

IAN MORTIMER

Why I am still haunted by my history teacher:

a talk to members of PiXL History Subject Conference,

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One of the most common questions I am asked in my professional life is ‘why did you become a historian?’ and that question is normally followed immediately by another, namely ‘was it because you had a really good history teacher at school?’ I always smile when I hear these things. No one would ever think of asking a novelist, ‘did you become a writer because you had a really good English teacher?’ Similarly, no one would say to a Wimbledon champion, ‘You must have had a really good games mistress at school’. No. We understand that English teachers don’t teach pupils how to compose novels, and that what makes a Wimbledon champion is a matter of character and the desire to win, as well as athleticism, fitness, eye-hand coordination, build and so forth. There is something different about history in that it is widely seen to emanate from education.

You could say that this is a tremendous mark of respect for history teachers everywhere. After all, just imagine if science teachers were credited by the public for the world’s great inventions, that economics teachers were likewise applauded for inspiring the creation of great fortunes, and philosophy teachers for ascertaining the truth. History teachers are in a privileged position, one might say, in that it is widely thought that our leading historians owe their teachers everything. Yet you and I know it is not quite that way. History teachers are no more responsible for creating historians than priests are for making saints. You can certainly help talented youngsters to flourish; you can inspire, inform, empower and guide them along the straight and narrow. But it is rare that a historian attributes his professional status wholly to the inspiration of a teacher.

Having said these things, I *did* have two outstanding history masters at school. About five years ago I wrote a tribute to one of them, Euan Clarke, a true gentleman, who taught and inspired me at Eastbourne College from 1981 to 1985.¹ The other was John Turner, who oversaw my historical education at Bickley Park School from 1975 to 1980. At the age of seven I

¹ This tribute may be freely downloaded from www.ianmortimer.com/essays/historymaster.pdf.

looked at Mr Turner as a terrifying man, with a voice like a sergeant-major on the parade ground and an expression as stern as that of a nineteenth century prime minister considering how to put down a Luddite insurrection. But his appearance is not the reason why I am still haunted by him. The real reason is that, one day, sitting in his classroom, at about the age of twelve, I was struck by the profound realisation that, if I could really go to Tudor England and see for myself what things were like, and subsequently returned to tell Mr Turner all about it, he would not believe me. Nor would my classmates. They would want to see those things for themselves. That led to another realisation: if I included precise details of my visit to Queen Elizabeth I's England in an exam paper, the examiner would strike out anything he did not agree with – because he hadn't seen what I had seen and would naturally prioritise his understanding over my first-hand experience. In other words, *I* would be penalised for *his* lack of knowledge. I had stumbled on to a fundamental historical problem – that the past and history are two distinct things – and what really attracted me was *the past* whereas what Mr Turner wanted me to produce was history.

This is my theme for this talk: the difference between the actual past and what we can say about it as historians, and the problems and opportunities arising from this difference. It is a difficult subject, I know. Most audiences want all their history to be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Historians too want to be seen to be delivering the truth when we go on TV or radio to explain, say, the causes of the Hundred Years War. 'These *were* the causes; they are not just my opinion', we want to say. And yet we know that they *are* just our opinions, even if they are correct. And that's where it starts to get complicated, because we alter what we say according to our audiences. When talking to the public or a school group, we speak about the past with complete authority, as if every word reflects past reality. Then, when discussing the same subject in academic circles, we remove our masks of authority and explore the nuances, ambiguities and the misunderstandings of the past. Every word reflects the limits of our knowledge. We stop telling stories and start pulling apart each other's explanations, testing them to see if they stand up to scrutiny. You can see why some people are confused as to whether historians really know what they are talking about.

Part One: Problems, Weaknesses and Threats

In general, people want the actual past and what we say about it to be in close alignment, and they presume that the closer the alignment, the more accurate the history, and thus the *better* the history. That's all very well in theory but, as we don't know how the actual past differs from the picture we have of it, the only way to improve this alignment is to take every possible relevant

source into consideration. The level of complexity that results often scares off the general reader. If you think of the present and the past as two banks of a wide river, and history as being the bridge between the two, all that most people want is to cross that bridge to see what lies on the other side. They want the engineering and engineered thing – the bridge – to be the same. They want to cross the bridge without having to worry about whether it will stand up. The problem is that many historical bridges are tentative and speculative. And as I began to realise that day in Mr Turner's classroom, none of them *ever* actually reaches the other side. We suggest things *might* have been this way or that but, when we do, our cautiousness makes us sound unsure of our subject. Far from leading to a *better* form of history, the added complexity of attempting to align history more closely with the actual past results in texts that many people find confusing and unsatisfying.

As everyone in this room will be aware, postmodernist philosophers and critical theorists seized on these problems in the late twentieth century. According to writers like Hayden White, whose book *Metahistory* led the way in reconsidering the processes and value of historical writing when it appeared in 1973, we select details from the source material according to our preferences, and shape them into artificial narratives, neglecting whatever does not accord with our preferred theories. We set arbitrary limits to the scope of our enquiries and ignore what lies outside their temporal and geographic boundaries. We do not understand what we are doing when we refer to something as a historical 'fact' – we pretend that things are factual when they are actually theories and opinions. We arrange our selected evidence in ways that support our assumptions and prejudices. We might produce a narrative that we feel represents the actual past but we fail to see that the past can be 'infinitely re-described' so any attempt to write a definitive account is bound to fail. Some postmodernists flatly deny that anyone can write history that has any direct connection with the actual past. 'So far as history is concerned, its telling has become impossible, because that telling is, by definition, the possible recurrence of a sequence of meanings' wrote the French sociologist and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard. 'Contemporary literary theory defies the very intellectual foundations of current professional historical practice by denying the factuality that grounds the authority of history itself' confirmed the American historian and historical theorist, Robert Berkhofer.² The British historical philosopher Keith Jenkins summed up the problem succinctly when he wrote 'we can never really know the past...

