

Presenting History: Past and Present

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Author:

Peter J. Beck

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Matt Phillpott

The recent upsurge in the popularity of documentaries, historical novels, films and television adaptations of past events and persons has emphasised the fact that there is a public thirst for history that remains largely untapped by the academic profession. Complaints are made outside of academia that historians make their subjects dry and dull, or fill the pages with jargon that only another similarly trained historian would understand. The public wants history, but they want it in a different form than academic historians are generally willing, or are able, to provide. The question that Professor Peter J. Beck asks us to consider is how such presentations influence our understanding of and interest in the past and whether academic history (both in the teaching of and research in) fails to ignite interest in its subject matter due to practices and standardisations of presentation in the field. Is it possible that as academic historians we are doing it wrong? Beck examines the subject through a series of case studies, bringing to the forefront historians who have attempted to reach a wider audience, historical novelists, television and film producers, as well as writers of history for children.

I personally came to look at this book after running the 'virtual' element of the Institute of Historical Research's *Novel Approaches* conference.⁽¹⁾ This started me thinking about the role historical novels might play in the public understanding of history but also the challenges that fictional rather than purely factual accounts brought to the academic presentation of the past. This was not the first time that I had encountered academic discourse concerning partially fictional representations of historical events. During my undergraduate degree I took a module in counterfactual history directly influenced by the work of Niall Ferguson, Robert Cowley and others, who made the 'what if?' question popular in the 1990s. Peter Beck deals with both historical fiction and counterfactual histories in the pages of this book, but does it deliver on its promise to make historians consider more carefully the presentation of their work? The short answer I

would say is yes, albeit with a few reservations, related mainly to its case study approach.

The first case study focuses on A. J. P. Taylor, the historian best-known for kick-starting academic presentations of history on radio and television over 40 years ago. Often frowned upon by his fellow Oxford dons, who called his writing in newspapers and magazines ‘highly distasteful’ (p. 56), Taylor nonetheless pursued a career that brought academic lecturing to a public audience. His academic articles and monographs were also written with a strong storyline, were compulsively readable, but could also come across as controversial. Taylor demonstrated pronounced pro-Soviet sympathies and did not hide his dislike of the USA. He was also an active and non-partial campaigner for nuclear disarmament. These opinions had a role to play in the types of arguments Taylor came up with, especially over the provocative topic of Hitler and appeasement. Beck provides a much more optimistic survey of Taylor’s career than that made by David Cannadine and Geoffrey Wheatcroft (2), whom he describes as ‘unduly pessimistic’ in their opinion of Taylor (p. 64). Taylor might today be viewed as a controversial figure in the history profession but his role in leading public history in various 20th-century media paved the way for the likes of Simon Schama.

The second case study contrasts A. J. P. Taylor’s staunch but considered rejection of Marxism, as failing to provide the all-encompassing key to understanding history, with Eric Hobsbawm who has become one of its leading exponents. Beck looks at how Hobsbawm has become the focus for discussion over the Marxist presentation of history and how in the public sphere historians and politicians have, as late as 2008, attempted to counter his claims. As Beck states:

‘Hobsbawm, the historian, has always proved a controversial figure, attracting both high praise for influencing the way we think about history and strong hostility for espousing a Marxist approach glossing over the Soviet bloc’s unsavoury past. Even so, over time his standing as one of Britain’s leading living historians has been recognised by an extremely wide range of historians, including many who disagree profoundly with his politics’ (p. 88).

Other than producing a straightforward account of Hobsbawm as a Marxist historian this chapter draws out two interesting elements of his career. The first is the difficulty of writing about events that one has lived through (especially when viewing those events through a politically-biased lens). For some time, Hobsbawm made a point of not writing about anything beyond 1914 but this was not to last. How do you situate yourself in recent events whilst also attempting a ‘neutral’ account of those events (pp. 80–2)? The second point looks at how Hobsbawm found himself reassessing the years up to 1991 when the Soviet bloc failed. Hobsbawm believed that history should not be written from a present day perspective yet, nonetheless, could not but reinterpret the Soviet era in light of recent events. There are no direct answers here, but Beck does note that these issues are important and worth consideration.

Chapter six returns the story to television historians; in this case how Simon Schama reinvented television history from ‘dull’ lecture and talking head-style documentaries, to a richer more entertaining performance. Much of the chapter is focused on Schama’s own dilemma in presenting a show on the entire history of Britain. The ‘A’ in the title of *A History of Britain* is reflective of his concern not to claim a definitive history, but nonetheless that is often how the show was received. The chapter looks more generally at the requirements of television and its limitations as a platform for relaying historical knowledge. Claims of ‘dumbing down’ can be debated amongst academics but the necessity of selection and lack of sufficient time to cover all topics and historical events (the Wars of the Roses, for instance, fell between the cracks) is an undeniable difficulty and one that various television historians have attempted to solve in varying ways. Beck presents a discussion on how television history is increasingly becoming the main conduit for the consumption of history by the general public and how there is still some resistance in academia to what they see as the limitations of television presentation for academically vigorous research.

