

# What Isn't History?

## The Nature and Enjoyment of History in the Twenty-First Century<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

For decades historians have worked against a backdrop of questions about the nature of their discipline. Since the 1970s this backdrop, influenced by postmodernism, has increasingly been in conflict with their work. Yet relatively few attempts have been made to justify history theoretically. This article attempts to do so in a universally applicable way. It does not directly engage with any particular philosophical critique; rather it attempts to transcend such critiques by redefining history, relocating it from an exclusively professional domain to a wider public one, and relating it to those who 'enjoy' it (in the widest sense of the word). In order to facilitate this relocation, the concept of 'free history' – the totality of all possible human engagements with the evidence relating to a past event or state of being – is introduced. This allows historical research to be contextualised as the relationship between the public on the one hand and, on the other, those extant objects and texts which can be located at certain points along the central axis of time. In this way, free history highlights the importance of public trust in historians and the crucial role played by objects and texts in limiting the possible re-descriptions of the past. This trust, it is argued, combined with public interest, amounts to a social mandate for historians to explore and write about the past, allowing society to gain a view of itself over time, not just in the mirror of the present moment.

### I

It is almost fifty years since E. H. Carr posed the question *What is History?* in his landmark series of lectures, published in 1961. More than forty years have passed since Geoffrey Elton's seminal response appeared, *The Practice of History* (1967). Since then the nature of history has been regularly discussed and debated, even to the point of being defrocked and debunked. Some of this revisionism has been due to historians themselves questioning the nature of the discipline. Some of it has been due to the rapid growth of heritage or public history (as it is called in the United States), which has brought new epistemological questions to the fore. Some has been due to the external criticisms of intellectuals in related fields, frustrated at 'the historian's bad faith in claiming the privileges of both the artist and the scientist while refusing to submit to critical standards currently obtaining in either art or science'.<sup>2</sup> But as Richard Evans pointed out in his 1997 book, *In Defence of History*, 'nothing has outdated the views not only of Elton, but

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to all those who commented on earlier drafts of this article, namely Professor Mark Ormrod, Dr Margaret Pelling, Dr Simon Dixon, Dr Jonathan Barry, Professor Adrian Wilson and Dr Gary Gibbs.

<sup>2</sup> Hayden V. White, 'The Burden of History', *History and Theory*, v (1966), 111-34 at p. 112.

even of Carr, more obviously than the arrival... of postmodernist theory, which has called into question the arguments put forward by both of them.<sup>3</sup>

The year 1997 also saw the publication of Keith Jenkins's *The Postmodern History Reader*, which included a number of the pieces which motivated Evans to set pen to paper. The following quotations may be considered indicative of the stance of the *Reader*. 'So far as history is concerned, its telling has become impossible, because that telling (*re-citatum*) is, by definition, the possible recurrence of a sequence of meanings' (Jean Baudrillard). 'I do not believe there are "stories" out there in the archives or monuments of the past, waiting to be resurrected and told' (Hans Kellner). 'In history, it [postmodernism] is a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past' commented the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, adding her observation that 'postmodernist history... recognises no reality principle, only the pleasure principle – history at the pleasure of the historian'. 'Contemporary literary theory defies the very intellectual foundations of current professional historical practice by denying the factuality that grounds the authority of history itself' wrote Robert Berkhofer, as if in confirmation.<sup>4</sup> Such statements revealed starkly for many readers (not just historians) that the postmodern critique of history was not a polite questioning, a whispered doubt in the aisles, nor was it just one shadowy glimpse of 'the smiler with the knife'. It was a whole army of smilers, marching with scythes over the fields in broad daylight. What united them (in the eyes of historians at least) was the idea that historians cannot tell the truth about the past, or, as Keith Jenkins put it 'we can never really know the past... the gap between the past and history... is such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it'.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the passage of more than ten years, neither side can be said to have won a decisive victory. With regard to doubts underlying the postmodernists' side of the debate, many historians continue to write and teach with little or no reference to postmodernism at all, regarding it as a mere theoretical distraction, like the question of how many angels might sit on the head of a pin.<sup>6</sup> The 'linguistic turn' (the shift from traditional epistemological approaches to the past towards literary and theoretical discourse), has been described as 'a revolving door... everyone went around and around and got out exactly where they got in'.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, postmodernism is increasingly discussed as a thing of the past, both in academic journals and newspaper reviews.<sup>8</sup> Most of the key texts used in teaching postmodern literature were written before 1990. Almost all the monographs concerned with the historiographical implications of the postmodern challenge predate 2000. Postmodernism simply 'has not been rejuvenated'.<sup>9</sup> It said what

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<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (1997, extended ed., 2000), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> These quotations are all from Keith Jenkins, *A Postmodern History Reader* (1997), pp. 40, 127, 158, 139.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (revised ed., 2003), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Dick Vann has commented that 'Hayden White's work has had virtually no discernible influence on its most salient intended audience – historians'. Quoted in Nancy Partner, 'Hayden White (and the Content and the Form and Everyone Else) at the AHA', *History and Theory*, xxxvi (1997), 102-110, at p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Partner, 'History in the Age of Reality-Fictions', in Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago, 1995), pp. 21-2.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Cartledge states in his review of John Burrow's *A History of Histories* that this author ignores 'the salutary effect that the postmodern bubble had in provoking reasoned and reflective counter-pricks' (*The Independent: Arts and Books Review*, 7 December 2007, 31).

<sup>9</sup> Alan Kirby, 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', *Philosophy Now*, lviii (2007), online publication: <http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/58kirby.htm> (downloaded 30 July 2007).

needed to be said in the 1980s and 1990s and then gradually fell silent. While a proselytising postmodernist might claim that this is a result of its success in undermining history as an intellectual discipline, few would agree. Historians still command their audiences, both within and outside academia. Had the followers of Jean Baudrillard and Hans Kellner been successful, the lecture halls and history bookshops would be populated only by the gullible. Clearly they are not.