² Keith Jenkins, *A Postmodern History Reader* (1997), pp. 40, 139.

the gap between the past and history... is such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it'.³

Historians' reactions to such views in the 1980s and 1990s were uncoordinated, hesitant and often indignant. There were some spirited counter arguments, such as Richard Evans's *In Defence of History* (1997), which demonstrated the limited relevance of some of the postmodernists' claims, but there was no coherent response on behalf of the profession as a whole. Had this philosophical attack been directed at plumbers, their trade organisation would have taken great efforts to reassure the public that their pipes were not about to burst. But the historical societies that are the nearest equivalent to trade organisations left it to individual historians to sort out. Most simply carried on as before – because, if they were professionals, that was what they were paid to do, and if they were amateurs, a few theoretical quibbles in the scholarly press did not make any difference to them or their readers. However, the troubling fact remained that much of what the postmodernists said was – and is – true.

Just consider the problem of what is a historical 'fact'. You can find many instances today of historians repeating that something is a 'fact' on no other basis than they have come across it so many times in trusted textbooks. After all, if it's never been disputed, why shouldn't they? It would be exceptionally tedious if everything had to be referenced to a multiplicity of primary sources. But that general usage of the word 'fact' does not excuse us from having to define what we mean by it. And that is rather difficult. The *OED* defines a fact as 'that which is known (or firmly believed) to be real or true; what has actually happened or is the case; truth attested by direct observation or authentic testimony; reality.' But a historical fact is not 'reality' but a description of what we *believe* to have been reality. And if it is attested by the direct observation of only one individual, his or her testimony could still be a lie. As for the suggestion that a historical fact is synonymous with 'what actually happened' that will not do at all. If a battle 'actually happened' on this spot a thousand years ago and no one knows it, it is not a 'fact' that it took place, even if it truly did. An examiner would quite reasonably strike it out if he read about it in an exam paper. It only becomes a fact when the historical community learns about it and accepts that it happened. Facts only exist in our minds. If anyone disagrees with a fact, it can hardly be regarded as being 'firmly believed'. But *anyone* might disagree with any supposed 'fact' – and that includes historians in the future – so you can never be sure that it will never be disputed. It follows that every so-called 'fact' is only provisionally factual. Yet we regularly talk about such 'facts' as if they are the indisputable truth. When historical details are treated as facts

³ Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (revised ed., 2003), p. 23.

in a public environment and acknowledged in philosophical circles to be merely provisional, how can they be regarded as factual? Or even trustworthy? You can understand why critical theorists in the 1970s and 1980s thought historians were trying to have their cake and eat it.

Until that day in Mr Turner's classroom, I thought everyone understood what history was. From then on, I started to suspect that everyone was wrong. As I grew older, I saw with a growing horror just how wrong they could be. People thought there could only be one correct view of a historical event: they had not come across the brilliant mountain metaphor in EH Carr's *What is History?*, in which he points out that the same mountain may look very different when viewed from various angles. Was Henry IV a usurper? You may have a view on that. It will certainly be different from either Richard II's or Henry's own – and everyone else alive and politically aware in 1399 would also have had an opinion on the matter, all slightly different. Another methodological trap was to make the mistake of ignoring possible alternatives. As an archivist in my early twenties, I despaired at the number of genealogists searching for an ancestor who ended up choosing someone with the right name who happened to be born around the right time. Such people were effectively satisfied with *an* answer, even though *an* answer is not necessarily *the* answer. Professionals frequently made the same mistake. The rather splendidly named Gerald Achilles Burgoyne was a herald at the College of Arms in the 1920s, and thus a professional genealogist. Yet he committed the sin of writing to all the parish clergy in Devon searching for his own six-greats grandfather and offering a £25 reward for the man's name and date of baptism. Of course, many incumbents happily obliged, and one received a cheque for providing details of a boy born into a suitably armigerous family. But I can tell you now, he got the wrong man. Gerald the herald was looking for *an* answer, not *the* answer. Many thousands of historical arguments are similarly flawed due to the author coming up with a theory and then looking for evidence to support it, not realising that other theories may also be supportable. Even a high court judge might fall into this trap. Last year I pointed out to one such learned gentleman that to have a theory that Shakespeare's works were actually written by a lawyer and then to go looking for evidence to support that theory without addressing all the evidence to the contrary, that William Shakespeare *did* write Shakespeare's works, was simply advancing a prejudice. To this he replied: 'why shouldn't I explore my theory?' This judge could not see that he was opening himself up to confirmation bias and avoiding balancing his argument.

You probably won't be surprised to hear me say that TV introduces a whole new set of methodological pitfalls for the unwary historian. I hope that one brief example will suffice to illustrate. A researcher for a series on the Hundred Years War phoned me up and asked me

about ‘the greatest knight of the fourteenth century’ – a man on whom a programme about the first phase of the war could be based – ‘but not the king’, she stressed.

‘There is one obvious candidate, Henry, duke of Lancaster, the grandfather of Henry IV. He led an English army into Gascony in 1345 and won an astonishing series of victories distracting the French while the king led another army into Normandy on the campaign that culminated at Crécy.’

‘Great, where do I find a picture of him?’ asked the researcher.

‘There isn’t one,’ I replied.

She fell silent. Then she said, ‘That’s a problem. We’ve got to have pictures. Can you think of someone else we can call the greatest knight of the fourteenth century?’

As you can see, there is an awful lot of very bad history being produced for TV, published in books, put up on the internet and narrated on the radio and in podcasts. Much of the criticism that postmodernists threw at historians was entirely deserved.