The development of counterfactual history or ‘what if’s ...’ moves the focus of Beck’s book on to the question of factual versus fictional representation of the past, which is most commonly associated with the

discussions over historical fiction. Beck breaks up his discussion into three main points: 1) the philosophical reservations about counterfactual histories; 2) their chequered track record; 3) the case for virtual history. The central problem in a counterfactual approach lies within the profession's focus on rigorous standards of research based upon 'what actually happened' rather than what might have happened. In general counterfactuals are viewed as making imaginative use of evidence but failing to meet those standards. Not all historians, however, agree with this assessment as demonstrated by the historian that Beck chooses to focus upon for this chapter, Niall Ferguson. In 1997 Ferguson championed 'virtual history' as editor of a collection of essays entitled *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*. Yet, even with Ferguson, claims have been made by historians that counterfactuals generally paint a too positive alternative picture: for instance Ferguson argued that if Britain had not joined the war in 1914 then Germany might have won and created a European state not all that dissimilar to the European Union (without so much bloodshed). However, such conclusions ignore many other elements, including the question: would Britain have stood for a German EU state if it had come about in that way?

Gender and feminist history is the subject for chapter eight through the biography of Joan Wallach Scott. Scott's seminal article 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis' remains one of the American Historical Review's most downloaded and cited articles, revealing its continued relevance and international interest.⁽³⁾ Scott began to investigate gender history using empirical and Marxist frameworks but, upon her move to the Nancy Duke Lewis chair at Brown University, started to follow Foucault, and his idea of viewing history as power relations through the lens of language and discourse. From there Scott looked into the possibilities of psychoanalysis for investigating the psyche of those that she studied. Although there are still outstanding issues with regard to gender and women's history and a reluctance amongst many historians to take up gender theory in any form, Scott has set the agenda in this regard and helped to expand the remit and interests of historical endeavour.

Chapter nine looks at the uneasy but lucrative relationship between Hollywood and history. *Braveheart* (1995); *U-571* (2000); and *The Tudors* (2007–11) are highlighted as particularly controversial and as lacking historical accuracy but there are many other examples noted. Included in the discussion are incidents when inaccuracy has caused political debates or outcry, particularly where national pride or sensitive subjects such as race are concerned. This chapter asks if history can be presented accurately as entertainment, or whether this matters to the general viewing audience or to the promotion of accurate knowledge of the past. The view that comes across seems to suggest that it should be possible, but rarely is it ever achieved. Indeed, although Robert A. Rosenstone's (the historian focused upon by Beck) attempts to promote Hollywood films as having potential for telling history have proven enlightening, many academics have yet to be convinced.

Next Beck moves from the screen back to the written page, but this time by looking at historical fiction, primarily through the career of the highly successful and award-winning author Philippa Gregory. Beck describes the relationship between academic history and historical fiction as 'problematic, occasionally turbulent' (p. 201). Various questions are asked in this vein, including 'should history and historical novels be treated as either completely different, complementary or inseparably twinned' (p. 223). Gregory is a good example, having successfully promoted Tudor and women's history through her *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001). She is a bestselling author who makes claim to authentic historical research which provides the background for her fictional stories. Of course, other historical fiction writers could have easily been chosen for this chapter. Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) is referred to several times, as is the contribution of Alison Weir, whilst historian Ian Mortimer could have been another witness, using the pen name James Forrester for his novels. There are many others. At the crux of the chapter are several inter-related questions. Should historical fiction strive to be historically accurate or is it just entertainment where 'true' history doesn't really matter? Is historical fiction an ally of academic history or a threat to it? What does historical fiction do better in promoting and educating people in their history that academic historians are unable to do? Hilary Mantel, for example, has argued that her depiction of Thomas Cromwell in her *Wolf Hall* is one possible true history based upon the evidence. It is not to say that there are not alternatives or that there is no fictional elements here, but that every attempt has been made to represent a true account of Cromwell and his world. Unlike academic historians Mantel is not proposing a variety of interpretations but one possible

interpretation.

The actual bestselling writer of history in the country, Terry Deary, the author of the *Horrible Histories* children book's is the next to come under the spotlight. Deary proclaims himself as anti-establishment and argues that history teaching in schools and by academics is boring and uninteresting. Deary's witty, 'bloody', and entertaining approach excites children but is also based upon strong research. Although there is some disagreement over how effectual the *Horrible Histories* actually are in raising awareness of history in children or if they represent the best method, their commercial success speaks for itself. Academic historians rarely look at Deary's work and Deary himself refuses the title historian. The success of the *Horrible Histories* books has led to a television programme, audio adaptations, internet resources, a computer game and theatre productions.

