

In Search of New Narrative Frameworks: an Interview with Ian Mortimer

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Donald A. Yerxa: Please describe briefly how you became interested in history and outline your career as a historian.

Ian Mortimer: I grew up in a house full of antiques and listened to family conversations that constantly harked back to days of greater wealth and greater glory. (My family ran a successful dyeing and cleaning business between 1773 and 1932—I was born in 1967.) Having the name “Mortimer,” I did not feel distant from the middle ages but associated with the famous warrior family of the same name. I also naturally questioned historical judgments about the medieval Mortimers, which were usually negative and unsympathetic – and so developed a critical faculty at a very early age. I started tracing my family history at about the age of six or seven. At the age of eight, in the summer of 1976, my history master wrote in my school report: “Here surely is a future historian in the making; he has a very sound knowledge and good understanding.”

My career as a historian has been unorthodox. Although I read for a BA in history in 1986-1989, I spent more time studying creative writing. Later I qualified as an archivist. In the years 1993-2000 I worked as an editor of 17th-century documents for the University of Reading, a Curatorial Officer for the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, and an archivist at the University of Exeter. I did not start to read for my Ph.D. (in the social history of medicine 1570-1720) until 2000, when aged thirty-three. I completed it in twenty-two months. Since March 2003

I have published four medieval biographies, one innovative social history (*The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England*), one scholarly monograph (*The Dying and the Doctors*, published by the Royal Historical Society), half of the guide to a university archive, and twenty-three peer-refereed articles. Collectively these have touched on every century of English history from the 13th to the 20th. I also have completed a book of essays, *Medieval Intrigue*, due for publication in September 2010, in which I seek to advance the philosophy and methodology of medieval history, testing the limits of certainty by examining aspects of royal secret business. I was awarded the Alexander Prize by the Royal Historical Society—a silver medal for the best essay submitted by someone within three years of completing his or her Ph.D.—in 2004.

Yerxa: What was the genesis of your thinking about history as an art? Have you been long disappointed by the published scholarship produced by academic historians?

Mortimer: When in youth I was fascinated by history, it had no bounds. But within a few days of being taught formally at school, I found all my amazement being driven out of the subject. I hated the syllabus at the age of seven, and I still hated when I left school at seventeen. My relationship with the past has always been a personal one, and my vision of history equally personal. But it has also always been serious, so that it includes both a sense of spiritual reassurance—in that the dead go on before us—and drama—in that people performed almost unimaginable acts of bravery in the past, as well as acts that were desperately sad, loyal, haunting, cheating, ambitious, hate-filled, loving, etc. The school syllabus never included these emotions.

I am not at all “disappointed” by scholarship—I am not sure what gave you that idea! I have produced a fair bit myself. I know well the thrill of finding out and contextualizing something that no one else knows. My book *The Dying and the Doctors*, which is an extremely detailed reconstruction of the level of medicalization in southern England in the 17th century, was a

tremendously exciting project. It is not a fun read, but we need works like this to produce reliable structures for understanding the past. My point is not that this is disappointing but that we also need people to look beyond the academic horizon and to build something out of such research.

Yerxa: Who are the historians and what are the history books that have inspired you most?

In the strict sense of the word “inspire,” none. I find inspiration in ancient places—whether a castle, a church, a house or the strange pattern of an old field. I find it in paintings, documents, surnames, old songs and things that are from a different age. Museums. Archives. Archaeology. I get no inspiration from history books or historians, nor history fiction, but only from the relics of the past.

Having said that, there are a few writers who have inspired me. Most of them are writers who have tackled key questions of existence and led me to realize aspects of life that are true in any age, not just our own time. Almost all are modern poets: T.S. Eliot, Boris Pasternak, W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, ee cummings, Bertoldt Brecht, Philip Larkin, James Wright, W.H. Auden, Jean Genet, and so on. The ways they inspired me are impossible to define: but each one has written something that, although elusive, is compelling. I find in a great poem by, say, Eliot, something as revealing of life over the centuries as standing in the middle of a medieval cathedral.