‘Fair enough’, you might say, ‘but we can still trust our leading academics.’ Can we? I think that we can trust most academics in most circumstances but by no means all of them in all circumstances. After all, historians are only human and they will occasionally allow personal prejudices to stifle debate and suppress methodological innovation. Let me give you the most obvious example from my own career to illustrate how this happens. It comes from my research into the death of Edward II, published in 2005 in the *English Historical Review*, the most traditional and well-respected of all historical scholarly journals. My article demonstrated that, despite the widespread acceptance of the deposed king’s death in Berkeley Castle on 21 September 1327, the evidence for it is unreliable. I pointed out that there was only one source for the news – Lord Berkeley – and it was possible to prove that his report of the death was accepted at face value by the royal court and circulated widely before it was possible to check it. But three years later, Lord Berkeley admitted he had not heard of Edward II’s death, even though he was the sole source. In other words, the entire edifice of evidence for the event was based on an apparently self-confessed lie and could not be trusted. That obliged historians, I argued, to take seriously several other documents that showed contemporaries knew Edward II to be alive after 1327, including the guilty sentence passed on Edward’s half-brother, the earl of Kent, for trying to rescue him from Corfe Castle in 1330, and an eye-witness account of a man claiming to be Edward II who related the story of his later life to a trusted kinsman of the English royal family, Cardinal Luca Fieschi, at Avignon in 1331. Needless to say there were attempts at the time to stop me

publishing it, with one peer reviewer recommending it be turned down by the journal on the grounds that the time wasn't right for it to appear. After it did appear, senior academics, who had spent decades repeating that Edward II died in Berkeley Castle privately expressed shock that something so contrary to their consensus could be published in that most respectable historical journal. Then they decided either to ignore my work or to dismiss it in reviews of my books or in their own monographs, which were not peer-reviewed. Only two scholars ventured into the peer-reviewed press with articles trying to refute my analysis, and their contributions to the debate are riddled with methodological errors.⁴ I answered one of these in a book published in 2009 but it seemed to me best to answer the other piece, published in 2016, in a peer-reviewed journal. So I wrote a second article showing how, if one accepts two basic principles – that 'without evidence there is no history' and that 'documentary evidence is only as reliable as the information available to the person who created it', then the story of Edward II's death can be *proven* to be a lie. To be precise, what I proved was that the reasons for believing he died in 1327 are based on a falsehood. This is all you can do because the past and history are not the same: there is no dead body at Berkeley for us to examine; we have to examine instead why we believe something. Those who still say I am wrong cannot avoid the fact that their belief in the traditional story of the death is ultimately based on that same falsehood, which amounts to a circular argument. The bottom line is that in order to argue that Edward II died in 1327, you need to know better than Lord Berkeley what happened in his castle on 21st September, and clearly no one alive today does. Nevertheless, dozens of academics – in fact, the majority of fourteenth-century specialists in this country – *do* claim to know better than Lord Berkeley what happened in his castle. And the majority of them don't want me or anyone else publishing articles that show they are wrong. That is prejudice. There may be reasons for it – especially among those older academics who have written repeatedly in their books that Edward II did die in Berkeley Castle – but it is still prejudice. And it carries on: unashamedly. When my second article was considered by the *English Historical Review*, demonstrating how this amounts to proof, one anonymous peer reviewer was cautiously in favour of publication; a second declined to offer any opinion; and a third stated that he was against publication due to his or her (and I quote exactly) 'commitment to a standard position'. No counter argument was offered, simply a refusal to accept the proof on the grounds that my work did not fall in line with this academic's 'commitment to a standard position'. The extraordinary thing is that the editors of the journal

⁴ These two pieces are J.S. Hamilton, 'The Uncertain Death of Edward II?' *History Compass*, 6, 5 (September 2008), pp. 1264-78, and Andy King, 'Death of Edward II Revisited', in Gwilym Dodd and James Bothwell (eds), *Fourteenth Century England* (2016), 1-21.

accepted this self-confessed statement of bias as scholarly opinion. And this is just one of many such examples I could quote.⁵ It makes you wonder: if personal prejudices are allowed to flourish even in our most respected scholarly journals, then the various ‘defences of history’ that academics have published start to look a bit thin.

The threats arising from these issues are obvious. Many non-historians see us as intellectually naïve and even a little gullible. Some critics go so far as to maintain that we shouldn’t bother with history at all, because it fails both as a form of knowledge and as a moral guide, and only serves to maintain the power of those in authority.⁶ In their opinion, this gives them the right to ignore our research and to belittle us all as storytellers. This is not just a threat to historians but to wider society, for the ability to disregard what we can say about the past plays into political hands. The denial of the Holocaust is the most famous example. Misunderstandings about slavery and slavers present a similar series of ongoing problems. People get very excited about toppling statues and renaming buildings when what they should be doing is trying to improve our wider understanding of how hundreds of thousands of God-fearing Europeans could normalise the transportation and inhuman treatment of millions of Africans for almost three hundred years, and justify profiting from their suffering. At the same time there is a near-deafening silence concerning two centuries of the white slave trade in North Africa. I get the impression that some people think it is a mark of disrespect to the seven million or so black victims of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to point out that there were at least a million white victims of slavery – mostly taken from the coasts of Italy, Spain, Portugal, Devon Cornwall and Ireland. Why are they hardly ever mentioned in the press? One reason is that about 20 percent of the slaves in North Africa were executed *every year* in order to maintain a culture of fear among the remainder, and they have not left descendants as they were generally not allowed to marry.⁷ However, another reason for the lack of debate about the white slave trade is that people fear the politics of publicly denying that slavery was an exclusively black experience. For heaven’s sake! These are some of the greatest injustices of the world we are talking about: it does not belittle the sufferings of one group to draw attention to the miseries of another. Indeed, to attempt to suppress discussion of either victimised race is fundamentally contrary to the values that we seek to uphold as historians. And why stop at the sufferings of seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early

⁵ I give details of other occasions of personal prejudices affecting academic outcomes in ‘Twelve Angry Scholars’ – a chapter in my book *Medieval Intrigue* (2009).

