

The Birth of the Past

Review Number:

1205

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 February, 2012

Author:

Zachary Schiffman

ISBN:

9781421402789

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£34.00

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

John Hopkins University Press

Place of Publication:

Baltimore, MD

Reviewer:

Malin Dahlstrom

As Geoffrey Elton put it, ‘The future is dark; the present is burdensome; only the past, dead and finished, bears contemplation’.⁽¹⁾ We take the concept of ‘the past’ for granted, yet Schiffman argues that the notion of the past as a concept ‘began only fairly recently, during the Renaissance, and did not culminate until the eighteenth century, after which it acquired its commonsensical status’ (p. 1). Although this book is the product of over 30 years of reading, Schiffman says in the rather flowery ‘Gestation’ (a.k.a. introduction), that it is a work of synthesis rather than scholarship. Schiffman argues that the past does not merely come before the present, but is distinct from it. Logically, the second point does not automatically follow on from the first, a point that Schiffman is keen to stress. The ‘distinction between the past and the present that constitutes “the founding principle of history” rests on something other than a mere priority in time; it reflects an abiding awareness that different historical entities exist in different historical contexts’ (p. 3). We usually pick up on this disjuncture via the concept of anachronism – to give a famous example, J. H. Hexter’s unhappiness over Bishop Stubbs adding Victorian liberalism to the Anglo-Saxons’ cargo.⁽²⁾ And as a concept, anachronism has a history. Schiffman’s thesis is that the idea of anachronism originates in the Renaissance. Such an interpretation breaks little ground in itself, but has consequences for ancient and medieval as well as modern thought.

On the face of it, to state that the ancients had no conception of the past seems slightly absurd: after all, they invented history as a literary genre. Ranke thought Thucydides the greatest historian ever, a proposition that is still arguable today. Yet Schiffman argues that the problem is that Thucydides has an awareness of the differences between ‘past and present without elevating that awareness to a principle of historical knowledge’ (p. 22). Thucydides failed to distinguish between different layers of historical explanation – what we get from his history is an unending surface narrative of events. Schiffman entitles this chapter

'Flatland' with a nod to Edwin Abbott; but one is also reminded of E. H. Carr's reference to Borges' short story *Funes the Memorious*. Funes remembers everything; but as a consequence, is unable to generalise or make abstractions. We 'expect a historian to view events ... from a perspective that relates parts to whole ...' (p. 18). To quote Elton again, Thucydides' conception of history might be described as simply 'one damn thing after another'.⁽³⁾ The work of Herodotus too, makes us recall Voltaire's comment that 'If you have nothing to tell us, but on the banks of the Oxus and Jaxartes, one barbarian has been succeeded by another barbarian, what is that to us?' In the *Histories*, Herodotus moves 'almost indiscriminately from story to story to story. Amid this flow, there are no events in the modern sense – nothing stands out as 'salient', as definitely shaping current developments' (p. 49). Any historian worth their salt can recite Aristotle's famous distinction between poetry and history, but Schiffman notes that we 'tend to approach this oft-cited passage from the wrong side of the divide between history and poetry, from a perspective that claims to have supplanted myth with fact' (p. 30). Aristotle's virtual silence on the subject of history reveals him as a true son of Homer; from 'the Greek point of view, time-bound historical facts are mired in contingency and offer no fit subject for historical knowledge' (p. 30).

Another problem with Thucydides is that there is no singular 'past' in his work; rather, there are multiple pasts, each one incommensurable from the next, with no way of privileging any individual one. The 'absence of an idea of "the" past militates against a systematic distinction between past and present' (p. 23). Schiffman argues that he emphasises the distinction for good reason. It could be argued, for example, that moderns might also subscribe to the idea of multiple pasts; each historian brings their own perspective to the past, and these collectively do not add up to 'the' past, but rather, a collection of pasts. And of course, the trend of the postmodernist philosophy of history has been to argue that the idea of 'the' past should be done away with in favour of reference to 'texts'. However, the postmodern conception of history is itself a reaction to the historicism of the 19th century – where the conception of the past as objective reality was born, so to speak. We take the idea of an objective, referring past for granted these days, so Schiffman argues that it is important to highlight the fact that this 'stratum of our consciousness settled from the convergence of several intellectual currents in the eighteenth century – that it is itself a historical deposit' (p. 24).