Yerxa: Before the rise of “scientific” academic history, were there a lot more historian artists practicing their craft?

Mortimer: Undoubtedly. Arguably before Ranke’s influence was felt, and before the rise of the

methodology whereby historians clarified chronicle accounts by analyzing documents (pioneered by Joseph Hunter and others in the 1830s), there was only an “art.” But at that stage, the “art” of history needed greater discipline (in the same way we now need more artfulness). The 19th century provided that discipline, so that towards the end of the nineteenth century the art and discipline of history were more in accord. In the UK the old *Dictionary of National Biography* was one of the great artistic and intellectual products of that age. That it was not superseded until 2004 was partly due to the quality of the original, both as a reference tool and a witty, shrewd, and entertaining text. In fact, there are many articles in the 2004 edition that are nowhere near as well written as the 19th-century versions.

The mid-20th century saw some brilliant historical writers. I think the best practitioner of the art as a whole was Sir Steven Runciman, whose mastery of the discipline was deeply impressive and whose prose was as good as that of any nonfiction writer ever. But style isn’t everything. Some brilliant writers of historical prose—A.L. Rowse, C.V. Wedgwood—have largely been eclipsed now, even to the point that their work is denigrated as old and useless to the academic of today. This is very sad. If you examine Rowse’s style, it has great energy and is entertainingly fluent.

Yerxa: You mention that historical artistry requires courage and confidence“even in the face of academic stigmatization.” May I ask if you have faced that?

Twice over. There are some academics who view the art of history as weak—less rigorous than the strict discipline that they are proud to maintain. Artistry, in their view, detracts from the discipline, it does not add to it. And if one is solely concerned with the discipline, they can hardly be wrong. It’s just that one cannot practice the discipline of history in such splendid isolation and expect it to have any wider meaning. If you establish the causes of the Second World War

with complete accuracy, and tell no one, then you might as well have got it all wrong. Such disciplinarians tend not to write sniffy reviews of my books, as I do have the academic credentials they normally look for (whereas many popular historians don't). But one does get the sense at academic conferences that they look at me and think "you're not one of us."

The passage to which you refer was written because of a very particular experience, one that has been ongoing for years. In my first book I wrote that we could be certain that Edward II did not die in Berkeley Castle in 1327. My book was a biography about the king's supposed murderer, so I could hardly fail to address the issue of whether the man died or not. A number of academics dismissed my conclusions without engaging with my argument, pouring scorn on such radical revisionism. Alarmed at the shallowness of their responses, I revisited the subject and wrote a 16,000-word article on the subject for the foremost peer-refereed historical journal in the UK, the *English Historical Review*. Responses to that article have been astonishingly blinkered—derogatory, too, in one or two cases. "Courage and confidence" are required to maintain a bold line in the face of entrenched opposition from a stream of professors eager to act together to preserve the values of their discipline in the face of a perceived threat from without. The attack on my work has been like the threats to "normal science" described in Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I deal with this in detail in a chapter of my book, *Medieval Intrigue*. The chapter in question is called "Twelve Angry Scholars."

Yerxa: You make an eloquent case for the need for history to evoke sympathetic understanding for people in the past. Do you also see a role for historical detachment?

Mortimer: But of course! Absolutely. In the modern world there is no "art of history" without the discipline and many aspects of the discipline require detachment. This is an important point: Bury, Trevelyan and Hayden White and many other people whom I do not mention were all

wrong to think in terms of an art vs. discipline/science tension. Rather the art needs the discipline, like a building needs foundations. You can't have a building without foundations—strong ones, too, if you want it to last. But, unfortunately, you *can* have foundations with no building on top, and that is what today's academic system is doing: producing thousands and thousands of foundations that are not built on, and which are neglected by the public and soon covered by the sands of time.

