demonstrated in 2005 is that a huge mass of information – every chronicle, hundreds of entries in royal accounts, a royal building programme at Gloucester, the establishment of chantry chapels up and down the country, and the holding of royal ceremonies and commemorations – could all be built on a single lie. We tend to trust announcements from people in authority; people did in 1327 too. No one had any reason *then* to question the royal announcement that Edward II was dead. Thus all the evidence for the death was created in good faith. The process allows us to see how information spreads and becomes evidence and, eventually, history. It should empower us all.

As historians we are taught that there is a difference between primary and secondary sources. After a few years you start to realise that sometimes the distinction is not quite as sharp as it seemed to be when you were a student contrasting medieval manuscripts and modern textbooks. When you read

chronicles that are themselves compounds of newsletters, charters and earlier chronicles, you realise that some of your primary sources are in fact early secondary sources. My information-based approach demonstrates that this is even more the case than most historians realise. Primary sources are not as 'primary' as they seem: they are amalgamations of older, unwritten data. They are not the *beginning* of a golden thread that links us with the past but the end of one. Or, rather, a chronicle is a gathering of the ends of many golden threads, each one being an exchange of information from person to person, reaching back to the first individual to articulate an account of what he or she had seen. The same applies with any other document, including royal accounts. If there is no link with a witness of the event in question, then the subsequent flow of information to the author is based on either disinformation or supposition. Just as there is no history without evidence, so there is no good evidence without good information, and there is no good information without an original report from an eye-witness of the event. Don't get me wrong: I am not trying to say that eye-witnessing is reliable. Ten eye-witnesses will have ten different views of an event. But the information within the primary source material *must* link back through a series of informants to the actual event it describes. If there isn't a golden thread of information, there is no possibility of truth.

Looking at evidence as the container of so much information allows us to ask 'who knew what and when they knew it'. It doesn't just apply to the spread of information publicly, it also relates to the circulation of information privately. You can use it to show that Henry IV must have ordered the killing of his cousin Richard II.[14] You can use it to show that the story of Edward II's homosexuality had its origins in politically motivated accusations of sodomy made against the Knights Templar, and even before that in Guillaume de Nogaret's accusations of sodomy levelled against Pope Boniface VIII in 1303.[15] It is fake news – fourteenth-century style. You can use the same method to identify where the stories of Edward III raping the countess of Salisbury came from, and even who wrote Shakespeare's works. Yet when this method is applied to Edward II's death, most senior academics prefer to take the evidence at face value, as if they can still apply the scissors-and-paste approach to history that was discredited by R.G. Collingwood in 1946.[16] For example, in his review of Professor Phillips's study of Edward II in *TLS*, Professor Chris Given-Wilson emphasises his belief in the traditional narrative and states that 'the accumulated evidence for his death in

September 1327 really is a lot stronger than the evidence for his escape from captivity'.[17] *Only* if you accept the 'accumulated evidence' at face value – and disregard the fact that the sole source later denied all knowledge of what he had announced. It is hardly to his credit that Professor Given-Wilson overlooks this entirely in his own popular study of Edward II.[18] Ignoring the principle that 'written evidence is only as reliable as the information available to the author' means the result can only be 'scissors-and-paste history' – which, as Collingwood pointed out, 'is not really history at all'.[19]

Principle no. 4: Evidence never exists in isolation.

There are two aspects of this principle. The first is that probably no document is completely unconnected to other written material. For the fourteenth-century, we have so much evidence that we can check our sources extensively, both intrinsically and extrinsically. Despite this, when it comes to the Edward II debate, some academics treat each document that contradicts the traditional story as if it were an isolated anomaly. Perhaps the most extreme example is Professor Roy Haines's edition of the Melton letter in the *English Historical Review*.[20] Haines does not even consider what Melton actually says but asks only 'how could such an intelligent man as the archbishop have been so gullible?' He thus fails to consider the letter in relation to other sources, such as the evidence relating to the earl of Kent's plot and trial, the Fieschi letter, and Archbishop Melton's own dealings with the Fieschi through William de Aslakeby, the intermediary that Archbishop Melton maintained in Cardinal Fieschi's household in the early 1330s.