The problem for the historical side of this debate is, however, even more profound. Historians did not defeat postmodernism, postmodernism defeated itself. It lost its voice. Or to be more precise, those elements of postmodernism which were most hostile to historical enquiry bore little or no fruit, while those which had genuine insights to offer historians became partially assimilated, especially among those investigating minority groups and multi-cultural societies. Thus, although postmodern philosophers may have stopped pulling history to pieces for the time being, it does not follow that all those pieces automatically slot back together again. Evans's *Defence* is witty, well written and full of trenchant observations but it does not provide a solid platform for writing a wide variety of historical texts in the face of fierce critical opposition. Many of the postmodern objections to history retain their relevance, especially those detailing the subjectivity of the historian, the selection of evidence and the limitations of interpretation. Justifications of history as an intellectual discipline are still few and far between, and tend not to appear centre-stage.<sup>10</sup> Some attempts to reaffirm the validity of specific forms of historical enquiry have proved instructive in their particular fields.<sup>11</sup> And there have been a few successful attempts to write histories which are sensitive to the criticisms of postmodernism.<sup>12</sup> But still the fundamental question remains. In the wake of postmodernism, how can historians collectively justify their claim to describe any past event or sequence of events? If the nature of history was already in doubt when Carr and Elton picked up their pens, is there anything left of the discipline which is both justifiable, coherent and universally relevant?

The answer to this is undoubtedly yes. But that positive response is not contained within the conflict between history and the critiques presented by postmodern philosophy and critical theory. Each discipline has a different set of tools and concepts, and so for one to triumph over the other would be a form of intellectual imperialism: the supplanting of one set of tools and concepts with another. Rather it is proposed in this article to transcend the debate, to move on by examining the relationship between the past and the constituency which has hitherto been completely ignored by both sides, namely the public. Historians have concentrated on the postmodern question as if it only mattered to them personally. Critics emphasising the value of the linguistic turn have similarly paid little or no attention to anyone except professional historians. What about the public? Where are they in this? After all, history is the study of the past – not just the past of historians and postmodernists but of every member of society. Relics from that past can be viewed, examined and used historically by everyone, not just by historians. By breaking down the usual professional academic boundaries, the nature of history (what we are doing when we study the past) may be considered in relation to its enjoyment

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<sup>10</sup> See for example: Stephen Haber, 'Anything Goes: Mexico's "New" Cultural History', *The Hispanic American Historical Review* lxxix (1999), 309-30; Joan Wallach Scott, 'History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story', *American Historical Review*, xciv (1989), 680-92.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Adrian Wilson's 'Foundations of an integrated historiography' *Rethinking Social History* (Manchester, 1993), 293-335; Geoffrey Roberts, 'Postmodernism versus the Standpoint of Action', *History and Theory*, xxxvi (1997), 249-60.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Simon Schama, *Citizens* (New York, 1989); Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution 1891-1921* (1996).

(why we study it and why we are permitted to study it). The enjoyment of history thus may be seen to act as both an enquiring and critical force, with the result that it is crucial in justifying history as an intellectual discipline.

## II

Professional historians have naturally seen history as a function of their employment. For those who practise the art or craft, history is indeed what they do. For Collingwood, Oakeshott, Carr and Elton the point did not need spelling out, it was so obvious. Over the years the explanations of 'what historians do' have been varied and numerous, and with the advent of postmodernism, the discussion shifted towards what historians *can* do (as opposed to what they *do* do). Nevertheless, historians have remained central to the debate. In Keith Jenkins's words, 'history is the labour of historians'.<sup>13</sup> Or as John Tosh puts it, 'the word *history*... refers both to what actually happened in the past and to the representation of that past in the work of historians'.<sup>14</sup>

If history is the work of historians, who are they? For most commentators they are professionals, mainly academic lecturers and researchers. In recent years there has been a greater awareness of the contribution of heritage professionals – archivists, museum curators, cartographers, archaeologists and other specialists – but, in general, history is regarded by all these professionals as something which is written by one of their number. Elton in particular drew a hard and fast line in *The Practice of History* between the professional and the amateur historian:

The best amateur history, however entertaining, cannot enlarge the understanding or deepen the participation because it is written from the outside, through a veil woven out of strangeness and wonderment. At its best it achieves sympathy and romantic love, but it cannot penetrate to fundamental explanation.

Thus, for Elton, history was the product of a small club of professionals. Although he admitted there could be fine amateurs,

the purpose and ambition of professional history is to understand a problem from the inside. This may well involve tedium, pettiness and pedantry, the main faults of the professional... but even at his worst he cannot fail to add to learning, understanding and knowledge; he contributes truth.<sup>15</sup>

Elton's view that history is properly something only continued by professional historians does not stand up to scrutiny. Many sound understandings of historical events are formed by popular writers and journalists, not academics. What really sets academics apart from all other writers of history – many of whom have PhDs and similar experience and qualifications – are their teaching responsibilities. One could go so far as to argue that the production of history by academic historians is largely a by-product of the higher education system. With the exception of discreet research projects funded by Leverhulme, Wellcome and other funding bodies, academic history exists because there is a continual requirement to teach undergraduates how to analyse and interpret texts as part of the process of becoming the next generation of managers, administrators and

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<sup>13</sup> Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1991), vi.

<sup>15</sup> G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (1967), p. 31.

civil servants. Without them there would be no more than a handful of history departments pursuing research agendas set by the independent funding bodies and the government. Obviously it is exceptionally unlikely that the number of undergraduates applying to study history will diminish to zero, but that is not the point. History cannot reasonably be defined in terms of what professional historians do – and thus a personnel-related issue – without asking the question of why professional historians exist in the first place, and what sets them apart from the rest of the history-writing community.

A similar argument separating history from its authors may be advanced for every other sort of historian. If a law were to be passed barring anyone without a university post from writing history, popular history would not cease to exist, for academics would soon fill the gap. History would still exist if there were no museums, no archivists and no history teachers in schools. History as a whole is not dependent on any one of these groups, and for Elton to appropriate history to professionals alone was somewhat disingenuous. The nature of history is not a personnel-related issue.