⁶ Keith Jenkins, *Ethics and postmodernity* (1999).

⁷ According to Professor Robert C. Davis, about 8,500 a year were put to death or died in bondage, creating a constant demand for more to be seized. See Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: white slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500-1800* (2003), p. 23.

nineteenth-century slaves? Roman and Greek slavery wasn't exactly a walk in the park either, being built on the concept of *dominium* or a slave-owner's absolute right to do whatever he wants with his property. The Saxons, Welsh, Scots and Irish were also proud to own slaves, like most wealthy men and women in Europe before the twelfth century. It is a salutary thought that we are *all* the descendants of slaves. We are all the descendants of slave owners too. Those who would stay silent on such issues because they are politically sensitive hardly do justice to the memory of those who suffered and died.

The abovementioned threats go far further than just historical debates. The difficulty of proving any aspect of the past means that many people simply ignore what they don't like. Contentious issues become tribal, with each side adhering to its own historical vision because it accords with the values of the peer group, not because it stands up to historical scrutiny. People are put off exploring historical matters because they run counter to a powerful lobby's interests. In some cases, people dispute a fact not because of the fact itself but because of their enmity towards those who maintain it to be true. What hope is there for evidence and interpretation then? The one recourse we have to resolving contentious historical matters is ignored because prejudice is allowed to take over from evidence and debate. In such situations, we all lose out. For if people can dispute the past on the basis that it is beyond knowing, then they can set aside anything that is contrary to their interests. If people believe that you can't prove the past, they can disregard massacres, ethnic cleansing, programmes of enslavement and the forced evacuation of islands and provinces. Politicians can deny that they ever made the promises that put them in power. Rich men can deny that they had immoral relationships with corrupt leaders and innocent victims. Dictators can deny they manipulated election results. An inability to know the past with sufficient accuracy for it to be widely believed undermines the rule of law and, with it, the values of a law-abiding society.

That is why I am still haunted by my history teacher.

Part Two: Is History dead in the Water?

So what should we do? Indeed, should we do anything? One strategy is to 'keep calm and carry on', paying no attention to the challenge of postmodernists or critics of history. That's actually not such a bad idea: it is exactly what many professional historians have done over the last three decades. Have members of the public stopped watching history programmes on TV? No. Have they stopped buying our books? No, thank heavens. Shrugging off the whole debate has worked

remarkably well. However, it leaves us open to the accusation that we are not in tune with the rest of the modern world. Nor does it solve the problem that those who disagree with some aspect of the past can simply ignore it. We need to do better.

A second option is to produce books that avoid all or some of the mistakes identified by critical theorists and postmodernists. Several of us have tried, with varying levels of success. For example, there is Simon Schama's *Citizens: a chronicle of the French Revolution* (1989), which avoids imposing a traditional over-arching structure on the events of 1789-94 by using a whole series of individual experiences as the narrative. My own attempt to write a theoretically informed historical work was published in 2009 as *1415: Henry V's Year of Glory*. It is laid out like a calendar, day by day, month by month. I used original sources almost exclusively: secondary sources were only used in the course of explaining an original document. In this way I avoided the criticism that this was an arbitrary choice of subject: it was one full year in the king's life. I avoided the accusation that I selected my details from the source material by including everything that concerned the man. I avoided the problem of arranging my details to suit my argument by not having an argument at all and arranging the details by date. Thus I also demonstrated that history cannot be 'infinitely re-described' because anyone else performing a chronological account of the year would have to repeat almost everything I had noted. An ardent critic would still point to a number of subjective inputs, such as my selection of supplementary details, explanations, phraseology and dramatic writing, which were always going to be a matter of personal choice, but the end result was as 'closely aligned' to the actual past as I could manage. That was the good news. The bad news was that the concept threatened to turn into a 200,000-word list of details. To make it a reasonably enjoyable read for the general reader was a huge challenge. And did the theoretical critics ever pick up on it and note the lengths to which I had gone to create a text that answered most of their criticisms? Did they ever! Frankly, although it is *possible* to produce a text that is resistant to philosophical criticisms, doing so is a thankless task. The result pleases neither the history-reading public nor the philosophical critics.

The failure of the philosophical establishment to comment on books that seek to meet their criticisms is very revealing. Critics of history, if they were constructive critics, would be welcoming and encouraging of any move that sought to improve our capability to know the past, for it is in their interests too, as members of society. But their silence shows them not to be constructive critics. They are unable to 'coach' or guide historians to write better history – or even to recognise it – because they lack the expertise. Even if a philosopher were completely familiar with, say, seventeenth-century probate accounts, so that he knew the problems of using these documents as well as I do, he would not be in a position to help me because his role would

be to establish the limitations on their ability to reveal truth whereas my role is to overcome those limitations. This is why it is a pointless task for historians to engage philosophers in a philosophical discussion about what historians do. Philosophers can theorise about historical practices but what they are criticising is a straw man – merely their ideas of what we do – and those can hardly account for the many complex tasks that each one of us performs, each in his or her own way. Of course, philosophy can assist historians; it is certainly helpful to have someone suggesting the shortcomings of our sources; but such advice does not necessarily help us fulfil the purposes of our profession. Basically, if you want to know the answer to a historical question, don't ask a philosopher.