Yerxa: If the academy is essentially incapable of producing historian artists, will they always be in short supply? To extend the artist metaphor abit, who are the patrons of historical artistry? Trade publishers?

Mortimer: Trade publishers? Patrons? I wish! Publishers are businessmen: they are after a profit. And the amounts of money they are prepared to advance for a book rarely will cover the time needed to research and write it. No, there are no "patrons" as such. There may be for specific purposes. I reviewed an excellent history of the Merchant Taylors' Company once, which was commissioned and paid for by the livery company itself. It was scholarly, lavishly illustrated, very well written—perfect, if you were a member of that livery company. Few other people would be interested.

I don't think one can expect there to be patrons. I look around the current crop of independent historians in the UK whom I meet at literary festivals, and some are brilliant writers; but I have to observe that quite a few come from rich backgrounds and have private incomes, or are able to command large advances because of a TV profile. Those who survive off their writing alone are relatively few and far between. And their relationship with a publisher is much more like a 19th-century artist's relationship with a gallery owner. There are no patrons for what I do; I have to rely on my books selling in sufficient quantities. But then, if there were patrons, they

would probably want to meddle. It is the complete freedom to research, think, and write whatever I want that I find so rewarding and constantly inspiring.

To say the academy is not capable of producing historians who practice the art is not quite correct. I have a high regard for two or three books produced by Simon Schama, who remains firmly within academia. But higher education does not teach anyone to visualize forms that have not been visualized before: if academia taught “Schama-style” history, students would simply produce derivative works in the vein of his *Landscape and Memory*, *An Embarrassment of Riches*, and *Citizens*. If they came up with a good idea, they would need to find a mainstream publisher.

Academia can only provide the foundation of the discipline on which historians may

build. **Yerxa: What prompted you to write *The Time Traveller’s Guide*?**

Mortimer: I was about ten years of age, visiting Grosmont Castle in South Wales, on holiday with my father, mother, and brothers. Grosmont was the birthplace of the famous first duke of Lancaster, one of the greatest military leaders of the Middle Ages. It was the third castle we had visited that day. I wanted to see the place where the duke’s mother had lived, where she had sat and eaten in the weeks before and after the birth, the hall with the central fire and the servants bustling about with the clean linen, firewood, and platters. I was so excited about it that I forgot the castle was a ruin. When I arrived I found myself standing in an empty stone shell, with the leaves of nearby trees rustling in the breeze. And everyone I had pictured in my mind on the way there was more than just dead—they were described in the guidebook like so many butterflies pinned out in a display case. I realized then that history is not about people as “the dead” but about them living. It is about butterflies in flight, not pinned out, fading in a display case. History is about life. Returning to my school syllabus after that holiday was an enormously frustrating experience. But as I sat in the classroom, I realized what I wanted to see was the living past.

The actual idea for a guide to the past came to me in 1994. I met a woman who worked for a chain of bookstores to discuss it on January 5, 1995. She thought it was an excellent idea—but

then she distracted me by marrying me. Twelve years later, although we had three children, I still had not written the book. So I decided that the time had come.

Yerxa: To give our readers better sense of *The Time Traveller's Guide*, would you speak to a few aspects of life in 14th-century England that would surprise the 21st-century visitor and mostly likely would not appear in standard academic historical treatments?

Mortimer: When writing about how to live in the 14th century, I found certain subjects completely neglected. Top of the list was personal hygiene: did people clean their teeth and, if so, how? Did they wash their hair? What did people use for toilet paper? Et cetera. It was very difficult to find such details.