The other aspect of this principle is that the land itself is evidence, a palimpsest of the past, especially with regard to its geography, topography and archaeology. If a messenger from Berkeley Castle arrived at Lincoln (150 miles away) on the night of the 23rd, his message could not have been checked before it was made public on the 24th. You can be certain of that. If a close roll entry places Edward III at the Tower of London on 10 August 1342, does it mean he was there that day? Probably. If another entry in the same roll suggests he was at Portsmouth, was he in both places? Probably not, as the distance between them is 72 miles. If a third entry on the same roll for that day indicates he might have visited Gloucester, was he in all three places on the same day? No. Gloucester is 102 miles from Portsmouth. If you use documentary evidence in isolation it says

one thing but when you look at it in conjunction with geographical evidence, it might say something completely different.

With regard to the archaeological side of this principle, one of the most striking instances in recent years is the East-Anglian royal settlement at Rendlesham, which lies four miles north of Sutton Hoo. Bede mentions this place, as the birthplace of a seventh-century king. But apart from that single reference, there is no other reason to suspect Rendlesham was an important Anglian settlement. It is only Professor Christopher Scull's extraordinary systematic survey there, using four metal detectorists, that has made Rendlesham the biggest dot on the seventh-century East Anglian map. Several thousand artefacts have come to light since 2008, dating predominantly from the sixth to eighth centuries, including many gold and silver coins and intricately worked precious objects, leaving no one in any doubt that this was a high-status settlement.

It is true that some evidence contains things that cannot be connected with any other document or topographical element. Consider Gildas's short chronicle, for example, written in the early sixth century. It mentions the battle of Mount Badon. So too do 'the works of Bede and Nennius, but they may well have drawn their accounts from his. We don't know when or where it took place. Thus we have to say, in respect of this battle, we have hit a dead end. However, I would suggest that this principle still has relevance because it is important to bear in mind what you do *not* know about the past. You might have read every early charter listed in Sawyer and be able to recite Beowulf off the top of your head but while there remains a parchment binding in the world that has not been pulled apart to see if the original binder reused a piece of Saxon charter or chronicle, you don't know what texts might yet turn up. Nor do you know what archaeology will yield, as Rendlesham shows. Perhaps we will yet find a site of a battle with a jewel inscribed *Arturus me fecit* around its rim. With regard to Edward II's death or survival, who knows what may yet be found in the Vatican or the Bardi archive? We are told that there is a memorandum from one Bardi banker to another, dated 1338, stating 'Messer Edouardo's debts will never be repaid' and the bankers would hardly have referred to King Edward III, the man paying those debts, as '*Messer* Edouardo'; the Peruzzi accounts all refer to Edward III correctly as the king. But was Messer Edouardo actually Edward II in Italy? Possibly. Some of the fortune that Edward III paid to the Italian bankers in the 1330s certainly went to

the Fieschi – but how much? Did the rest go to them? Or did it go to the pope to pay for the building of a new palace at Avignon, which started about this time? Or did it go to German mercenaries? That too is a possibility. It is an important implication of this principle – that no evidence exists in isolation – that you have to bear in mind what you *don't* know as well as what you do, as this places limits on what you can and can't say about the past.

Principle no. 5: Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence – except where a dataset is known to be complete

Little needs to be said about the first part of this principle. It is so obvious that no one would ever think of disregarding it. However, when it comes to Edward II's death, nothing is impossible. Professor Vincent has written that when Lord Berkeley claimed he 'had not heard of the king's death' in November 1330, 'he didn't deny others had carried out the deed'. But why *would* he have said anything about who 'had carried out the deed' when he had just said 'he had not heard of the death'? You can't assume that something he *didn't* mention *not* happening *did* happen. Professor Jeff Hamilton made exactly the same methodological error in a peer-reviewed online article in 2010, in which he claimed that we do *not* have any evidence that Edward III did *not* remove the cerecloth from his father's face to identify the corpse. Well, why would we? We don't have any evidence that Edward III could *not* walk on his hands either – but that doesn't mean that he could.