What distinguishes ancient from modern historiography in Schiffman's view is the lack of a conception of anachronism in the former. Anachronism exists at a local level – for instance, Homer has Achilles wield a bronze sword. But this does not extend beyond the local level; 'it appears from one time frame without carrying over into the next, if only because the time frames are incommensurable; they address different problems and issues. For lack of a systematic sense of anachronism, the ancients could not sustain a distinction between past and present and, consequently, had no idea of the past' (p. 71). So how did we get from a multiplicity of pasts to a single past? In short, Schiffman argues that we didn't. An 'intellectual leap from these myriad pasts to a unitary past would have been impossible' (p. 79). It is tempting to describe the Greek multiple pasts as being simply different takes on the same object; i.e. 'the past'. But of course, for the ancients, the idea of 'the past' did not exist, so how could they conceive of the need to make an intellectual leap in the first place? Before 'the past' as a category of thought could emerge, a conceptual shift needed to take place – classical sensibilities needed to be rejected in favour of a new way of thinking.

To trace the aforementioned conceptual shift, we must forsake history in favour of theology. St Augustine can in no way be described as a precursor of the modern idea of the past, and yet his thought marked the clearing away of classical culture which was required in order for some form of progress to be made. Augustine formulated a concept of 'human existence that enabled him to perceive it as an integrated whole, as transpiring in a space specifically designed for human action' (p. 79). St Augustine blocks the idea of transcending time through prayer, and thus privileges the present in an entirely new way. His 'insistent orientation in the present establishes a fixed point of view – a sustained perspective – with which to interpret the course of his own life and that of all humanity, a viewpoint which overrides the multiple pasts of linear and episodic time' (p. 86). It seems that Augustine is merely a step away from distinguishing between the past and the present in some kind of sustained fashion; ironically however, precisely the opposite occurs – 'past, present, and future all coalesce for him in the *now*; qualitative distinctions between them vanish,

precluding any possibility of the past as we know it' (p. 86). Augustine relegates Christians to the on-going act of confessing their yearning for God in this world – an act which, of course, will always be unattainable. The act 'takes place in, and focuses attention on, an ineffable moment, conjoining past, present and future' (p. 101). In the *Confessions* and *The City of God*, Augustine coins the idea of the *Sæculum* – the space in which the sacred and secular intertwine, a space where the past, present and future coexist in the *now*.

Two other Christian chroniclers need to be analysed when looking at mediaeval ideas of the past; Gregory of Tours and the Venerable Bede. Schiffman argues that Tours' *The History of the Franks* is in fact nothing of the sort. Tours refers to the text as 'decem libros Historiarum', which literally translated means *Ten Books of History*. We should not be seduced by the use of the word 'history' into thinking that Tours, although he conceived the field of human action as an integrated whole, 'regarded the unity as temporal, deriving from chains of cause and effect that link the past to present' (p. 119). The unity is spatial rather than temporal. Gregory's History is 'nothing less than the realisation of what Augustine meant by the *sæculum*, the space where sacred and secular intertwine, where past, present and future coexist in the now. To entitle this work "a history of the Franks" is to distort it utterly' (p. 119). Gregory, like Herodotus, thinks of a long span of time as an indeterminate continuum with no chronological reference points.

Bede is usually compared to Tours; and the former usually profits more from the exercise than the latter, having been universally judged to have produced a much more readable history.⁽⁴⁾ However, as Schiffman is at pains to stress, 'modern notions of historical coherence have no place in Gregory's world, a fact that makes Bede's subsequent approximation of these standards appear all the more unnatural and anomalous' (p. 127). Which begs the question as to what enabled Bede to construct such a coherent narrative in light of the fact he did not possess the conceptual tool of 'the past'? Bede's outlook, like Tours', was eschatological – but Bede did not think that one had to wait until Judgement Day to know God's meaning and movement in events; 'the finality of God's judgement is readily apparent to Bede from the outcome of events' (p. 128). Bede creates figural chains from events in scripture to post-biblical ones, which enables him to endow his account with a narrative, and thus a greater coherence. In order to do this he has to play fast and loose with chronology, obscuring the points where the narrative flow parts company with sequences of events as they occurred. The anchor of the figural chains lies in the future – the British abandonment of Christianity after the departure of the Romans prefigures the slaughter of the British at the Battle of Chester, which in turn prefigures God's final judgement on the British.

In his writing Bede completed the transformation of the *sæculum* from a spatial to a temporal entity – from the aimless unfolding of human events to a purposeful narrative of God's action in the world. Yet the temporality that holds his *sæculum* together is not one of cause and effect, for, as we have seen, Bede sometimes allows the effect to precede the cause. Modern commentators tend to overlook these lapses as mere anomalies in an otherwise coherent chronological narrative. But we 'should really regard them as windows onto an underlying, eschatological reality. ... This eschatological perspective determines the true relationship between events in Bede's narrative, one that is temporal without being chronological' (p. 133). The difference between Bede, Augustine and Tours from the moderns is that while they could refer to the past in colloquial terms, they were unable to conceive of the past as something systematically different from the present.