This brings us to the nub of the matter: the purposes of our profession. If we had no historians in this country, we would need to create some because modern society needs historical understanding. Once upon a time, historians' royal duties and religious responsibilities amounted to little more than recording the deeds of great men and to a lesser extent, women, and demonstrating through their achievements and failures the sort of behaviour that men and women should emulate or avoid. Whether expressed as a chivalric entertainment or a moral chronicle, history's traditional purposes can be summed up as providing a series of inspirational and cautionary messages to the living, derived from past experience. Since the seventeenth century, these core purposes have been extended. First there came causality, which arose in the course of the Scientific Revolution and required writers to start thinking about *why* things happened. Later, as governments and publicly funded institutions took responsibility for employing groups of professional historians, society at large increasingly dictated the purposes of history. In modern times the championing of great men has fallen out of favour, because it does not allow us to move on from a repetition of past hierarchies, military ambitions and moral attitudes. We have thus adapted our 'series of inspirational and cautionary messages to the living' to cover the ideals and perils of political systems as well as individuals. If one state commits atrocities against another, we want the events to be remembered. We want to hold ideologies to account, not just those who promote them. More generally, we want to understand how our society has come to be as it is. For instance, why is property ownership always so unequal? Why do we still have a monarchy in the UK? Why do we have an established church? How have standards of living changed? History also serves the purpose of showing us how humanity behaves under pressure. If you want to know how we are likely to behave when faced with an outbreak of a fatal disease, study the history of the plague. If you want to know how efficiently we can organise ourselves against starvation, look at the English legislation of the sixteenth century, culminating in the Old Poor Law. If you want to understand how fear can hypnotise a

whole nation into surrendering to a murderous imperative, look at Nazi Germany, the Khmer Rouge, Stalinist Russia or the witch craze. And on an individual level, when so many people in the West are doubtful of any religion, it is family history and the history of their communities that gives them a sense of belonging, of rootedness. To all these purposes we could add simple curiosity. What was here a hundred years ago? What levels of suffering were endured by our ancestors? Finally, there is our ability to plan for the future. In order to see how the years ahead might be different – whether worse or better – it is necessary to understand how society has developed up until now, because that is our only way of coming to terms with social change. Putting all these things together, you can see that the purposes of history have multiplied over the centuries – and have grown in importance from that ‘series of inspirational and cautionary messages’ to the means by which we may understand our place in time and our likely future development on this planet, which *history* tells us we have already changed profoundly.

With all these responsibilities, we need to write history that is fit for purpose. We need to take on board the specific criticisms about our practices without giving into the general negativism of philosophers and cynics whose view is that, because *they* cannot see a way through the difficulties of describing the past, *we* should not bother looking for one. But how do we do this? How do we narrow the gap between history and the actual past, and more closely align our histories with real events, and avoid over-complicating our narratives so that they become too difficult, boring and obscure? To my mind the answer lies in two directions: one being the application of information science to the construction of historical facts and other the exercise of the historical imagination.

Part Three: The construction of historical facts

You will remember that earlier I outlined why some people maintain a fact is only ever provisional – because anyone might come along to disagree with it. That’s not always true. As soon as you state that there are no hard facts, some clever clogs will ask something like ‘can we not be sure that Queen Victoria existed?’ It is an eminently sensible response and, as *ad absurdum* cases are often very revealing, it is worth pursuing. Victoria’s existence is a yes or no question: it can be defined in non-relative terms, examined as both a positive and a negative. On the positive side we can ask ‘is there any evidence that can be shown to have been created with first-hand authority that she did exist?’ and we may point to hundreds of thousands of first-hand accounts that indicate she did, created by the thousands of people who knew her over the course of her long life. On the negative side, we can ask is there evidence to the contrary – that all the

foregoing material was falsified or the result of a series of mistakes, and that someone else was queen of the United Kingdom between 1837 and 1901. I defy you to find any. It follows that, if you employ the principle that ‘without evidence, there is no history,’ you cannot argue that Victoria did not exist because there is no evidence for that possibility. It is perverse even to suggest something so lacking in evidence: it would be like a man who has had his leg amputated insisting it might grow back when, every day, he and we can see that it hasn’t. The important point is that merely to doubt something is not enough, for doubt by itself has no basis in reality, being merely rooted in the mind of the credulous. And in this case I do mean *credulous*: although critical theorists and philosophers position themselves as sceptics, you have to be very credulous indeed to believe in the possibility of something that is not evidenced when there are so many hundreds of thousands of indications to the contrary.

This somewhat tedious point is worth making because if it is possible to be certain about one thing, it is possible to be certain of others. You can employ the same argument to construct facts across a wide range of subjects that were witnessed independently by large numbers of people. It is a cast-iron certainty that the conflict we know as the Second World War broke out – as far as it involved this country – in September 1939. Likewise, we can be certain of well-documented public events like coronations, trials, public executions and Acts of Parliament. You cannot doubt the factuality of the Great Reform Act of 1832 any more than you can doubt the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester in 1819 or the staging of the Great Exhibition in London’s Hyde Park in 1851. If you were to apply the mathematical process known as Bayesian inference to the very slight chance that each reference to someone visiting the Great Exhibition was lying in their journals, and all the images of the glass palace and all the accounts for building it were forgeries, you would find very quickly that the accumulated likelihood tended to zero. And if there is no chance of something *not* being true, it follows that it is certain. Any sound thinker has to reject the claim that ‘contemporary literary theory ... [denies] the factuality that grounds the authority of history itself’.

Facts concerning well-witnessed events in the lives of public persons and group events many such persons are, by their very nature, so obvious that their factual status will not interest anyone. Far more significant are those facts which may be extracted from documents that are themselves embodiments of an act or a decision. For instance, it is a fact that Edmund, duke of York, made no bequest to his supposed younger son, Richard of Conisbrough in his will: we know because proved text survives in the archbishop’s register. It is similarly a fact that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon did make a bequest of memorial rings to his ‘fellows’ Richard Burbage (the principal actor of Shakespeare’s plays in London) and John Hemmings and

Henry Condell, the editors of the first folio of Shakespeare's works. In this case we have double the grounds for certainty because we have the original manuscript of the will as well as the text of the proved version in the archbishop's register. Extracting series of details implicit in documents can lead to the construction of further facts. It cannot be doubted that the name of Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, appears in all but one of the 83 witness lists copied in the rolls of royal charters granted by Henry IV prior to the earl's rebellion in 1403. And of course we can apply quantitative analysis to extracts from documents. In the course of doing my PhD, I examined the 13,500 probate accounts that survive for the diocese of Canterbury for the period 1570-1720. These indicate that the proportion of people whose executors and administrators claimed to have paid for medical assistance increased from less than 10 percent in the late sixteenth century to more than 50 percent after 1670. This change too can be regarded as a fact: not only does the sample include all the accounts known to survive for the diocese, it is such a large proportion of the population of East Kent that if a further series of accounts were to come to light for that region, it would almost certainly reflect the same proportions.