There are, of course, circumstances where you can use absence of evidence as evidence of absence, and that is when you have a complete dataset. For example, if you wish to investigate Richard II's gift-giving to his relations in the 1390s, you can investigate the patent rolls. These reveal how Richard handed out titles, positions and incomes to men he liked. In marked contrast you can see that he gave nothing to Henry of Lancaster, his cousin. Even if you expand your search to other rolls, you can find only the 'gift' of a helmet belonging to a friend of the king who had been impeached and executed by Henry and the other Lords Appellant; this was given on the anniversary of the execution and thus was probably meant as a threat. Richard also gave Henry a dukedom; according to Thomas Mowbray, this was an unsuccessful attempt to lure Henry into a murder trap. The lack of any other gifts in these rolls is itself evidence of a lack of closeness between the two men throughout this decade. But this is a rare example

of when absence of evidence *is* evidence of absence, and it can only apply when the dataset is known to be complete.

Principle no. 6: Motive is not evidence.

I hope this principle is obvious to all. Our minds are not medieval minds, as mentioned above. We cannot hope to know the inner workings of a medieval character; we can only hope to identify different patterns between modern and medieval ways of thinking. Even when there seems to be a plain and clear motive for an individual to do a particular thing, that does not mean it appeared that way to him or her. You might say that 'Roger Mortimer had every motive for wanting Edward II dead,' as Professor Carpenter has written.[21] On the other hand, you might say that Roger Mortimer had every motive for keeping Edward II alive so he (Mortimer) would not alienate the young king and his mother, who both clearly remained deeply committed and emotionally connected to the man. As Roger Mortimer spent a great deal of time with the teenage Edward III, murdering the boy's father would have guaranteed a very rocky future relationship. In short, we cannot use motive in determining what actually happened.

Motives are often presumed to be circumstantial evidence. They are not. I am sorry to disappoint all the fans of detective programmes on television, in which motive is always a clue. However, we are not looking for clues but hard information, and your perception of someone else's motive is never going to be that. Detectives can work on a hunch. They can formulate hypotheses and test them. Historians can't. To use a motive as evidence in a historical question is the equivalent of a detective declaring a woman guilty of murder on the grounds that she stood to inherit something – regardless of her emotional and moral motives to keep the person alive and of *other* people's motives to kill the victim. A suspicion might point the modern detective in the right direction but with the historian it is likely to be a distraction, for a perception of motive is effectively a hypothesis, something that requires testing, and searching for evidence to fit that hypothesis is, as we have seen, liable to lead to confirmation bias and the skewing of evidence.

Principle no. 7: Evidence is not proof

One of the most common methodological mistakes is to assume that contemporary evidence amounts to proof. It does not. For a start, most things are not provable. We can only prove matters that can be defined in absolute terms, like birth, death, land borders, distances and dates – nouns that are quantifiable in time and space. More interesting aspects of life, such as love, hatred, lust, fear, ambition, envy and sadness cannot be proved. You may have an abundance of evidence that Queen Isabella hated Hugh Despenser but that does not amount to proof. How *much* did she hate him? Was that emotion consistent? Is our understanding of hatred the same as hers? If you cannot define something, you cannot prove it, however much evidence you have. The best you can do is try to understand it.

Things aren't much easier with clearly defined subjects. Many traditionalists respond to the narrative of Edward II's survival by demanding that *that* narrative be 'proved' before they will even consider changing their minds. In reality, there is just as much of an obligation for traditionalists to prove that Edward II *did* die in Berkeley Castle as there is for revisionists to prove that he didn't. But what is proof? It is very easy for one side to demand the other 'prove' their case but can anyone actually prove anything? Just as history is not like science, in that we can't design a hypothesis and test it, so too it is unlike maths, in that things are not provable in absolute terms. Sometimes you *can* employ a scientific test but, even then, it is very unlikely to amount to more than a partial proof of the matter in question, especially in in political history. For example, we could use lead isotope analysis to test whether the coffin containing Edward II's body was made of Mediterranean lead or not. It might be possible through DNA analysis to show that the body in the coffin is from the same male line as the bodies in the coffins of Henry III, Edward I and Edward III in Westminster Abbey. But certainty in these matters won't prove anything. We still won't know *when* the body was placed in the coffin, nor when the coffin was placed in the tomb. In political history, proof normally depends on documentary proof, and that is a much more elusive thing.