More interesting were the implications of things we take for granted about the past. Relationships between men and women, for example. Yes, these were highly uneven, with women hugely disadvantaged. But when you consider the medical understandings of the time, you start to understand the sexual prejudices were not entirely because of sex but partly medical. Similarly the restrictions on women's liberty. When you realize that half of medieval England's population was under the age of twenty-two, you become aware of the high proportion of young men traveling between towns, armed with swords, with many opportunities for breaking the law and getting away with it. In such circumstances not only would you not allow your daughter to travel between towns without a strong escort, she probably would not want to. So the restrictions on women traveling appear more social precautions than sexual prejudices. And in the context of this implicit violence, when boys as young as seven could be hanged for misdemeanors, including theft, you start to understand why beating them was considered a responsible and good thing to do.

These are obvious to most historians but for that very reason they rarely are overtly stated in history books. One can say the same regarding the benefits of superstition. The modern

nonspecialist reader tends to deride medieval people for their superstitious beliefs. Of course, academics versed in postmodernism and sophisticated models of belief understand that one belief system is not necessarily better than another. But using the *Time Traveler's Guide* conceit, one can illustrate this vividly by juxtaposing the process of a witch trial in which it was noted that various oddities were boiled in the skull of a hanged murderer with Roger Bacon's famous lines that rationalize the possibility of suspension bridges, deep-sea divers, aircraft, and fast-moving land vehicles. It is precisely because of the medieval mind's openness that such things were considered possible—whether these be classed religious, superstitious, or scientific. Without the belief in what we class superstitious practices, there would not have been the innovation.

Yerxa: How did the day-by-day framework you employed in *1415: Henry V's Year of Glory* contribute to your overall assessment of Henry V?

Mortimer: Profoundly. Ever since starting to write the “January” chapter I have talked about this book as an “experiment in historical form,” for I quickly realized it was experimental in more ways than I could have imagined. At the outset I decided on the comprehensive day-by-day structure because there are many books on Henry V and just as many on the battle of Agincourt, and there's a good scholarly contribution, too, (in both book and article form) across both fields. So either I had to do something different or I had to skip Henry V's generation in my “biographical history of medieval England.” Given that the avowed aim of my “biographical history” is to deal chronologically with the history of England 1326-1461 through a study of the biggest mover and shaker in each generation, it would have been a fatal flaw to ignore Henry V. It also would have been a flaw because he directly tried to emulate his great-grandfather Edward III, and the one of the main justifications for a multigenerational biographical approach is to examine how later generations took inspiration and learnt from their forebears. So I had to find

some way of addressing Henry V anew. The radical form was thus undertaken simply for the sake of doing something different. My view of Henry V at the outset was that he deserved the heroic reputation we normally accord him. Having dealt with Edward III in *The Perfect King* (2006), it seemed to me that Henry V was another man who set out to be a “perfect king” and more nearly accomplished this impossible ambition. I knew he was deeply religious, and I knew that his restarting of the war was deeply questionable; but in many respects I had not even begun to get to know the man. The difference was not so much the decision to base the book on a year as the determination to be comprehensive. I did not select evidence: I included everything I could find that personally related to the king (although some details were relegated to the endnotes). This comprehensiveness allowed me to see that he was not just religious, he was fanatically religious, even by the standards of his own time. It also allowed me to compare his relationship with his brothers and other kin, and exposed the degree to which he was a rival of the Duke of Clarence (just a year younger) and how the Earl of Cambridge could feel he had been set aside by Henry. It permitted a clear statement of Henry’s approach to women—cautious to the point of hostility, misogyny even. Similarly, it revealed his insecurity as a king and his cruelty: his unjustifiable treatment of Lord Scrope being a clear example. But above everything else, it exposed his genuine courage: that he did make remarkable decisions, believing that God would protect him. While I did not like the character that emerged at the end, I have to take my hat off to him for his sheer courage.

Yerxa: Do you plan to use this particular historical form, or variations of it, again? Or are you planning to employ another “new narrative framework” in the future?