Chapters 12 and 13 return to the academic historian, but to how sometimes presenters of history are negatively viewed in the wider media, and are subject to claims of propaganda writing, or improper or inadequate research. The issue of 'using and abusing the past' or the raising up of the 'shortcomings' of an historian's credentials in a public arena is looked at through the case studies of Michael A. Bellesiles and Stephen Ambrose. Bellesiles wrote *Arming America* (2000) – a book in which he argued as inaccurate the American claim to the right to own a gun as originating with the foundation of the Constitution. Bellesiles was attacked for producing a one-sided viewpoint, directed against present-day gun law. Ambrose, meanwhile, was brought up on charges of plagiarism within his accounts of American history that made him a well-known name. Chapter 13 continues this theme with perhaps the most well-known controversy: David Irving and claims (proven in court) of Holocaust denial. The chapter also questions whether countries are right or wrong to bring in laws that make illegal certain views, such as Holocaust denial, or if this impinges and damages the historians right and need to view the past as they feel it should be viewed (even if this might mean that they are wrong).

The book concludes by arguing that historians need to maintain the vigour of their discipline but that more needs to be done to capture a wider audience. Beck also argues that non-academic history writing, including historical fiction and television histories, need to be taken more seriously by academic historians; historians should 'consider what can be learnt from other presenters of the past about reaching and engaging audiences'. In brief, as Beck states several times in the introduction and conclusion writers of history sometimes need to be reminded to follow a simple dictum: 'presentation, presentation, presentation'.

Beck's book is therefore thought-provoking, as it looks beyond the normative study of academic historians as researchers and looks instead at their presentational appeal, comparing them to other presenters of the past both factual and fictional in nature. At its core is a question over the legitimacy of varying approaches to studying and presenting history. Beck refuses to be drawn into a sensationalist conclusion. It would have been tempting to claim that academic history, as divorced as it can sometimes be from 'public' histories, requires drastic changes, but this is not what Beck argues. His thoughts are well-researched and carefully thought out and offer a challenge to historians to consider their research from the reader's point of view and as only one amongst many legitimate ways to explore the past.

The case study approach however, does seem to detract or even distort the full picture and the argument that Beck is outlining. Reading the chapter on television historians, for example, one could be mistaken for thinking that David Starkey is little more than a commentator on Simon Schama rather than a well-known television historian himself. The narrative jumps from the 'lecture'-style television of A. J. P Taylor to the documentary style of Simon Schama leaving relatively little said of what happened in between. There is also a surprising gap in the form of digital presentation of history. The rise of the internet along with encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia, social networking sites (primarily Twitter and Facebook) and media channels such as YouTube and iTunes-U, have had an immense impact on public understanding and knowledge of the past. Indeed, 'online' history promises a very different presentation of the past than is possible through traditional publications or even television and film. The list of missing elements could also bring in family history, local 'amateur' history, and journalistic history magazines such as *History Today* and the *BBC History* magazine. Of course, it is impossible to include everything, and selections have to be

made, but the lack of these elements left out some interesting avenues of investigation.

Nevertheless, the stated goal to ‘encourage and enable readers to engage with and reflect upon in an informed manner the varying ways in which the past is presented to diverse audiences within and outside academia’ (p. 1) is achieved through lucid and carefully thought-out research and discussion. Thus Beck succeeds in contextualising 20th– and 21st–century academic history within the wider scope of the past as presented in the public sphere. In Britain reaching out from academia to a wider public audience is increasingly becoming a necessity. It is therefore vital, and thus timely, that a book looks from the inside of academic history at the discipline as perceived from the outside. Academic history can often appear insular in its debates and arguments but what Beck offers here is an opportunity to consider whether the traditional discourse should move away from its accepted modes of conduct or whether a change is required. The study looks at something that historians are only now beginning to approach and attempt to understand. It is therefore a useful starting point for further examination into the varied ways of presenting history, and a challenge to historians to write thoroughly-researched academic texts in an approachable and readable manner.

Notes

1. *Novel Approaches: from academic history to historical fiction* <http://ihrconference.wordpress.com/> [2] [accessed 5 April 2012]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Cannadine, ‘I wish I’d written’, *The Guardian*, 15 August 1998; Geoffrey Wheatcroft, ‘Portrait: A. J. P. Taylor’, *Prospect*, 120 (March 2006), 46–9. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Joan Wallach Scott, ‘Gender: a useful category of historical analysis’, *American Historical Review*, 91, 5 (1986), 1053–75. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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