So what is documentary proof? People will inevitably define it in different ways but I would suggest that it is when you can show that a specific piece of information within a document (1) can only be interpreted one way; (2) is supported by further information that has a different source (and ideally more than

one source); and (3) cannot reasonably be doubted. Any information found only in a single document *can* be reasonably doubted, on the basis that it might be the result of a mistake or a fraud. Similarly, many pieces of evidence that contain the same information derived from one source can also be reasonably doubted, for the same reason. It follows that the more independent sources you have, the more conclusive your documentary proof – and in order to prove something 'beyond doubt' you might need a number of different sources. But even supposing that you do have multiple sources, you still need to process your information in a coherent argument: evidence never actually 'speaks for itself'. Perhaps the clearest way to do this is to construct your argument as two diametrically opposing questions, following the *sic et non* (yes and no) model of Peter Abelard. What is the evidence supporting your theory? And is there any evidence that casts doubt on it? To take an *ad absurdam* example, did Edward III exist? There are millions of pieces of evidence that he did, from charters to wall paintings, coins and heraldry. Furthermore, from what we know of seeing a large sample of them, they form a coherent whole, right across Europe. No one could have forged them all singlehandedly. Had a large number of people attempted to do so systematically, they would have left a massive trail of evidence of the fraud. On the other side of the argument, what contradicts his existence? Nothing. The royal records for the years 1327-77 form a substantial dataset, and all identify Edward III as king in those years. The balance is thus tilted 100% in favour of the argument that Edward III existed and ruled for those five decades. There is not even a theoretical possibility that he might not have done; the idea that he might not have existed is merely hypothetical.

How can we apply this to a more meaningful question, such as a man's death? In this sense we are like travellers in a dark wood, able to advance only by making our way between the occasional shafts of light that break through the tree canopy high above us. Fortunately, some evidence is truly enlightening and, when correlated with other documents and artefacts, it allows us to postulate a documentary proof. For example, on the fine rolls you will find a writ to an escheator to make enquiry into the goods and lands of the late Thomas, duke of Gloucester, dated 7 September 1397. By itself this piece of information proves nothing. But when contextualised with the evidence that the duke was still alive that day, in royal custody in Calais, it suggests that the king and court either had prior knowledge of his death or they believed a rumour that he had died. When

further contextualised with the information that the duke was confirmed to be dead eight days later, it says more still. Most revealing of all are the two writs from the king to William Rickhill dated 17 August. One of these told Rickhill to go to Calais; on arrival there on 8 September he found the other writ, which instructed him to take the duke's confession (which he did). None of these documents by itself proves that Richard II killed his uncle. Evidence is not proof. It is only when all the information is put into a model of 'who knew what and when they knew it' that you may derive a proof. We can be sure that Richard II murdered his uncle because he could not have issued the enquiry into the duke's lands *after* the duke died unless the writ on the Fine Rolls was misdated. However, the fact that three weeks earlier he had ordered Rickhill to take the man's confession shows that he had knowledge *then* of the likelihood of death, which allows us to rule out the possibility that the apparent foreknowledge was due to a dating error or rumour. What is the evidence to the contrary? None. The only reasonable basis for doubt is that the duke might coincidentally have died of natural causes in royal custody after the king had heard a false report of the man's death. That would be an enormous coincidence, and one that we may safely dismiss given John Halle's independent eye-witness account of how the duke was murdered, which he confessed in 1399. The idea that the duke of Gloucester might have died a natural death is merely hypothetical.