These above categories of facts are all document-based but we should not neglect that vestiges of the actual past remain. Therefore we can add the corroborations between the documentary record and the actual past as another means of achieving certainty. For instance, until 2008 all that was known of Rendlesham in the Saxon period was the reference in Bede's *History of the English Church and People* to it being a royal *vill* where a prince was baptised in the seventh century. That single reference was given enormous support when a systematic search by a team of metal detectorists over 400 acres of farmland there revealed thousands of Saxon objects, including more gold coins than found at any other Saxon site and many other precious items. Just a single gold coin by itself would not have supported Bede's statement that this was a royal residence: the discovery of thirty-seven of them amongst the finds, which were scattered across 120 of those 400 acres, leaves no doubt.

What about those recorded details that do not obviously qualify as facts – details that we cannot check through the archaeological and scientific means? Almost all of these are potentially correct but any one of them might be tainted by misinformation, disinformation, mistaken identity, mistaken quantities or some other error. Obviously, we should not simply presume any one is true – especially if it cannot be independently verified. However, in some cases, we can test the truthfulness of a piece of information recording an event. We can employ the principle that 'written evidence is only as good as the information available to its author'. Every document must have been composed by someone who had an informant or who was an eyewitness of the events he or she describes. If the information conveyed can be shown to be false, we can set

aside or at least question the resulting document. If it can be shown that there was insufficient time for it to reach the chronicler before being written down – for instance, if something was reported before it happened – we can be sure that the informant was privy to prior knowledge. A chronicler may well have been writing an original text – in which case we would certainly refer to his chronicle as a *primary* source – but in reality his narrative is not original unless he was an eyewitness of the events he describes. He is simply part of a network. The information in his chronicle was framed by the original eyewitness; it may have passed by word of mouth through one or more intermediaries, and it finally reached one or more chroniclers, who wrote it down. So a primary source is not the *start* of an information trail but the end of one, the point at which the word-of-mouth testimony becomes enshrined in its final literary form. Moreover, although we cannot understand it in exactly the way that it was written, with all the nuances of the language and culture of a different time, we can recover the specific details as if we were reading them on the same day that they were written. The bridge of evidence might not take us all the way to the actual past but it gets us close – and sometimes we can reconstruct the information trail that connects the event in one place and the chronicler in another.⁸

Edward II's fake death is a prime example of this. We can see how Lord Berkeley's news of the supposed death at Berkeley Castle was taken to Lincoln and from there, how it passed throughout the realm to all the chroniclers who repeated it, over and over again, and kept on repeating it even after Lord Berkeley denied its veracity. We can thus understand how the news spread and why people believed the man was dead. (No one repeated his denial of the news, which was delivered in Parliament but which he was forced to retract.) Similar techniques concerning the distribution of news can be used to examine the death of Edward II's grandson, Thomas, duke of Gloucester, in 1397. We can see that he was arrested on the authority of Richard II, that the king ordered the duke (his own uncle) to be taken under guard to Calais, that Richard authorised a man to go to Calais to take the duke's confession, that Richard issued an inquisition into the possessions of the *late* duke of Gloucester on 7 September 1397 and that the duke's confession was made two days later, on 9 September. Thus although the extant original evidence does not go so far as to show us that Richard II ordered the duke's murder, it contains sufficient information for us to establish beyond doubt that the king had prior knowledge of the duke's impending death, which was violent, as we know from an eyewitness who testified in Parliament two years later. Therefore we can be confident Richard II ordered his uncle to be murdered. The bridge of evidence sometimes allows us to see an event with sufficient clarity that

⁸ For a fuller explanation of this approach, see I. Mortimer, *Medieval Intrigue* (2009), introduction.

we may point the finger of blame with certainty at someone – in this case, Richard II. All these basic facts provide the framework for studying the past and are not subject to the criticisms of personal bias or selectivity.

So what? Using all these methods we can construct a bundle of facts. By themselves they do nothing but twinkle in the vast darkness of the past. Does this not just make us antiquarian stargazers rather than historians? No. Every single fact we can construct places a limit on our possible re-descriptions of the past. In describing the reign of Richard II we have a fixed point in that we know he ordered his uncle to be murdered in Calais. We can similarly determine many other facts – from his accession in 1377 to his trial in Parliament in 1399 – and thus we have more fixed points, which are not tainted with personal views, likelihoods or professional opinions. We end up with just a fraction of all the things that we might want to know about him, of course, but nevertheless the things we do know for certain act as constraints on the possible re-descriptions of the man and his reign. If we know from multiple sources that he was in Westminster on a certain day, we cannot say that he might have been in York on that same day. While his reign is indeed ‘infinitely re-describable’, the potential for infinite variation lies not in the framework of facts but in the interpretations and explanations we lay over that framework, as these inevitably differ from historian to historian. To use the analogy of a Beethoven symphony: that too is ‘infinitely re-describable’. Every performance is different yet each one is still recognisable as a Beethoven symphony on account of the performers observing the essential limits of the work. In the case of the symphony, these are the notes and the bars of the music; in the case of a historical subject, they are the facts and the passage of time. The potential for ‘infinite re-description’ does not imply a vast scope for error but our ability to have more than one view of a series of historical facts. It is thus not a weakness of history but a strength, like our ability to have more than one view about the pros and cons of a political suggestion in the modern world.

