

Doing History

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Over the past few decades we have been invited to rethink history, pursue it, practise it, defend it, refigure it, and generally consider what it is, what it's for, and whether we really need to bother with it. Now, just as we think it must all be done and dusted, if not done to death, we are offered more advice on 'doing' it. Jaded academics may wilt at the prospect of this attempted resuscitation of what to many may have declined into a stale debate between ultimately incompatible contestants, but what we are offered here is an introduction to still relevant issues for students who, we must remember, are replenished perennially, in all their refreshing historiographical naivety.

The authors are well aware that discussions concerning the nature and purpose of the subject are ongoing, and their aim is to introduce students to the key historiographical debates that still, they affirm, divide the profession. The preface makes clear their belief that the practice of history cannot be isolated from its theory, not least because the very concept of 'history' itself is based on philosophical presuppositions that determine who and what are to count as legitimate subjects, worthy of historians' attention. The first part of the book, then (consisting of two chapters), is concerned with the perennial question 'What is history?' This includes a discussion of whether 'history' is the same as 'the past', an introduction to two main schools of historiography, and a brief look at the function and purpose of the subject. Chapter two goes on to discuss 'Changing approaches to history', where students are confronted by a wide-ranging survey of two millennia of historical practice – including Chinese, Islamic, and Afro-Asian – focusing on 'some of the more important people and ideas'. The four chapters of part two then confront the question 'What do historians do?' There are sections on such staples as 'historical knowledge' and 'the [sic] historical method' and its relationship to science, primary and secondary sources, the role of imagination, and the postmodern

challenge. In part three the authors turn (in three chapters) to the question 'Whose history?', where the power of history (and of archives) is discussed, in relation to politics, ideology, and the formation of identities; and consideration is given to alternative perspectives, including postcolonial, feminist, and black histories, and to heritage and more 'popular' entertainment. A fourth part concludes with 'History today', and considers possible futures for the subject. The whole is written in a clear, accessible style; there is a judicious use of boxed 'case-studies'; and each chapter is helpfully divided into headed subsections, concluding with a short list of books recommended for further reading.

Covering such a vast expanse of open territory, the authors no doubt lay themselves open to sniping from many quarters, and I'll fire off a few shots here. One is to draw their attention to the mistaken ascription to Thucydides of a history of the Trojan (rather than Peloponnesian) War (p. 22). Another is to register my complaint that their feminism has resulted, quite unnecessarily surely, in ungrammatical constructions (where subjects do not agree with verbs) – something that could be easily avoided through the use of the plural. A further suggestion is that cited authors might be introduced with at least the courtesy of a full name, and preferably with an adjective or two of description (nationality, century?). More positively, I note but do not criticise the (inevitably) heavy reliance on 'secondary' sources; and I can confirm that, so far as I can judge, that reliance has been meticulously acknowledged with references cited.

From the heavier artillery, though, and as a more substantial point, I would raise the question of whether Mark Donnelly and Claire Norton themselves are sure (or are agreed) about where they stand in relation to the two contrasting historiographical positions introduced at the outset. It seems to me that, in their approach to these, there is a continuing tension between the two, and I shall take that as my focus for a more detailed discussion of their work.

The book, then, introduces readers to what might be called 'traditional' and 'postmodern' approaches to history. The former implies subscription to the conventional belief that an historical work consists in a representation, made to the best of its author's ability, of the past as it actually, or probably, was: any such work would, as Donnelly and Norton put it, stand 'in relation to a picture of how the past probably looked' (p. 4). This position derives from a 'realist' attitude towards the external world, including the past, and it implies that that reality can be somehow retrieved and re-presented. The second approach, by contrast, is maintained by those who see their work as being primarily, or even entirely, 'textual' – as belonging to a literary genre, which puts more emphasis on individual and imaginative input, and (in the authors' own words here) as 'standing in relation to nothing more than the way that they have used their research materials' (p. 4). Though well amplified later, where postmodernism is described as being responsible for 'destabilising the idea that the past can be accurately reconstructed' (p. 176), and as having 'foregrounded the fact [sic] that history is never neutral' (p. 186), those introductory descriptions are hardly adequate; and the dichotomy between them is admitted to be 'overly stark' (which it is). Nevertheless, the fundamental distinction drawn there, despite the absence of any authorial commitment to either side, does provide students with some sort of template for what follows.

And such help might well be needed, for students are introduced to so much more in the introductory chapters that, having possibly arrived at university innocently thinking that they know what it means to 'do history', they may well, by the end, feel thoroughly disorientated. Which may, indeed, be no bad thing, so long as they retain the motivation (or are subjected to external pressure) to go on to subsequent chapters, where these matters are handled in greater depth...