Applying the *sic et non* test, what evidence is there that Edward II died in Berkeley Castle in 1327? On the face of it, a considerable amount, and this is what has misled historians for centuries. There are royal letters, accounts, commemorations, parliamentary records and chronicles – all of which are absolutely clear that Edward II died in Berkeley Castle. However, none of them passes intrinsic examination, for they all depend on the news issued by Lord Berkeley in 1327, which he later denied. What evidence is there that Edward did *not* die in Berkeley Castle? Quite a few documents – including the Melton letter; the earl of Kent's letter to Edward II at Corfe; his confession; his trial proceedings; the inconsistencies in the trials of Lord Berkeley and John Maltravers,[22] Lord Berkeley's statement to parliament in November 1330; the Fieschi letter; and a large amount of circumstantial evidence, including Edward III's treatment of the men who were charged with keeping his father safely. Between them, these documents show at least four first-hand sources.[23] What I did in 2005 was to shift the balance from one side of the *sic et non* enquiry to the other. Initially the vast

bulk of the evidence favoured the death narrative; now, none of it does. While I cannot prove absolutely that Edward II was still alive in 1330 (because such things are impossible to prove absolutely), I *have* provided documentary proof that the evidence for his death cannot be trusted, on the one hand, and that there are multiple independent sources for the survival narrative on the other.

Principle no. 8: A circular argument indicates an unresolved conflict of evidence.

The circular argument is a disconcerting beast, like a serpent in Celtic art: all frantically twisted and trying to swallow its own tail. Or to put it more prosaically, it is a cycle of reasoning that depends on its own conclusion. One example was alluded to above, in relation to why the earl of Kent believed Edward II was still alive in 1330. To be specific, it circulates like this:

1. We cannot use Kent's testimony as evidence that Edward II was still alive after 1327 because the earl was stupid.
2. Why do we think he was stupid?
3. Because he believed that Edward II was still alive.
4. But why did he believe the he was still alive?
5. Because he was stupid…

And so it goes round and round. Nothing outside this cycle of proposition and denial is actually anchored in the past.

Circular arguments feature quite commonly in the Edward II debate. They seem to arise when a historian notices that an existing narrative cannot accommodate a piece of evidence and tries to force the two together. Thus there is an unresolved conflict of evidence at the heart of every circular argument – or, at least, there is in all the circular arguments in this debate. The most important example is to be found in the works of Professors Carpenter and Phillips: if you recall, they both maintain that when Lord Berkeley said that he 'had not heard of the death of Edward II' in 1330, he did not mean that he had not heard of the *death* but that he 'did not know anything about the *alleged circumstances* of [his] death.' The circularity of this argument may be demonstrated as follows:

1. For centuries historians have believed that Edward II died on 21 September 1327 because there is a mass of private and public contemporary evidence that clearly states he died on or about that day.
2. How did the creators of this 'mass of private and public contemporary evidence' know he died?
3. Because the death was announced at Lincoln by the government following the receipt of Lord Berkeley's letters.
4. But did Lord Berkeley's letters contain good information?
5. There is evidence in the Fieschi letter and documents connected with the earl of Kent's plot that Lord Berkeley lied in 1327. This is confirmed by his own statement that he had not heard of the death in 1330.
6. Why might historians dismiss all that evidence, and disbelieve Lord Berkeley, and claim that he meant that, yes, the king was dead but he was ignorant of the circumstances?
7. There is no reason except for the mass of private and public contemporary evidence that states the ex-king died on or about 21st September 1327. This brings us back to stage one.
8. Similarly, historians who maintain there *must* have been some other unevidenced check on the corpse at Berkeley Castle do so because of the mass of private and public contemporary evidence that states Edward died on or about 21st September 1327. This too brings us back to stage one.

As you can see, there is no information external to this cycle of information and denial that supports the original news of the death. In short, historians who believe that Edward II died in Berkeley Castle believe it because they believe it.

Conclusion

As stated above, the Edward II debate has acted as a magnifying glass on historical practice. It has shown that the very best academics will neglect basic principles when they feel obliged to defend their own work or a consensus. They will resort to reductionism. They will advance historical theories without evidence. They will argue that an absence of evidence is evidence of absence. They will employ circular arguments. Even though the evidence for the death has been discredited, they ignore the methods that show this and maintain that it *must* be reliable because they believe it. They thus are like believers in alternative realities, who do not wish to

hear about the shortcomings of their methods but only to discuss their conclusions with those who think likewise. On this point, when I proposed to give this talk at a certain well-known medieval congress, the organisers replied that:

> I'm sure the lecture you propose would not be along the same lines… A large number of the audience you'd be addressing will be former pupils of Chris Given-Wilson and Mark Ormrod and any criticism of them would need to be packaged very carefully.