Part Four: The historical imagination

You are probably aware of the long debate about whether history is a science or an art, which started in the late nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. I often feel I want to go back to those distinguished gentlemen and tell them: ‘look, chaps, it a straightforward matter. The extraction of historical facts from a body of evidence is a *scientific* process, like the extraction of pigments in order to make paint; what we then do with the products is an art.’ I’d then illustrate the point by showing that, while the deduction that Richard II ordered his uncle to be

killed is entirely down to a logical, scientific process, what we say about the event is a matter of opinion. What were the motives? How did the killing affect Richard's relations with the nobility and the populace? Did the killing play on the king's conscience? All such things are matters of interpretation, and part of the art of history. To be reliable and effective, a historical work needs to incorporate both science and art.

The historical imagination sits between the two. It is not a fact-based interpretation but an informed attempt to picture the actual past that we cannot directly reach. If you go right back to the start of my talk, I mentioned being in Mr Turner's classroom thinking about visiting Tudor England. My mind was full of such speculation in those days. One day my parents took me to see Grosmont Castle in South Wales. This was the birthplace of Henry, the first duke of Lancaster – the greatest knight of the fourteenth century, you might recall (unless you happen to watch TV) – and my imagination was working overtime. I pictured his heavily pregnant mother in her gown coming down from the solar to the hall, and the fire burning on the hearth, the priest sitting beside her at the table on the dais, the painted walls and the servants bustling. I was so carried away that, by the time we arrived at the castle, I had forgotten it was a ruin. I stood in the empty stone shell of the hall, with grass beneath my feet, and looked at the explanatory signs. The people who had lived here had their dates after their names, as if their deaths had become part of their identity. It struck me then, that all these dead people were being pinned out like butterflies in a museum cabinet. But surely the way to see butterflies is alive and flying about? And surely the way to see medieval people is laughing, eating, smiling, praying, fighting, drunk, angry, crying and imploring?

Many years later these flights of fancy developed into my Time Travellers Guides – to Medieval England, Elizabethan England, Restoration Britain and Regency Britain. The idea is, on one level, simple: if you really could travel to the past, where would you stay, what would you wear, how would you need to talk to communicate with the natives, which diseases might kill you, which medical practitioners might kill you, which laws might kill you, and so forth. It is an extremely easy-to-read format and has the wonderful advantage of putting the reader at the centre of the story, and thus juxtaposing the modern world and the past in such a way that it has immediate impact on people. On another level, however, it is a much more subtle device. Normally a historian will research all the evidence at his or her disposal to find out what is known about a subject and then attempt to add to that body of knowledge by reinterpreting some data or adding to the facts and details that may be gleaned from the records or the archaeological evidence. However, in a *Time Traveller's Guide*, you have to prioritise the actual past, as if you could see it. That exercise gives you new research questions – for example, what

did such and such street look like, smell like and sound like in the fourteenth century; what did a bedchamber in a house on that street look like and smell like – and then you have to reach for all the evidence you can find to answer those questions. And sometimes you find the evidence is lacking. As a result, it teaches us what we *don't* know about the past. It illustrates the shortcomings in our evidence in a very powerful way.

You don't have to rely on me having anticipated your areas of research in my *Time Traveller's Guides* to use this method. Earlier this month, I was attending the Fifteenth Century Conference at the University of Exeter. In one session, two PhD students and one academic separately presented their findings on the extent to which foreigners in London, King's Lynn and Exeter were able to integrate with the local community. In each place we were talking about 6% or 7% of the population, most being Dutch or German. The historians presenting their papers each talked about whether the incomers were accepted into parish fraternities, trade guilds or given the freedom of the city. They spoke about the high prices they sometimes had to pay for such freedoms. All three papers were very good studies of the entry lists to the memberships of relevant organisations. Yet that was just it: they were studies of these documents, not the past. What was missing became immediately apparent if you applied a 'time traveller's test' to the subject. If you were to walk down to the quay in Exeter in 1470, how would you identify a foreigner? How would they identify themselves? First, by their clothes. Second, by their language and accents. Third, by the customs of their homeland. None of these were evidenced in the documents under discussion except their names. Yet we know from Dutch and Flemish paintings how distinctive Continental costume would have appeared in an English setting. In Exeter, there was a substantial settlement of Bretons; and many ships from Brittany came to the quay each year; so it would be wrong simply to assume that Bretons would have dressed in the English style, like everyone around them: it is equally likely they were proud of their Breton costume and keen to maintain that identity to bond with their brethren who regularly visited from the homeland. Some may have been half and half. We know from our own time that dress sends powerful signals about difference or the desire to conform; and we know from fifteenth-century records, when clothes were comparatively far more expensive, that society was even more attuned to the way people dressed. Therefore, although examining the records of freedoms of the city and membership of fraternities and guilds reveals many interesting facts, applying a 'time traveller's test' reveals limitations to the relevance of those facts.

An important extension of this principle lies in the histories that remain hidden. As most documents in pre-twentieth-century history were created by men for other men to read, it is inevitable that women's interests rarely feature. You don't need to run a time-travel exercise to

work out that medieval women's history is considerably more difficult to tease out of the existing sources. You can say the same of the history of any minorities living in Britain. Some thematic subjects, by their nature, are harder to trace than others. It is far easier to study heterosexual love than homosexual love before the 1960s. In past centuries, when even powerful men could be hanged for sodomy, such as the earl of Castlehaven in 1631 and the bishop of Waterford in 1640, the discussion of same-sex love normally only appears in the sources in a negative context. Similarly, few people were inclined to be open about their religious doubts when the penalty for heresy was being burnt at the stake. Writing about a subject whose protagonists constantly faced persecution requires us to recognise that the extant evidence leaves us a long way short of past reality. In order to write about the subject (not just the persecution) requires a very careful use of the historical imagination to establish relevant questions which might be answered by elements within the extant evidence.