This leads on to the question of whether history can be described as a set of values shared by all those engaged in a historical activity. Evans considers that this is indeed the case. In defending himself against the criticism that he only ‘defends’ academic history, he states that his book

focuses on how we define and achieve truth and objectivity, whatever kind of history we are practising. These matters are, to my mind, the same, whether you are Antonia Fraser, writing for a broad general market outside the academy, or whether you are Joyce Appleby, writing predominantly for a readership of students and other professional historians.<sup>16</sup>

Evans here is claiming a wider representativeness than his *Defence* warrants. Many popular historians are content to work with contemporary stories without questioning them too closely, as they lend colour to a subject. Academics on the other hand have a duty to question the veracity of each such story. It is not that popular historians do not understand the fallibility of the evidence, it is simply that they know they will not sell enough books if methodological or historiographical analysis is allowed to dominate their texts, so they leave these aspects to scholars. Conversely, scholars who believe that sensationalism is incompatible with analysis tend to downplay the real drama of events and the richness of stories, even to the point of downplaying the fear, courage and drama of a battle. The battles may have been thoroughly sensational but representing them in a suitably dramatic fashion is something academics leave to popular historians. In each case, authors’ understandings of their audiences lead them to deal very differently with the evidence at their disposal.

A more subtle reason not to define history in terms of a set of shared values or understandings of ‘truth and objectivity’ is that these very concepts are relative ones. They depend on the subject selected as well as the writer. Was Richard II a murderous tyrant who broke his coronation oaths and deserved to be dethroned and killed? Or was Henry IV a rebellious vassal who was legally exiled by his sovereign and who committed the ultimate treason of dethroning and killing him? One historian may argue both points of view using the same evidence, each point of view representing the outlook of each fourteenth-century man. Neither is more correct than the other; it is simply a matter of

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<sup>16</sup> Evans, *Defence*, pp. 259, 279-80.

whose point of view is represented. The views of those tangentially concerned in the dispute, including everyone at court, could also be represented. So a single historian could read the events of 1397-99 in dozens of different ways. Hayden White has remarked 'the only grounds for preferring one [vision of history] over another are moral or aesthetic ones'.<sup>17</sup> That is not quite correct: one might investigate a character's life from a determinedly sympathetic point of view because it has never been done before, or because of a desire to question whether his reputation was deserved. Nevertheless, it is clear that if a historian can employ different modes of objectivity *at will*, then across the whole spectrum of professional and amateur writers, the varieties of objective historical 'truth' must be legion.

### III

The realisation that history cannot be defined by a series of shared understandings of 'objectivity' or 'truth', or by reference to a set of professional criteria, is both important and empowering. If historians' work is a product of their characters, imagination, creativity and experiences, as well as historical evidence, they themselves are far more important forces in shaping views of the past, and thus of society's understanding of its own development over time. In this sense, postmodernism does not lessen the value of the historian's role, it emphasises it. Historians' ideas do not proceed solely from the past but also from themselves; they are no longer merely the standard bearers of the legions of the dead. They are free to explore the past in ways which are not 'tedious or pedantic' (as Elton would have it) but enjoyable and engaging from the public point of view, as well as from a scholarly one. Indeed, freedom is the very essence of the difference between history as an institutionalised profession and all other forms of studying the past. By showing that the Eltonian academic-centric view of history is no longer a satisfactory definition, many of the traditional constraints upon historians are lifted. There is no reason why a scholarly account of a battle should not employ drama, or emotion, or such literary techniques as the objective correlative. There is no reason why scholarship should not convey emotion, or give rise to a poetic or melancholy response. History is not just an academic exercise.

Breaking down the traditional concepts of 'what history is' and 'what historians do' in this way raises the question of how far one can go in broadening the definition of history. If it is not just something written by historians, what is it? Obviously it includes the work of popular historians and historical biographers. It includes the work of amateur historians and journalists, archivists and museum curators. It includes what castle custodians say publicly about the properties in their care, and what enrolled members of American Indian tribes say about the history of their reservations. And, most importantly, it includes what other people write and say about those castles and reservations too. The fact is that history can be written or related by almost anyone who makes the effort to do so. It is an engagement with some aspect of the human past, no matter who is writing. As the American Historical Association puts it in its *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct*, 'we all interpret and narrate the past, which is to say we all participate in making history'. The result is that, outside the contexts of universities, record repositories, and museums (whose employees' activities are defined by their job

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<sup>17</sup> Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973), quoted in Evans, *Defence*, p. 100.

descriptions), history is open for all to write about, or talk about, or criticise in any way they choose. Outside such institutions, history is free.

‘Free history’ is much more than just history written and discussed by non-professionals and members of the public. Consider the case of a woman restoring a listed building: she engages with the past through studying evidence – the fabric of the building – to determine how it once appeared. To say she is a historian is nonsense. It would imply that everyone is a historian, regardless of their knowledge or ability. By this reckoning, schoolchildren would be historians – as well as mathematicians, geographers, etcetera – so this is an indiscriminate and unhelpful application of the word. But the house restorer, like a history pupil, is nonetheless engaging in a historical activity. They are both ‘doing’ history. The same applies to a genealogist searching for a putative ancestor’s name in a parish register. Every engagement with the evidence relating to a past event or state can be considered the conscious fulfilment of a historical initiative, and thus a historical act. The totality of all such engagements – those within a literary framework and those of a more practical form – may be considered within the scope of free history.

Freedom is all very well, but it must be used wisely. When Carr considered the destruction of historical objectivity, he asserted it was a dangerous position. ‘If the historian necessarily looks at his period through the eyes of his own time,’ he asked ‘will he not fall into a purely pragmatic view of the facts?’<sup>18</sup> To put it even more bluntly, if objective truth is unattainable, why should a historian not make up a narrative about the past and claim it is true? What is there to prevent user-generated, inaccurate and prejudiced history being posted on the Internet as a supposed contribution to genuine knowledge? What is to stop politically motivated historians selecting the evidence that suits their views and ignoring important evidence to the contrary? Is everything not just storytelling, part-fact, part-fiction?