Welcome to my world – in which rigorous and innovative scholarship has to take second place to the reputations of leading academics.

Why make such a big thing about this? Why do I continue to annoy all these professors? They are just trying to do their job. None of them are evil Bond villains or Holocaust deniers. They have merely been caught in an unfortunate trap. Having committed themselves to the traditional narrative over the course of their careers, they cannot now explore possible alternatives without undermining the integrity of their life's work – as well as that of their colleagues. I understand this, and I sympathise. I am also very grateful to every one of them – because I would not have learned a fraction of what I have learned about historical methodology without their determined attempts to undermine my analyses. I therefore thank them all – even if they do not thank me.

But we need to be able to get our facts right. What we do is worthless if it amounts to building a narrative on the basis of a senior academic's declaration that a king died in 1327 because it is 'simpler' that way. If we are content to let that be the benchmark of excellence, then woe betide us all. However, there is no reason why we should not improve the rigour of our profession. All we need to do is to recognise three things. First, we need to hone our methodological skills and apply them consistently. Second, we need to have the courage to question the consensus, even when it seems every senior academic who has written on the subject is ranged against us. They won't last forever; good methodology will. And third, we need to understand the implications of the work of the nineteenth-century Austrian mathematician, Georg Cantor.

Critics of history as a discipline often tell us that the past can be 'infinitely re-described' but in so doing they reveal they do not understand what an infinity is. It sounds like a big, daunting thing – an intellectual atomic bomb – whereas it is

often just a toothpick. As Cantor pointed out, there are big infinities and small infinities. Imagine a line marked with numbers, starting at zero and leading away from you towards infinity. All those numbers together constitute one big infinity. There is no end to it. But that is only one infinity. There are many others, much smaller. For example, there is another infinity between 1 and 2, because that one integer can be broken down infinitely. There is yet another infinity between 1.1 and 1.2, for the same reason, and another infinity between 1.111 and 1.112, and so on. There is an infinity of infinities – and some of them are infinitesimally small. Thus when critics say the past can be 'infinitely re-described', that doesn't mean to say the variations between all the possible accounts are enormous or even that they are significant. When we say that everyone who was at Kent State University on 4 May 1970 has a different view of what happened that day – a series of subjective narratives – that doesn't necessarily mean there are *any* major differences between them. All those people were occupying different positions; they all had a different view. But their narratives are all constrained by the evidence that four people died and nine were injured, that some of them were engaged in a protest against the American intervention in Vietnam, and that the Ohio National Guard opened fire with live ammunition. No one is going to deny any of those things; they are all definable in non-relative terms and have multiple sources. The point is this: the more events that you can prove, the more limitations there are to the possible re-descriptions of the past, and the smaller the variations in them. The number of potential discrepancies remains infinite but their significance is reduced. As I put it in my essay 'What isn't history?' 'if the past can be 'infinitely re-described', it is only in that sense in which Beethoven's Ninth Symphony can be infinitely re-interpreted: no two performances are identical but they are all recognisably similar, for the score remains essentially the same.'

So, was Benedetto Croce right to say that 'without narrative, there is no history?' No. Geddes's starting point was flawed. A single detail devoid of narrative can have tremendous historical significance – partly because it limits the possible re-descriptions of the past and partly because it may have a significance all of its own. The fake death of Edward II has just such significance. So too does the very real killing of an innocent student at Kent State University in 1970. Single-event history can be just as meaningful as narrative history. You could even write history purely in terms of a series of unlinked, objectively tested facts. Narrative is useful

when practising the *art* of history but it is not essential to the science of determining what happened in the past.