Schiffman's look at the concept of the past in the Renaissance begins with a look at Raphael's *School of Athens*; a painting which 'expresses a vision of the past that manages to be both historical and atemporal, that celebrates the greatness of antiquity while obliterating the distance between it and modernity' (p. 140). But we have not quite reached the modern conception of the past yet; instead of the past being something far removed from the present, the past becomes what Schiffman calls 'the living past'. In the Renaissance, the idea of anachronism defined the 'pastness' of the past not to distance it from the present, but to *propel* it into the present, so that the two 'could actively cross-fertilize' (p. 140). Thucydides' historical accounts retained a sense of narrative at the expense of eliminating historical distinctness; Renaissance readers of ancient history experienced these works in terms of temporality and distinctness but did not see any narrative

connection between them. There were Roman historians, but there was no such thing as 'Roman history'; there was no 'classical poetry', just Virgil and Horace. This derives in part from the humanist educational curriculum, which proceeded from the principle of *imitatio*; that classical models were to be imitated, for the ancients had presented us with the most outstanding example of thought and action. Renaissance scholars thus read the classics in a somewhat piecemeal style, with the result that each exemplar that they read tended to be seen as historically distinct.⁽⁵⁾ The problem, of course, is that the idea of exemplarity is a paradox, in that 'something is exemplary when it stands out as a model or striking instance of a universal truth ... it is at the same time unique and general' (p. 143). Texts began to be seen as 'Greek' or 'Roman', and thus the uniqueness dissolves into a 'solvent of historical and cultural relativism' (p. 143). But are we are overrunning the tale slightly here.

As Schiffman stated in his introduction, his book is based on the premise that a sustained awareness of anachronism emerged only in the Renaissance. This in itself is nothing new; both Burckhardt and Erwin Panofsky commented upon the stirring of the idea of anachronism in the Renaissance. The concept of anachronism has two aspects; the positioning of a historical entity outside of its historical context, but also the awareness that this positioning is in fact out of pace. The idea of anachronism originates in the Renaissance; but not the modern notion of the past as 'back there' in time. The idea of the past constituted in the Renaissance had none of the 'pastness' associated with its modern conception; 'it was not relegated to a space remote from the present, for such a space did not yet exist ... its defining quality might be defined as an awareness of things 'not present', with all the multivalence of this expression' (p. 147). A nice visual metaphor of this would be that of Machiavelli taking off his muddy farmer's boots and donning his curial robes before feeling fit to discourse with the ancients, which of course, he would not have done if he had conceived of himself going back in time to engage in a dialogue of the dead. He conversed with the ancients; but he must dress appropriately, lest they mistake him for a peasant.

The author who conceptualised the idea of a 'living past' more than any other was Petrarch; yet Schiffman carefully refers to his breakthrough as a Copernican leap; for like Copernicus, he did not make the breakthrough by himself, retaining much of the old worldview while preparing the foundation for its overthrow.⁽⁶⁾ Petrarch's *Secretum* 'enacts the living past as a dialogue, but the ambiguous nature of its interlocutors dramatizes the fact that this dialogue is not between the past and the present as we conceive them' (p. 170). That said, we should take care not to canonize Petrarch – Erasmus and Montaigne, to name but two, were equally skilled in the art of creating a living past through imitation. But it was Petrarch's informal suggestions about note-taking – the result of distilling truths from texts – that saw humanist commonplace notebooks become the chief instrument for the exercise of *imitatio*. Thus, exemplars came to be deployed as modes of proof in rhetorical set-pieces. Aristotle distinguished in the Rhetoric between 'common' and 'special' places – 'common ones contained ways of framing arguments applicable to all forms of knowledge, whereas the special ones applied only to specific forms of knowledge' (p. 175). In effect, 'the humanist habit of note taking served to confirm the truth of the commonplace – again, and again, and again' (p. 179).