For historians, this is not a difficult question to answer. There are many thousands of family trees in the world; some are demonstrably false. One does not need postmodernism or critical theory to show that they do not reflect any sort of past reality: they make arbitrary connections between characters selected on the basis of the availability of the evidence (not its trustworthiness) and the desires of the compiler. There are good genealogists and bad. What makes them good or bad is not their standing as historians, or their qualifications; it is the accuracy of their work. The same can be said for contributors to the Internet, and local historians, as well as professional writers. Conscientiousness, integrity, methodological sophistication, sound background knowledge, awareness of the limitations of the sources, literary skill, and judicious and fair choice of evidence are the criteria by which a historian’s work can be assessed, just as they always have been. Moreover, despite the postmodern questioning of historical authority, it is still possible to *prove* arguments wrong. The only concepts which have to be discarded by shifting to a free-history outlook on the past are that anyone has a monopoly on the truth, and that any historian is infallible. In a free-history context, a historian is just another member of the public, albeit one with some specialist skills. If he or she is methodologically thorough, there is no reason why readers should doubt what he or she writes: it is a historical problem, not a philosophical one, to test his or her reliability and fairness. But even if the work is methodologically flawless, alternative interpretations may well be possible. And if those alternatives are also methodologically sound, it will not be on accuracy that the works are compared but on other criteria, such

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<sup>18</sup> Carr, *What is History*, p. 27.

as literary skill, empathy for certain characters, and sympathy for the human condition. In this sense, free history is like free verse. Freedom does not necessarily result in anarchy. As T. S. Eliot pointed out in 1917, ‘no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job’.<sup>19</sup>

The above does not quite fully describe history in its widest, or free-est form. John Tosh’s first definition – ‘what actually happened in the past’ – is a wider definition; but as most of the past is unrecoverable, it is patently impractical. Free history therefore lies somewhere between ‘what happened in the past’ and ‘what historians do’, being less than the former and more than the latter. Effectively it encompasses the full extent of activities which could be considered ‘historical’. Obviously this includes the writing of history, the discussion of past events, the conscious search for historical objects and artefacts, and so on. The only exempt items are those which have no bearing on the history of humanity (as history is specifically concerned with the human past). But as indicated above, if any artefact which relates in some way to the human race can be considered ‘historical’, then any interaction with it in respect of its age is a historical one. Even though a man may have no expertise in Roman history, it would be a historical experience for him to visit Hadrian’s Wall. Of course, if he did not know that Hadrian’s Wall was Roman, or if he did not recognise it when he arrived, his visit would not be a historical activity. It is this conscious engagement with the relics of the human past, or texts about them, which is the key factor.

Free history thus constitutes a practical, broad-base answer to the question of ‘what is history?’. It is a conscious engagement with an aspect of the human past – that quality of which people are aware whenever they undertake a historical activity, in the same way that poetry is a quality of which people are aware when they read a poem, or hear one, or simply read words which suddenly have an emotional or aesthetic resonance over and above their literal meaning. Its value is that it has relevance for all those who are mindful of the past, whether they approach it from ‘above’ (writers, curators, speakers) or ‘below’ (readers, museum visitors). If a woman visiting the National Gallery in London looks at Canaletto’s *Venice: the Basin of San Marco on Ascension Day*, she might be engaging in a historical activity. She might see the painting as a visual record of the doge setting out in his ceremonial golden gondola, created in about 1740. However, just to look at this painting does not necessarily imply a historical act. She could look at it from an artistic point of view, as a matter of painterly skill, not a historical one. Free history, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder.

As anything which existed in the past can be defined as historical, in theory everything which exists at the time of writing could be described as historical by the time this article is printed. On this basis, free history encourages us to ask ‘what *isn’t* history?’, not what is. Almost all of our knowledge can be deemed ‘historical’, based on experience and perceptions of things which have been in existence for some time. People are like astronomers viewing the light of stars which exploded hundreds of years ago: what they see and hear is inextricably linked with what is no more. What they see is not the past itself but its light, relics or residue. However, this leads to an impractically wide definition, inclusive of almost all knowledge. Within free history, then, certain forms of history are bound to prevail over others as they correlate with Mankind’s never-ending quest for self-awareness. The human race has developed a desire to understand itself and its environment in more depth than present-day appearances and personal experiences

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<sup>19</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Reflections on Vers Libre’, *New Statesman*, 3 March 1917. Eliot quoted himself in his *The Music of Poetry* (1942).

allow. Enquiry into the nature of things – and thus into perceptions arising from past centuries as well as past seconds – makes certain forms of history inevitable. How those should be determined, and how they may be pursued are questions which will be considered in the rest of this article.

#### IV

Free history has important implications for the debate between professional historical practice and postmodernism. Criticisms of the validity of history have been primarily concerned with the past as represented by ‘texts’ used or created by historians. Reduced to its most simplistic level, the argument is that the past plethora of actions, objects, attitudes and events cannot be adequately represented by a few words neatly arranged by someone in the modern world on the basis of a small amount of evidence. Evidence is a partial record, selection of evidence is a historian’s choice, and therefore what historians write is conditioned by their own experiences, prejudices, ability to access and understand evidence, and their chosen literary style and vocabulary. Importantly, this same subjectivity-laden process underlay the original creation of each piece of evidence historians use. Changes in the relationship between language and meaning, differences between language and reality, and the apparent relativism of all elements in the succession of present moments which make up ‘the past’ (which by definition no longer exists) preclude the writing of anything which relates to the past in any unquestionable way.

Free history allows us to see things differently, uncluttered by unsatisfactory assumptions about texts and historians. When an observer looks at the size and shape of the *Mary Rose*, nothing need be written down; but he or she gains a sense of the proportions of this historical ship, and may consider aspects of its fabric and content, which are in themselves historical interactions. They are definitively historical interactions because the timbers can be dated through various scientific means, by dendrochronology as well as radiocarbon analysis. It is true that there is a theoretical basis underlying every dating process (each being an application of a scientific theory), but a theoretical foundation does not mean that the date is doubtful or weak, especially as there is an extensive corroborating documentary record of this ship (stating it was built in 1509-11). On top of the documentary record and the dendrochronological and radiocarbon tests, a separate science, Bayesian probability, can be employed to quantify the potential for error in a series of radiocarbon dates.<sup>20</sup> All these add up to what can only be described as an integrated historical and scientific date. Any one single putative date is open to question but, when a number of different dating methods are employed and are found to correlate, confidence in their correctness tends to completeness. On this basis, anyone may start to make statements about this sixteenth-century ship which are archaeologically certain.