Where do we stand now? If you were to say the standards of historical scholarship are only as high as their least rigorous application, then pretty obviously we are in a parlous state. It is astonishing in itself that so many professors are stuck in an intellectual rut; what is even more extraordinary is that so many of them agree that this particular rut is just the place to be. I do not believe that this will continue much longer. It can't. Edward II's death represents an abnormally low point in medieval historiography – and one that historians working in other fields will start to regard with consternation because such methodological slips cannot help but bring the whole discipline into question. We need robust principles, refined methods and consistent logic – not airy declarations of what is and is not 'convincing', or preferences for 'simpler' arguments, or 'scissors-and-paste history'. Above all else we need a *scientific* approach to information and its potential to prove the past. And if this sounds radical, then so be it. As Albert Einstein once said, 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.'

Ian Mortimer

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[1] White, *Metahistory*, p. 433. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, p. 77. Jenkins associates the 'infinitely re-describable' idea with Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*(Cambridge, 1989). It is also a theme in Hayden White's *Metahistory* which he expanded in *The Content of the Form* (1987) and *Figural Realism* (1999, new ed., 2000). With regard to its latter incarnations, White refines the 'infinite' character of the complexity of the past to be specifically the infinite re-descriptions of an *event*, each and every event being composed of endless details set within an equally immeasurably extended context (*Figural Realism*, p. 71).

[2] Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (revised ed., 2003), p. 23.

[3] Hayden V. White, 'The Burden of History', *History and Theory*, v (1966), 111-34 at p. 112.

[4] TNA DL 10/253.

[5] Ian Mortimer, 'The Death of Edward II in Berkeley Castle', *English Historical Review*, cxx, 489 (2005), pp. 1175-1214 at p. 1186.

[6] Ian Mortimer & Nicholas Vincent, 'Was Edward II really murdered?' *Medieval Kings and Queens* (BBC History Magazine, 2017), pp. 64-7 at p. 66.

[7] Three piece of evidence suggest Edward II was at Corfe: the Fieschi letter, the *Brut* account of the earl's trial, and the earl's confession, which does not name Corfe directly but refers to the castellan, John Deveril.

[8] Jonathan Sumption, 'Plotting the past', *Guardian* (5 April 2003); see also my *Medieval Intrigue*, p. 147, n.5.

[9] I. Mortimer, *Medieval Intrigue*, p. 170 n. 2.

[10] W. Mark Ormrod, *Edward III* (2011), p. 123.

[11] Seymour Phillips & Mark Ormrod (eds), *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, volume iv (2005), p. 114. Previously published as *Rotuli parliamentorum*, ii (London, 1767), 57. The Latin reads: '*qualiter se velit de morte ipsius regis acquietare, quod ipse nunquam fuit consentiens, auxilians, seu procurans, ad mortem suam, nec unquam scivit de morte sua usque in presenti parliamento isto*.'

[12] Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 580.

[13] In addition, if the death did not take place at all, both parts of Lord Berkeley's statement are wholly consistent. Second, there is a 'nor' clause, which actually separates the two parts of Lord Berkeley's statement that Carpenter here has elided. Third, if this is what Lord Berkeley meant, why was it rejected altogether and the man forced to give a lie in his defence – that he was not at the castle at the time. Fourth, the Latin here perhaps masks a slightly different meaning that the original spoken French would have conveyed.

[14] I. Mortimer, *Fears of Henry IV* (2007), pp. 210-17.

[15] I. Mortimer, ''Sermons of Sodomy: a Reconsideration of Edward II's Sodomitical Reputation', in Gwilym Dodd and Anthony Musson (eds) *The Reign of Edward II: New Perspectives* (Boydell, 2006), pp. 48-60.

[16] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 257-8.

[17] Chris Given-Wilson, 'Holy fool', *TLS* (9 July 2010).

[18] Chris Given-Wilson, *Edward II* (2016).

[19] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 257-8.

[20] R. M. Haines, 'Sumptuous Apparel for a Royal Prisoner: Archbishop Melton's Letter, 14 February 1330', *EHR*, 124 (2009), pp. 885-94

[21] David Carpenter, 'What happened to Edward II?' quoted in Mortimer, *Medieval Intrigue*, p. 124.

[22] The inconsistencies in these trials are discussed in Ian Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor* (2003), pp. 244-51.

[23] For an explanation, see Mortimer, *Medieval Intrigue*, pp. 110-111.