Looking with hindsight, the persistence of the idea of the commonplace seems – dare we say it? – an anachronism. Were it not for its presence, the early modern world would seem almost, well, modern. Yet such a view is the result of our knowing that a historical revolution was just around the corner that would bring into existence the modern discipline of history. The commonplace 'would retain its potency as long as the past remained a living thing, as long as it continued to speak directly to the present' (p. 182). The problem with the synchronous space of the living past was that it could not stand up to too much historical scrutiny – and Jean Bodin's attempts to systematize the relationship between exemplarity and historicity ended up flattening it. As 'long as the symbolic nature of the past remained intact, one did not need to concern oneself with its unity, for the nature of the utopian space was such that past and present coexisted as a unity' (pp. 194–5). But once Bodin tried to de-clutter the past with practical housekeeping, the symbolic space collapsed, which in turn made it necessary to find the 'unity' of history. Bodin's method arbitrated between competing and contrasting histories, which implicitly distinguished between events and the accounts of events. The 'demand for accuracy in historical accounts tends to corrode the exemplar theory, in

which the lessons derived from the past had traditionally overshadowed the actual events recounted' (p. 197). Ironically enough, the living past had to die before a dead past could be reborn. The idea of objectivity however, did not arise as a pre-ordained truth ever firmly grasped, but rather, it is 'red in tooth and claw' – it evolved as 'one species of thought struggling with another' (p. 221). The idea of contextualization had its contingent origins like everything else – specifically as an ideological weapon in the Renaissance against the hegemonic pretences of pope and emperor; to 'the extent that both the pope and emperor alleged a power universal in time as well as space, the idea of anachronism became one of the chief weapons in the humanist arsenal' (p. 200). Constantin Fasolt has called this the 'historical revolt' in his pioneering book *The Limits of History*, in which he looks at the writings of Hermann Conring (1606–81). Conring trumps Bartolus of Saxoferrato in an argument over whether the Roman Empire continued to exist or not by adopting what we would term a historical approach to talk past Bartolus.

And so to the Enlightenment, where we find ourselves at what Schiffman neatly describes as an intellectual crossroads. How did Europeans obtain and sustain a sense of perspective and distance on themselves and others? To speak of the Enlightenment is slightly problematic, as there were many Enlightenments – but its best-known starting point ran through France around the mid 18th century. Here Schiffman offers a corrective to the customary view that portrays French Enlightenment thought as so rationalistic as to ignore the importance of historical and cultural context, and also the view that historicism emerged from modern antiquarianism, which in turn emerged from Renaissance philology. He posits Montesquieu as standing 'at the point where humanism and Cartesianism emerge, providing a foundation for historicism that has hitherto been obscured by our tendency to separate quantitative from qualitative thinking' (p. 210).

Such is the gist of Schiffman's book. Naturally one has had to do some violence to boil down Schiffman's thesis to around 4,000 words, and I pity the reviewer faced with the challenge of writing about this work with a mere thousand or so words to play with. It is a complex, erudite work – one that must be read with a pen and paper close by, as opposed to one that can while away a couple of hours on the train. Schiffman's statement that his work is one of synthesis rather than scholarship belies the phenomenal amount of reading and work that has preceded the *Birth of the Past*. The fact that Anthony Grafton has contributed a foreword to this book is also another reason to sit up and take notice. In said foreword Grafton compares Schiffman's work to the likes of Berlin, Collingwood and H. Stuart Hughes. The comparison with Collingwood is a bit of a stretch – can anyone really rival that old master? – but there is more than a touch of Isaiah Berlin about Schiffman's prose.[\(7\)](#)

From my point of view, although Schiffman does not mention him, there is much in *The Birth of the Past* that ties in with the thought of Frank Ankersmit. With the introduction of the Cartesian ego in the West, reading a text 'could no longer be seen as ... immersion or subsumption in the text that reading could still be for sixteenth century humanists. Reading was essentially done by a transcendental self, no longer able to lose itself in or merge with the text as the premodern(ist) reader was required to do; reading was now done by a self that would always remain separate from and outside the text'.[\(8\)](#) It would be nice to see Schiffman, in future work, relate his view of the changing conception of the past to current historical theory. In the epilogue, he states that he has come to question the idea of the objective existence of 'the past', but offers no comment on what implication this has – if any – for historiography as a whole. But this is a small gripe. Anyone with an interest in the history of ideas, or the history of historiography for that matter, will find that this book repays close attention.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Elton, *The Practice of History*, (London, 1967), p. 1.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. H. Hexter, *Reappraisals in History* (London, 1961), p. 2.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Elton, p. 36.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See for example, John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (London, 2009), pp. 198–9.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. The idea of history as exemplar of course was not new – one only has to look at the work of Polybius, 'who punctuated his interminable account of occurrences with period digressions on the utility of

history' (p. 178). Of course, Polybius and his successors in antiquity never pondered the question of whether the lessons of one age could be boiler-plated onto another, because they had no sense of anachronism.[Back to \(5\)](#)

6. It was Galileo and Kepler who ultimately put paid to the Ptolemaic conception of astronomy.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Grafton describes Schiffman's book as an essay – some essay![Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Palo Alto, CA, 2005), p. 88.[Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy with this review and does not wish to respond.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1205>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7862>