Once this principle of archaeological certainties is realised, it immediately becomes apparent that a great many more things can be said about the past by talking

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<sup>20</sup> Bayesian probability is now regularly used in conjunction with radiocarbon dating to assert archaeological chronologies. With regard to the West Kennet Long Barrow, see Alex Bayliss, Alasdair Whittle and Michael Wysocki, ‘Talking about my Generation: the Date of the West Kennet Long Barrow’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, xvii (2007), 85-101. For a general description of the technique with regard to the construction of Stonehenge and Wayland’s Smithy. David Miles, ‘Cracking the code’, *Heritage* (November 2007), 19-21.

about what remains of it. Houses, musical instruments, paintings – everything is open to observation with respect to its age.<sup>21</sup> The body of a man may be exhumed, dissected, and investigated for such details as his last meal, the geographical origin of the water he drank for most of his life (from the chemical composition of his teeth), his stature, his DNA, his age at death, diseases which left traces in his body or bones, and perhaps his cause of death. A thousand such exhumations from, say, graves dated to the early fourteenth century within walking distance of York, would constitute a statistically significant sample from which to draw a number of scientific observations about individuals in that locality. Scientific processes, being grounded in the present, and repeatedly testable, represent a means of escaping the theoretical limitations of textual history and investigating the past through a sequence of archaeological certainties.

The foregoing argument deliberately employs a simple view of what constitutes an archaeological artefact. It hardly needs to be stated that the form of things changes over time. For example, certain timbers of the Mary Rose date not from 1509-11 but from later refits of the ship, carried out in 1528 and 1536. Moreover, as David Lowenthal pointed out in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, the act of preserving objects does not protect them from change.<sup>22</sup> Whether human intervention is the cause or not, the beams of a sixteenth-century ship are not exactly as they were at the time of sailing, let alone at the time of construction; they are waterlogged and partially decayed. Buildings are particularly prone to change, restoration never actually turns back the clock. In many cases what is deemed archaeological is itself doubtful. However, while an object's appearance may alter, its point of creation – the temporal context of its building, construction, or re-construction – does not. A timber-framed building may have its laths ripped out and replaced with brick, and its thatch torn down and replaced with slate, but the date at which its foundations were laid does not change. Nor does the date at which the thatch was replaced, or the date of the brick infill. Specific dates in each case may be determined, and the dates of those successive states established to provide a chronological description of the house.

History would be less interesting if it only sought only to establish past states of being, and failed to consider events, actions, ideas and sensations. As Hayden White succinctly puts it, 'the dead can be studied scientifically but science cannot tell us what we desire to know about the dead'.<sup>23</sup> Archaeological certainties are therefore not of great importance in themselves; their importance lies rather in their implication for the postmodern argument that 'there are no centres', that everything is relative, and thus everything may be questioned.<sup>24</sup> Archaeological certainties imply use of chronometric time, which may be referred to as a 'centre' – the central axis of time – to which all existing things can be related.<sup>25</sup> This axis includes everything from the construction of

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<sup>21</sup> See the range of techniques mentioned in Matthew Hedman, *The Age of Everything* (Chicago, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> White, 'Public Relevance of Historical Studies', 333.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, pp. 44, 57, 71, 75, 76, 78.

<sup>25</sup> Various historians have tried to argue that time moves at different speeds, most famously Fernand Braudel who stressed 'the distinction within historical time, of a geographical time, a social time and an individual time'. However, the use of 'time' here amounts to an attempt to supplant the age of things with a poetic or sociological time for the purposes of understanding social change. Braudel himself used phrases such as 'at the time', indicating his belief in a single chronometric framework. See Fernand Braudel, *On History* (1980), pp. 4, 84; Stuart Clark, *The Annales School* (1999), p. 121. Similarly the theoretical stab by Lucian Hölscher to show that 'history is made up of a huge number of totally different chronological orders: such as fast and slow change' is concerned with historical interpretation, not the past itself. See Lucian Hölscher, 'The New Annalistic: a Sketch of a Theory of

Seahenge in 2049 BC and its older neighbour, Holme II (dated by dendrochronology), to the stature of men in and around York in the early fourteenth century (using radiocarbon dating and palæopathology), and the binding of a set of *The Times* newspapers (dated archivally). Everyone who has left a physical trace and every organic thing can, in theory, be scientifically associated with a specific life span of days and years.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as the postmodern argument is itself a theoretical one, today's practical limits of accuracy in dating things hardly need be taken as a limitation. If the vellum on which the Vinland Map is drawn can be dated to 1434 +/- 11 years with the technology of 2002, there is every reason to expect that the technologies of the future will be more accurate. On this basis historians can reply to Robert Berkhofer: if 'contemporary literary theory defies the very intellectual foundations of current professional historical practice by denying the factuality that grounds the authority of history itself' then it is not history which is at fault but 'contemporary literary theory'.

This use of time as a 'centre' has a significant implication for the study of texts. Primary and secondary sources are both artefacts as well as texts: these too can be scientifically dated. In reality, only occasionally is there a good reason to doubt the veracity of the date written in a manuscript or printed in a book, or the watermark dates of paper (except in the cases of certain forms of evidence, such as Saxon charters, among which forgeries are common). But whatever actual process is used to do the dating, most physical texts can be associated with a temporal context. This might not be when they were first written but it will relate to their point of physical creation. Where there is reason to doubt a date – in the case of the Vinland Map, for example – not only the age of the parchment but the ink itself can be examined (in that case revealing a distinct possibility of a twentieth-century forgery). Archival context too can clarify the age of documents. Intact runs of daily newspapers with separate archival provenances permit accurate dating: radiocarbon analysis is not required.