In chapter three, then, the authors turn to look in more detail at 'what historians do', noting how the traditional belief that the past has an inherent and ascertainable 'shape', for the study and retrieval of which historians have reliable tools and procedures, gives the subject its public authority and influence. 'The historical method', they explain, as modelled on the natural sciences, benefits from rules that are 'agreed' (p. 58). One may already question the singularity of 'the historical method'; and it seems to be questioned immediately, within the book itself, when its rules are conceded to be only 'contingent', flexible, and 'subject to change' (p. 59). Going on then, more radically, to adopt the second of their historiographical positions, the authors conclude that history should be treated, not like a science after all, but more like

literature. As such, it importantly requires analysis of its *rhetorical* construction; and with that in mind, it behoves historians to repudiate their long-favoured impersonal air of detachment, with its implication that what is revealed derives, not so much from individual writers, as from ‘mediums’ narrating from nowhere; instead there should be authorial transparency, with usage of the first person.

The tension that surfaces here between the pressures of conventional history and its more recent challengers persists in the treatment of the old distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources – a distinction that has of course long been considered by some as fundamental, but that is recognised here as ‘potentially problematic and artificial’ (p. 68). The ‘old’ model here begins to crumble, especially as we read that the historian’s choice of sources is ultimately a matter of ethics, and that ‘imagination’ can provide important inputs in a situation where the concept of ‘objectivity’ is (though still widely used) no longer useful, and where historical ‘knowledge’ is seen to be constructed by historians from their own particular perspectives with their own particular agendas.

That takes us to a fuller treatment of the central debate between traditionalists and their ‘postmodernist’ challengers. The former, it is explained, subscribe to an empiricist epistemology and a correspondence theory of truth – a belief in ‘realism’, or that an external world (and, for history, a past) exists independently of us, and that we can succeed in making verifiable knowledge claims about it. Contrariwise, postmodernists would substitute a plurality of pasts, of which historians will have different perceptions, taken from a variety of viewpoints, with multiple agendas. In the latter case, histories are revealed as ‘fictive’, in the sense of being personal constructions (rather than reconstructions); and the whole distinction between history and fiction thus becomes blurred.

This chapter concludes with what, for some, must still be a highly contentious definition of history, as ‘an often fascinating genre of literary writing which is ideologically motivated’ (p. 113). And that seems to put the authors squarely in the ‘postmodernist’ camp. But evidently they still want it both ways, for they go on, more conventionally, to assert that the discipline of history remains defined by certain protocols, and that while *some* of these can be changed, not *all* of them can.

Such fence-straddling becomes yet more uncomfortable with the authors’ consideration of ‘Whose history?’ in part three; and here they finally take their gloves off. Declining to accept the possibility of any ‘impartial’ history ‘written for its own sake’, they unashamedly proclaim that, ‘History is and always has been used for political and ideological purposes’ (p. 134); and that ‘all history writing relates to questions of power’ (p. 135). With that acknowledgement of the *inevitability* of political/ideological input, the question for historians and for their readers is ‘not, then, whether a particular narrative is ideologically motivated, but rather whether it consciously acknowledges the viewpoint from which it is written and the functions it hopes to have’ (p. 117). (For the sake of transparency here and now in this review, I do personally agree with that conclusion, however heretical it may still seem to some.)

One of history’s political functions is to manufacture, legitimise, and control communal and national identities. That role is indicated here in a range of examples, from India to Italy and South Africa, and is clarified by reference to academic curricula from countries such as Greece and the USA. In that latter case, history has been described as ‘designed to make Americans feel good about themselves and their government’, and more generally ‘to reinforce the status quo’ (p. 127). Further, the power of nationalistic narratives is shown to be complemented by that of archives – so often taken as neutral repositories – which help to determine what can (or cannot) be written, through selective processes of acquiring, collating, maintaining, classifying, categorising, naming, and so on. And in this context, the authors draw attention to the lack of any national archive in the case of Palestinians – leaving no other option for historians than to rely on problematic oral reports and heavily censored Israeli documents.

These matters of power and ideology lead conveniently to the subject of chapter eight, ‘Histories from another perspective’, where we have discussion of histories that are explicitly political/ideologically positioned – that is, making no pretence of being properly ‘neutral, objective, and disinterested’ (p. 142). These seek to give voice to the previously silenced, excluded, and marginalised – and with an avowedly

practical political purpose for the future. For example, postcolonial historians have sought to counterbalance traditional histories that served to legitimise colonialism and oppression of subject peoples; and feminist, gender, and black histories have likewise engaged with contemporary societal issues. All such sectional interests are 'explicitly political and ideologically motivated' (p. 151), and it is, we are reminded again, disingenuous to think that any histories are not; all practitioners choose their subjects and perspective on the basis of a (consciously or unconsciously adopted) ethical and political position.