Mortimer: No, I won’t use this framework again. This book very nearly drove me mad. Unlike my other books it required a great deal of research to be front-loaded, so I would know which supplementary characters’ lives to include as corollary narratives. Thus when it came to writing

the book I had to work from a mass of notes. And then I discovered how difficult it was to turn those notes—basically a long list of things that happened or may have happened in 1415—into a literary work without being able to change the order of any event or subplot. There were days in 1415 that were just plain boring. As I wrote in the book, the task of making this book readable was like trying to describe the periodical table of the elements in a book without excluding any and without changing the order.

Had I world enough and time I would like to employ this same structure for years like 1485, 1558, 1688, and 1939 in England—years when various interplaying forces across several countries all were shifting their positions around each other, with social, religious, and political agendas that affected England. But I want to move on to other things.

As for another “new narrative framework,” yes, definitely. But I'm not saying what it is, except that it's not fiction. One of the rarest and most valuable things in writing history for the public is an original approach that has both intellectual validity and popular appeal. *My Time Traveler's Guide* has set a pattern that I can follow for other periods (an Elizabethan England volume is under contract) but this concept is more or less settled as a form now: it won't allow me to experiment much further. Treating the past in the new way I have in mind will be very challenging, and hugely experimental, but it will reveal another way to make history (in its most general sense) relevant to the public, which is what I see as the real value of my historical work.

Yerxa: What is your take on the various ways people are attempting to connect with the past by such things as military reenactments, cooking old recipes with period utensils, or performing music with period instruments? What drives this impulse?

Mortimer: Their attempts amuse me and sometimes interest me, only rarely irritate me and

occasionally inform me. On the whole, I am too skeptical of the ability to “get it right” to warrant trying these things myself, and I think one has to do a lot of experimentation to learn anything significant. For example, if I were to try cooking on an open fire, I would very quickly learn how bad I am at it, not how good they were in the past. Having said that, there are some people who have taken these things seriously for years, and who therefore have acquired a number of points of practical experience. I spoke to a man the other day who had built his own thatched Iron-Age-style hut. “Where’s the hole in the roof?” I asked. “There isn’t one,” he answered. “You don’t need one. What’s more if you do put one in, you lose heat and a sudden updraft can take the flames up and burn both you and your roof. In the meantime, the layer of smoke kills the insects in the thatch.” I was amazed. And stood corrected. A few years ago I watched my youngest brother David, who is a blacksmith, make some medieval-style arrowheads. He has quite a few years’ experience, and the time it took him made me aware of the labor involved. So I was able to estimate how long it would have taken to make the quantity of arrows that the English took on their expeditions to France. One English writ from the 1340s contains an order for the supply of 130,000 sheaves of arrows. How long would it have taken to make this lot? About 2.6 million man-hours. This is why the French were never able to produce archery-based armies to respond to the English. French culture looked down on the archer, and thus there was no tradition of archery or steady production of the essential ammunition required for an archery war. So reenactments can have impact on scholarly understandings, too.

Yerxa: What is the historian’s social responsibility? And what, if anything does the public’s “enjoyment of history” have to do with it?

Mortimer: This is a really big question, and there is insufficient space here to deal with it. The full answer is to be found in my essay: “What Isn’t History? The Nature and Enjoyment of History in the Twenty-First Century,” *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 93 (2008):

454-474. But the short answer is that people are aware that they and the society they live in has a past, and they seek explanations of that past—how did this happen, why does that building look that way, why am I here, etc. If historians refuse to look beyond the academic horizon, and fail to answer the questions posed by the public, then they are failing in their social duty—in the same way as a public law-enforcement officer would be failing his duty if he only protected his friends and not the general public. As most academic historians are paid with public money (in the UK, at least), I argue that they have a duty to address the questions that society wants answered, not just their own research projects.