The implication is that texts are not free floating objects, independent of the past, but can be related to the axis of time. They are no longer just 'discourses' (as postmodernists refer to them) but temporally located discourses. And being temporally located, they have historical contexts too. Consider the date of Queen Victoria's death. The principle of archaeological certainties allows us to interpret *The Times* of 23 January 1901 as an artefact made on that date. It contains an article on Queen Victoria's death, beginning 'the dreadful blow has fallen, and a world-wide empire mourns its irreparable loss'. The sincerity of those words is questionable but the report of the death itself is not. It is an archival certainty that *The Times* reported the death in the issue for the 23<sup>rd</sup>, following the publication of wishes for the queen's recovery in its issue of the previous day. The key point is that all these archaeological and archival certainties, *by their very*

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History', *History and Theory*, xxxvi (1997), 317-35. As any delineation of tiers, hierarchies or types of time is essentially bound to be subjective, one is safe in presuming that only chronometric time can form a central axis. As Penelope Corfield notes, there are numerous conceptual difficulties within Braudel's multi-tiered model. 'Identifying the dimensions within history, which unfolds within time, means that it is not necessary – indeed, it is entirely misleading – to allot different characteristics to different 'sorts' or 'types' of time. See Penelope J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (2007), pp. 209-10, 217.

<sup>26</sup> While Einstein famously pointed out that time is relative to speed, this is not a practical problem for historians: The time dilation effect of the fastest speeds possible today in supersonic aircraft is only measurable with an atomic clock, and then only amounts to nanoseconds after prolonged flight. As Penelope Corfield notes, after Einstein 'the old process of temporal succession remains still detectable and still measurable. Indeed Einstein's formulation makes its calibration better understood, not less so.' Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, p. 11.

*creation*, imply historical certainties. Although the report of the queen's death remains only theoretically true, and cannot be regarded as certain on the strength of the evidence of the newspaper alone, the publication of the report at this date cannot be doubted.

Historians might frown on such minor 'certainties' as mere antiquarian trifles permitting little or no interpretation, but, in this light, antiquarianism should not be underestimated. For a start, an archaeological certainty (that something was made at a particular date) might well be the only form of historical certainty available (Seahenge is a good example). But far more importantly, these certainties themselves provide limits to the interpretation of the past. With regard to Hayden White's contention that 'we are free to conceive history as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will', this freedom is significantly limited by the existence of archaeological and archival certainties. Only by neglecting them can history be conceived at will.<sup>27</sup> As the authors of *Telling the Truth about History* observe,

history is never independent of the potsherds and written edicts that remain from past reality, for their very existence demands explanation. The past cannot impose its truths upon the historian, but because the past is constantly generating its own material remains, it can and does constrain those who seek to find out what once took place.<sup>28</sup>

This view is even more powerful when those 'potsherds and written edicts' are seen as archaeological and archival certainties, so that the constraints they impose are absolute. They cannot be ignored; they are not selections applied to the past but survivals from it. Similarly we cannot 'conceive history as we please' because, in some cases, the *lack* of evidence in an intact archival sequence prevents it. Hence the postmodern dictum that 'all history is theoretical' needs to be clarified.<sup>29</sup> The central axis of time provides a chronometric framework for representing the past not as a pure theoretical discourse but as a series of archaeological and archival certainties, all of which imply a range of historical certainties, on which a theoretical discourse may be built. It is possible to question when Queen Victoria actually died, but not without reference to the historical certainty that her death was publicly reported on the 23 January 1901 as having occurred the previous day, nor without some evidence suggesting an alternative date. No amount of theory can obviate the need to account for both aspects of these complementary arguments. Thus the principle of archaeological certainties may be used to refute Jenkins's dictum that 'the gap between the past and history... is such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it'. Quite simply, Jenkins's view is too absolute, and prone to the same objections which apply to claims that a history book is comprehensive or definitive.

## V

The most important implication of this principle of archaeological certainties is the clarification it brings to the idea propounded by almost all theorists from Hayden White to Keith Jenkins that the past can be 'infinitely re-described'.<sup>30</sup> The key lies in

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<sup>27</sup> White, *Metahistory*, p. 433.

<sup>28</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (1984), p. 255.

<sup>29</sup> Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, p. 77. Jenkins associates the idea with Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989). It is also a theme in Hayden White's *Metahistory* which he

understanding what ‘infinitely re-described’ actually means. As Georg Cantor pointed out in the nineteenth century, there is no one ‘infinity’ as such. There are big ‘infinite’ sets and small ones. A big infinite set is one on an axis stretching away from zero. Between the numbers one and two in that set there is a smaller infinite set of numbers, all the possible fractions. Similarly between 1.1 and 1.2 there is a yet smaller infinite set of numbers. There is an infinite set between 3.1415926 and 3.1415927; the number  $\pi$  lies in this range. If all we knew about  $\pi$  was that it lay between these two numbers, it would be true to say that it may be ‘infinitely re-described’ as a number in this range, but the actual room for variation is relatively small. The implications for readings of history are obvious. If there are some things which are archaeologically and archivally certain, and by implication some things which are historically certain, these certainties impose limitations on how big each set of infinite re-descriptions can be. The potential for re-describing them is ‘infinite’ only if the variations themselves are tiny, in fact infinitesimally small. What Hayden White and his followers have done in suggesting the potential for an infinite set of re-descriptions of the past is to confuse the potential for an infinite set of infinitesimally small variations with an infinite set of substantial variations. To put it another way: 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 professional performances are identical but they are all recognisably similar, for the score remains essentially the same.