With that reminder ringing in our ears, we are ready to confront 'popular history', and the realisation that most people have access to 'history', not through academic books, but via films and television, and maybe historical fiction and other hybrids. Such media are often relegated to mere 'amateur' status by 'proper' historians. But 'academic' and 'popular' histories are not necessarily or usefully to be seen as mutually exclusive opposites; and here the authors helpfully illustrate their topic with a case-study of the film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), and indicate useful ways for students (and others) *qua* historians to approach such matters: that is, rather than quibbling about the details of a film's relationship with 'proper' history, to raise questions about the maker's intentions, about meaning-generation, and about the possibility and adoption of varied interpretations and readings.

This penultimate chapter concludes by looking at a number of other contentious issues of great importance and contemporary interest. 'Memory studies' is rightly introduced as a burgeoning field, and (in my view) sound advice is given to treat history and memory as neither identical nor mutually incompatible, but rather as interactive and interdependent. Another growth area – heritage – is often snubbed by historians, but again provides another popular route to 'the past'; and once more good advice is offered concerning recognition of the important political implications of choosing what is to be preserved, what is to be funded – what, in short, is to count as 'heritage'. And that prepares readers for a brief but important discussion of recent critiques by theorists of our 'historicised culture' – a culture in which history is commonly identified as a seemingly 'natural' entity, while it should really be seen as an oppressive force that justifies (naturalises) current injustices and inequalities as being apparent inevitabilities, and that promotes only ever more of the same.

By this time, and with such awareness of (and evidence for) contemporary trends, readers will probably be prepared for a comparatively radical conclusion concerning 'The future of history'. And that (fortunately in my view) is what (for the most part) they get.

But there does remain some ambivalence. For on the one hand, we have history described as 'a contingent, historicised product of its times – a way of narrating the "before now" which was useful for what people wanted to do with the past in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but which has since lost some of its applicability' (p. 173); while on the other hand, we are informed of the 'considerable congruence and comparability between different cultures' understanding and practice of the genre of history' (p. 192) – the implication surely being that there is, after all, something 'essential' about it. Similarly, we are urged to make space for other and new sorts of history, as influenced by postmodernism, recognising the 'arbitrary and contingent nature' of its form; no one type is '*the* proper type' (p. 174). So we should refuse 'to remain constrained by the historically determined and contingent genre protocols of nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic history', in favour of 'more plural and heterogeneous definitions of what constitutes "history"'. Which is all very radical, but steady on: we are *not* advocating 'a collective abandonment of these genre protocols entirely' (p. 192)!

So hesitancy – or is it fair to term it commitment-phobia? – runs through the book, as a persistent relic perhaps of the authors' own historical training. It is consistent with their practical – and no doubt pragmatic – advice to students: namely, that they should remember to identify 'which approach' other historians take, while taking care themselves to avoid 'taking sides' (p. 6); that they should remember that they themselves need to follow the rules and 'play the game' as currently practised. So while, on the one hand, histories should be 'open' and 'heterogeneous', students should, on the other hand, learn 'the accepted ways of "doing history"' – the current 'rules' that collectively constitute 'the historical method' – so that they can follow those rules, and *conform*, learning 'how to think, talk and write like historians do now' (p. 7). That may, we

are assured, all change; but in the light of such conservative advocacy, it is difficult to see quite how.

To conclude, though, despite the apparent residue of ambivalence (or is it difference of opinion?) that permeates their thinking, the authors have succeeded in producing a worthwhile introduction to 'doing history' for the 21st century; and it is to be hoped that their book will replace some of those long outdated texts on historiography that reappear so depressingly in bookshops at the beginning of each academic year, presumably at the behest of tutors who are pleased to ignore more recent thinking on their subject. The book under review may appear to aim to be all things to all people – refusing to commit one way or the other to the initial distinction made between the two fundamentally different historiographical approaches – but as it proceeds, the authors succeed in direct proportion to their failure to achieve that aim. The whole pace and urgency of the book moves up a gear, as they confess to their approval of much of the 'postmodernist' agenda. And the message they leave is very positive: that 'history' itself can be changed, enlarged, and redefined (at least in part, as they would stress); and that a newly refigured history can properly serve vital socio-political purposes. Theory and practice come together here at last, and students reading the book will be exposed to exciting new possibilities in 'doing history'.

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