The public enjoyment of history is a multilayered thing. On the one hand it is simple—going to a ruined castle, reading a great “true” story—but on the other hand it goes far deeper. Why do we preserve old buildings and have conservation areas in old towns? The willingness to live in an old, listed building and to maintain it for future generations indicates a social engagement with the past. So, too, does the pride we take in long-established traditions and institutions, even a sense of national history. All these things matter to the public and to us as a group, a society. I find it deeply irritating and condescending when I read lines like “history is simply what historians do”; history is also what members of the general public do, everyday, and if we as historians don’t recognize that, we are the ones who will suffer, sailing off up our own little creek in our own little canoes, alone. However, if we do engage with the questions that the public want answered, then we have the means of justifying what we do socially and enhancing its significance—to the benefit of all, those we inform, those we inspire, and our ourselves.

Yerxa: You have reflected recently on “true originality in history.” What do you mean by the term, and where do you see it today?

Mortimer: As the *TLS* have made this essay “Beyond the facts” freely available on-line, I would encourage everyone to read it there at

http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/tls_selections/commentary/article5473416.ece.

But, in brief, I distinguish between routine originality and true originality in the following way. Routine originality is a new research finding as a matter of historical discipline. We have research questions, we find evidence, we analyze it, we apply our theories, and we come up with something original to say. True originality is when we find something in life, or in ourselves, that conditions our response to the past, something that previously was not to be found and could not have existed without us. It might be as simple as a term: “bastard feudalism” or “The Renaissance,” or it might be a new approach (like my *Time Traveler’s Guide*), or it might be a radical reinterpretation of an entire subject (like Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*). I argue in my *TLS* piece that it is only true originality that has public significance:

It is only those historians and scholars of true originality who have a significant and influential part to play in modern society, for only they can put into their works something which is rooted in life, not evidence. Through them, people may come to understand the human past differently, and what mankind has done differently, and thereby achieve a new vision of what mankind is Poets may not be the only unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Yerxa: In several think pieces (including to some extent “The Art of History”), you have argued for the value of history as reader-centered rather than evidence-centered. Could you speak to that distinction briefly?

Mortimer: This is too radical a distinction. Have I ever used the term “reader-centered”? If I have, then I was probably trying to draw attention to the fact that history does not have to be wholly evidence-based in order to be meaningful. In fact it cannot: the historian needs to consider the audience.

Historians in the modern world are obsessed by evidence—too much so in some cases. In late medieval studies, a small but significant proportion of evidence is plainly wrong. Not slightly wrong, but completely so. For example, all the evidence that Edward II died in Berkeley Castle is based on one message sent on September 21, 1327, received by the king 130 miles away on the night of the 23rd, and circulated without verification on the 24th. Historians have never seriously doubted that the announcement was true, because the weight of evidence told them it was so. They should have been more skeptical. The sender of that one message claimed three years later he “did not know of the king’s death,” and there are six independent information streams that attest to his survival. One can use information in this way to undermine much evidence that medievalists teach as a matter of course. The need for scholars to base their arguments on information, not evidence, is a key theme of my forthcoming book, *Medieval Intrigue*.

No history text can be entirely reader-centered. What I would argue for is a balance: history should pay as much attention to the reader’s interests as it does to linkages with the past. Or at least the art of history should do. The discipline can be heavily centered on the linkages with the past, if necessary, so long as the basic research question has wider meaning (i.e., there will be at least one interested reader).

A more reader-centred approach is not necessarily in opposition to a heavily evidence-based one. Take a book like *Montaillou* by the French scholar Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie: it generated huge public interest and gained a wide readership because the evidence happened to be of such a rare, exciting, and accessible nature, with relevance to so many people. In that case the historian was simply the conduit through which a fantastic array of source material simply flowed to his readers. Another example is Eamon Duffy’s *The Voices of Morebath*. With archaeology, of course, the objects can themselves become the center on which public attention is fixed, so paying attention exclusively to, say the mummy of Rameses II, is to attract the readers’ attention. This also applies to old ships and historic houses and castles. Where the evidence itself is the object of interest, there is a natural meeting of the art and the discipline of describing the past.