The implications of this reveal some significant shortcomings in the validity of much postmodern theory. The announcement of Queen Victoria’s dying fixes one limit for describing the early twentieth century. The announcement of Edward VII’s sets another. Multiple correlating historical certainties considerably limit the ‘infinite’ re-descriptions of the past, forcing the variations to become smaller and smaller. As the choice of any single word or clause in a document can be considered an archival certainty, and thus in some measure a historical one, this means there are billions of historical certainties limiting the ‘infinite’ re-descriptions of the past. No one can doubt that a woman called Mary Tudor existed, for millions of independent ‘historical certainties’ (words on coins, documents, portraits etcetera) locate her in the sixteenth century and independently and coherently describe her life and identity. Her life can be ‘infinitely re-described’ only within this mass of limiting historical certainties. While any single historical certainty’s relationship with the event it describes may be questioned, and even shown to be false, they cannot *all* be questioned, for in order to do so it would be necessary to explain why there is no evidence that there was a well-coordinated international project in the sixteenth century, involving many thousands of people, to fabricate evidence for this woman’s existence from conception to burial. The principle of archaeological certainties thus means that the existence of the characters repeatedly mentioned in dateable documentary evidence cannot be doubted, nor can many of their statements and deeds. To do so would involve inventing explanations for the existence of such evidence which are wholly without a basis in documentary evidence. Postmodernists criticised historians for selecting documents and writing history subjectively ‘at the pleasure of the historian’.<sup>31</sup> However, even at an amateur level, such a process takes consideration of some evidence, and depends on some historical certainties. To doubt the stages of Mary Tudor’s life is not only to create doubt ‘at the

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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).

<sup>31</sup> See the quotation from Gertrude Himmelfarb above.

pleasure' of the critic but is to do so without any evidence. It is to *invent* doubt where there is none, and where there is no evidence suggesting that a doubt is valid. This is intellectually indefensible. It is also not a process which inspires trust, whereas historical interpretation, grounded in millions of pieces of evidence, is.

This point about trust has an important application with regard to sources. Postmodernists argued against making a distinction between primary and secondary sources on the grounds that the historian selects both as texts to be used in compiling a history.<sup>32</sup> There is some justification for this. As any medievalist knows, chroniclers copied and corrected each other with near-reckless abandon, thereby creating resources which were at once both primary and secondary. They incorporated copies of official documents into their chronicles too, further creating ambiguity. In addition, a secondary source can take the place of a primary one (where the original is destroyed or damaged). However, the traditional differentiation of primary and secondary remains useful and important for the following methodological reason. Consider Domesday Book: as an artefact (as opposed to a text) the original volumes can be dated to the eleventh century. It is not possible to create any more late eleventh or early twelfth-century documents and so it is necessary to make use of all those available in writing about England in 1086. The Domesday historian therefore does not have a choice in considering which contemporary and near-contemporary sources to use: they have already been selected for him. That he does what is expected of him, and selects them all, is necessary in order to preserve the trust of his audience. To a greater or lesser extent this is true for all historical subjects. Historians of Margaret Thatcher's premiership have a far greater choice of primary and secondary material but even so, their choices are not entirely free, if the trust of the readers is to be preserved.

Trust has connotations of weakness, of pleading, but it is far stronger than the connotations suggest. Its strength may be seen when it is described in terms of 'reasonableness'. It is unreasonable to doubt that well-attested historical characters like Queen Victoria and Mary Tudor existed, for the reasons outlined above. It is unreasonable to assume historians can write about English society in 1086 without referring to Domesday Book. In theory such a view could be challenged but there must be a clearly identifiable cause or purpose. Postmodern expressions of doubt were and are an indulgence in speculation for the sake of philosophical enquiry; they do not necessarily reveal any truth, still less any historical truth. It would be foolish to march into the National Gallery and tell the curators that *Venice: the Basin of San Marco on Ascension Day* was not painted by Canaletto around the year 1740. Without evidence to the contrary, it is unreasonable not to trust the consensus represented by their public attribution of the artist and date.

In this way it can be seen that trust is crucial to an understanding of how historical source material is selected, how chronologies and narratives are maintained, and how historical ideas are shaped and projected. 'Our collective enterprise depends on mutual trust' states the AHA's *Statement on Standards*. 'Trust is at the core of all historical practice,' echoed Justin Champion recently in his inaugural lecture.<sup>33</sup> Historical interpretation is a socially constructed activity involving trust which can only reasonably be interpreted in social terms which respect trust. If no one were ever again to look at a Canaletto painting in a historical light, it would be simply an art object. Likewise if no one were to look at the *Mary Rose* in a historical light, it would be nothing more than a

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<sup>32</sup> Evans, *Defence*, p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> Justin Champion, 'What are historians for?', *Historical Research* (forthcoming).

lump of wood. What is interesting therefore is not that theorists working in the wake of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) can break up the representations of historical reality into the atoms of 'signified' and 'signifiers', or claim that narrative distorts reality, but that society has developed trustworthy means to represent reality in the first place. Making allowances for the shortcomings of verbal signals permits language to reflect past reality with some accuracy, and, in the case of non-relatively-defined matters of fact (such as the date of death of a specific individual), it allows them to be described with complete clarity. Similarly it is not the 'infinite re-descriptions' of the past which are interesting so much as the impossibility of advancing more than a few readings of any single piece of evidence. It is no less remarkable that society has developed highly organised methods of calculating the passage of time, even to the point of measuring the miniscule practical problems inherent in the idea of centralised time (Einstein's time dilation effect). The cultural effect of postmodernism (had it prevailed as a single philosophy of history) would have been to fragment our systems of signs and codes, which took millennia to develop, for no great purpose. If such systems had not been developed, the human race would have to set about developing them anew in order for society to function. Concentrating on the theoretical limitations of any tool (including a system of linguistic signs and codes) without reference to the context in which the tool was developed is of no practical purpose beyond serving as a means whereby the authority of the person who uses it can be questioned. In history, this amounts to a refusal to trust 'our collective enterprise' or to accept the reliability of any methodology and the epistemological value of any knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

## VI

Enjoyment is an emotive word. Many scholars see the enjoyment of history as a trivialisation of their work, a pointless popularising aspect which does little to enhance their scholarship. But as shown above, that scholarship does not have much meaning unless it does have that wider social, or public, dimension. It is in this free-history context – of wider public as well as professional appreciation – that enjoyment should be understood, and in this sense it is anything but a trivialisation. Public enjoyment demands that any historical narrative be drawn up in accordance with all the available archaeological, archival and bibliographical certainties. It sets the parameters for every test of reasonableness for historians, and thereby establishes the limits of trust in historians' use of chronology, evidence and language, and the determination of what is certain and wholly trustworthy, and what is probable, possible, doubtful and just plain wrong.