Proponents of 'What if?' history perform similar exercises in historical imagination. By asking 'what if the Spanish Armada had been successful?' and 'what if it had not rained the night before the Battle of Agincourt?' we can use our historical imaginations to dispense with much of the later baggage that clouds our judgement. The very words 'Armada' and 'Agincourt' make us immediately think of great English victories. Yet to Sir Francis Drake or Henry V on the eve of their battles, victory was far from assured. Moreover, on hearing that a Spanish invasion fleet was at sea, the people of England would themselves have thought 'what if they land?' The men with Henry V definitely wondered what would happen if the French were able to engage them on their own terms: the rich would be ransomed, the ordinary soldiers killed. Such outcomes focus the mind. As things turned out, the Armada was unable to land on English soil, and it *did* rain the night before Agincourt, so the French heavy cavalry became bogged down in the mud. But if you want to close the gap between the actual past and what we can know of it, you have to use your historical imagination to identify the worries of those witnessing the unfolding of events, for such concerns are not normally preserved after the event.

Another example of how the historical imagination can help us close the gap between the past and history is illustrated by people working in the fields of re-enactment and experimental archaeology. Often their findings will be speculative but they can also be meaningful. For example, when writing *1415*, I found myself wondering why the English managed to remain dominant in the use of the longbow for so many years. After all, you'd have thought that the French, having lost out so comprehensively at Crécy in 1346, would have learnt by the time of Agincourt in 1415 that English archers could be very disruptive and that therefore they should have archers just as deadly, if only for their own defence. Part of the explanation why this did

not happen clearly lies in the military culture of the kingdom of France and the low status of archers within it. However, another part lay in logistics. In April 1342, Edward III ordered seven thousand longbows to be gathered and stored at the Tower along with 130,000 sheaves of arrows.⁹ The full meaning of that detail can only be appreciated if you try to envisage making all those arrows. There were normally twenty-four arrows in a single sheaf so that one order is for 3.12 million arrows. I asked my brother David, who is a blacksmith, how long it would take to make a single arrowhead of the sort used in the fourteenth century. He experimented with various forms – heavy points for piercing armour, flat-headed blades for wiping out infantry – and found that his average time after making more than twenty examples was thirty minutes per arrowhead, with his fastest time being twenty-eight minutes. He reckoned he could get that down to perhaps twenty-five. An experienced medieval blacksmith might get a little faster, with perhaps twenty minutes being possible. Therefore, making 3.12 million arrowheads would have taken in excess of a million hours work. That would have occupied five hundred blacksmiths for ten months – and that’s probably about a quarter of all the experienced blacksmiths in England – and they’d have to produce nothing but arrowheads in all that time. And that’s just the arrowheads: there was also the selection and shaping of the arrows themselves, the fletching with goose feathers, the making of the quiver, and the fitting of the arrowheads to each shaft. Every full sheaf probably took in the region of twenty man-hours. You could not just give the order for so many arrows to be made for an attack in six weeks’ time: you had to have them constantly being manufactured and repaired, so that royal officers and sheriffs could simply gather them up when required. So it is significant that English archery laws made sure that arrows were constantly in production. The French, on the other hand, could not suddenly make three million arrows to defend themselves at short notice. A practical experiment in shaping a plain piece of metal closed the gap between the evidence and the actual past and revealed a key reason for the English archery advantage in the Hundred Years War.

Conclusion

We have come a long way since that moment in Mr Turner’s classroom. We have come to terms with the disturbing shortcomings of history, and we have taken a look at the threats they pose to our society. We have seen that it is not our methodologies themselves that are the main problem so much as the spreading cynicism that history is unprovable and may be denied. In response, we have looked at the purposes of history and we have identified ways to underline the factuality of

⁹ Jim Bradbury, *The Medieval Archer* (1985), p. 93-4.

parts of the past. We have seen how we can employ archaeology and information science to support the certainty of many other historical details, and we have observed that these collectively limit how much re-description of the past is possible. Finally, we have seen the value of using the historical imagination in establishing what we don't know of the past and how we may apply the questions arising from that exercise to construct new facts that otherwise we might not have noticed. In this way, it may be seen that an awareness of the differences between the actual past and history is valuable.

You might sense in this some resolution of the issue. Yes, there are problems, but I do not subscribe to an over-arching programme of despair or doubt. Quite the opposite. The purposes of history are growing, not diminishing, and however much people think that every historical question can be answered by a google search, the unreliability and patchiness of the answers points to a future need for even greater expertise. So why do I say I am still *haunted* by my history master? It is because that moment in his classroom represents the point at which I first came face to face with the fact that there is a gap between history and the actual past *and there always will be*. All those threats we face about denying wrongdoings and disregarding misdemeanours and atrocities will always be with us. It came as a shock to me, like the supernova that astronomers called the New Star in 1572 must have come as a shock to them. Suddenly their belief that the stars were fixed in their places in a crystalline structure around the Earth was shattered, and, in the space where they had previously thought Heaven must be located, they realised there was nothing but seemingly endless space. How do you make sense of your own understanding when you unexpectedly find yourself standing outside it, looking at it objectively, as if you had just stepped into a different dimension? You have to come to terms with it, and adapt, and realign your understanding. Historians will forever be trying to bridge the gap between the present and the past. Although we will never succeed completely, we can go some considerable way. And it is important that we do so, for history is the very conscience of Mankind – the dividing line between civilisation and barbarism. There are far too many of us on Earth now to think we can live peacefully in the present, without the structures and moral lessons of history, without the accountability and laws that hold us in place, without seeing the damage we have caused to our environment. At which point I would like to remind you of my starting point: 'there is something different about history in that it is widely seen to emanate from education'. This responsibility falls on all of us. We can't just close our eyes to the changes in the world. Unlike philosophers and critical theorists, we have to take responsibility for understanding those changes. Our wellbeing – and that of every member of every future generation – is at stake.