As the foregoing suggests, a huge degree of trust underlies the historian's ability to explore and explain what happened in the past. If the public is not involved as an audience in this exercise of representation, there is no level of trust underpinning it except the historian's own. To adapt the old example of the leaf falling unheard in the forest: if a historian declares a full and correct analysis of the outbreak of the Hundred Years War when standing alone in the forest, and no one hears, he might as well be wholly wrong. One cannot write history for history's sake: history is a dialogue, and the representation of the past requires the participation of an attentive audience, capable of both trust and criticism.

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<sup>34</sup> Haber, 'Anything Goes', 312-20.

The enjoyment of history by the public may be considered the historian's mandate to write history. It is a social mandate. Historians are obliged to answer the questions which society asks about the past, to the best of their ability, not answering to 'the past' itself but to society. Any individual may encounter a piece of historical evidence and ask a historical question as to its nature, purpose and meaning. Many of those encounters do not need the intercession of a historian. But many more do. If William the Conqueror won the battle of Hastings, why do we speak English and not Anglo-French? Who is to answer but a historian? Why do people so often say that history is written by the victors when it is written in the language of the vanquished? In answering such questions it is necessary to use terms of reference which are understood by the person asking the question. Certain sources have to be used. Archaeological or archival certainties cannot be neglected.

Not all historical interactions and thought require the intervention of historians. Many identity-related and historio-poetic moments are better experienced alone, or in the company of poets. But many interactions and experiences do require historians as facilitators of understanding and appreciation, and it is in this respect that the public role of the historian has to take priority over postmodernists' attempts to deny historians the ability to describe the reality of the past. Historians' expert views are vital to society as the backbone of the public's own unsteady view of the past. For the distortions of historical reality which arise from attempts to describe the past objectively are nothing by comparison with those of popular myth and legend, which would have highwaymen and pirates cavorting as folk heroes, and brigands and terrorists as freedom fighters. These views have immense cultural value (as repeatedly demonstrated by Hollywood); but, in order to distinguish the historical characters of Owen Glendower, William Wallace and Oliver Cromwell from their continually changing status as cultural icons, historians are necessary.

## VII

It goes without saying that the history profession has a central place in the understanding of history in the modern world. But this central place has been misunderstood and misrepresented by historians and postmodern critics alike. Historians have for years tried to control the understanding of what history is by defining it as what they do, as if the medical profession could define 'health' as what it does. Postmodernists have misrepresented it in many different ways, from the disjuncture between language and reality to criticisms of the straw man of 'the historian' (who has never existed except as a theoretical entity). In addition, literary theorists have taken advantage of historians' tendency to define history as what they do in order to criticise history as a 'text' or 'discourse', regardless of all extant archaeological and historical certainties. Historians have responded by either ignoring the problem or by emphasising the use of evidence. The former is unwise: a policy of ignorance. The latter leads to tedium and pedantry, risks alienating the public, and renders the end product both vulnerable to unreliable evidence and easy for theorists to criticise without reference to any external cultural values.

Free history – relocating history within society – is a way out of this predicament. By allowing the historical validity of any historical interaction by any member of the public, the questions which people naturally have regarding the relics of the past are given validity. These in turn validate the pursuit of explanations on both a professional

and amateur basis. Historians have a social mandate to investigate the past, and to explain and make use of those archaeological, archival and bibliographical certainties which are available. Defining the precise parameters of historical certainties relating to an event is part of the historian's job: the 'scientific' analysis of what may be considered trustworthy information.<sup>35</sup> But also there is also the creative side, the explaining, the suggestion of meanings within these parameters. As a result there are bound to be differences between what historians write and the past reality they write about. Critics need to be clear about the benefits of exposing those theoretical differences, especially if it results in the unwarranted prioritisation of unsubstantiated doubt over probable and reasonable understanding. The process might be theoretically valid but the differences themselves might be miniscule in reality. Culturally such differences are likely to be of little public value. And yet even a wrong historical analysis might be culturally instructive, as an example of a failed experiment. Indeed, historians' work can be justified in a similar way to that of medical scientists seeking a cure to a new and dangerous disease. Repeated failures and near-misses are tolerable because the ultimate goal – a cure, or, in the case of history, an illuminating explanation or narrative – will benefit the population at large.

Even though it is impossible to know the whole truth about the past, there is nevertheless an area of doubt to be tested, prodded, considered, examined and explained to the best of our ability. This is the way forward: to be aware of the limitations of language, evidence and perspective, the impossibility of both complete subjectivity and absolute objectivity, not to mention the limits of narrativity, and yet to proceed despite all these theoretical limitations where there is a practical reason to do so. If that reason is a desire to inspire, to explain, to illuminate, and to question the meaning of archaeological and historical certainties, and to create and communicate ideas about the past with the public – and especially if its is a combination of all of these – then historians must go ahead, seek the trust of their readership, and produce their visions of the past. Those works which carry the courage of their inspiration will break free from the stalemate of theoretical criticism, and might reveal something about humanity which was previously unknown or unrealised. Such works are precisely the enjoyable and rewarding books which society hopes historians will create. They go beyond the analytical demands of history-as-education and reach for the essence of our being here, of human identity. The greatest type of 'truth' to which a historian can aspire is not something which can be assessed in terms of past facts and figures, recitation of past events, or precise explanations of past circumstances; it is the 'truth' of human nature over time: our resilience, understanding and inspiration. Attempts to describe the past in this way – paying attention to historical certainties and at the same time going beyond them, to find meaning in the human past – stand every chance of lasting; and lasting, that is, not just for a few years or decades, but like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, for centuries.

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<sup>35</sup> 'Scientific' as used here refers to Collingwood's final description on how one may apprehend historical meanings which may be inferred from evidence. See Adrian Wilson, 'Collingwood's Forgotten Historiographic Revolution', *Collingwood Studies*, viii (2001), 6-72, at pp. 53-5.