

## Making History: The Historian and the Uses of the Past

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Alun Munslow

According to the blurb on the back of this book:

‘Everyone has a personal connection to the past, independent of historical inquiry. So, what is the role of the historian? *Making History* argues that historians have damagingly dissociated the discipline of history from the everyday nature of history, defining their work only in scholarly terms. Exploring the relationship between history and society, Kalela makes the case for a more participatory historical research culture, in which historians take account of their role in society and the ways in which history-making as a basic social practice is present in their work. *Making History* not only asks provocative questions about the role of the historian, it also provides practical guidance for students and historians on planning research projects with greater public impact. This book is vital reading for all historians, lay and professional, and will be an essential text for undergraduate and postgraduate courses on historiography and research methods’.

The pursuit of this ‘more participatory historical research culture’ starts in the preface (entitled ‘Why history?’) with the author, Jorma Kalela, arguing that this question is more fruitful than the conventional ‘What is history?’ This undertaking is rationalised by the author with the claim that people need knowledge of the past, which is as natural as needing to eat or breathe (the author quotes the American historian David Thelen to this effect) (p. ix). Kalela then goes on to offer a detailed defence of the history profession, based on the basic assumption upon which the book is built and which it defends. This assumption is that there is a ‘relationship between historical inquiry and history-in-society’, but Kalela places ‘the emphasis on the other end of the question’ (p. x). It is a book about not just the nature of history (which the author defines as a ‘craft’) but its uses and especially how ‘laypeople’ create histories. Kalela thus addresses (as he says) ‘a

much more complicated matter than just the disciplinary practices of which historians willingly talk – not to mention the idea of some postmodernist thinkers according to which history is the historians invention’ (p. xi). Then in the next-but-one sentence Kalela says it is his hope ‘...that members of any society will accept, as the British historian John Tosh has recently emphasized, history by its nature as the citizens’ resource’. Now, it is not much of an insight to say that we all read texts through our own intellectual beliefs. So, I came to realise from the first few pages that this book was probably not going to be one I could agree with. I became certain when I read the author’s claim that historians ought to ‘... take on a more balanced way of thinking and greater self-awareness’ (p. xi) concerning what they do. Spending half my career trying to pursue this exact objective has suggested to me that such an aim is laudable but incapable of delivery. But that apart, what is it that Kalela is arguing?

As Kalela says, ‘... it seems obvious’ (to him) ‘that we have a connection to the historical past, as ordinary persons, prior to and independently of adopting a historical cognitive interest’ (p. xi). He summarises this as ‘history-in-society’ (p. xii). This is delivered for Kalela through his defence of what elsewhere I have called the ‘empirical-analytical/colligatory-representationalist’ epistemological understanding of how we can and should be able to conflate the past and history. Kalela ends the preface to his book by saying ‘Since the book is written in the spirit of “history is an argument without end”, I welcome all criticism and comments: [jorma.Kelela@utu.fi](mailto:jorma.Kelela@utu.fi) [2]’. So, please regard this review as both criticism and comment.

That apart, the author gets into his stride in the introduction to chapter one, which he subtitles ‘Second thoughts about history’ (p. 1). Basically, he addresses the connection he makes between the public consumption and professional production of history. In acknowledging that history is a social process, and that historians are ‘parts of history’ (quoting E. H. Carr) to the effect that historians are ‘spokesmen of the society to which they belong’ (p. 1), Kalela evaluates the matter of ‘history-in-society’, believing that the big issue is the public functioning of history. In pursuit of this narrative the author notes the ‘paradigmatic change in historical research’ comprised of ‘the disruption within the discipline ... that elevated cleaners to a status on a par with kings’, and a second such change, namely the linguistic turn ‘which questioned the familiar tenets of historical research, reality, objectivity and truth’ (p. 5). This time of turmoil in approach and content was shaped by the ‘the trouble symbolized by Hayden White’s *Metahistory* from 1973, for example’ (pp. 5–6). Invoking Richard J. Evans as his source for his analysis of this ‘trouble’, the author concludes that this ‘postmodern threat’ overshadowed the other ‘disruption’ (p. 6). The resulting upset was ‘...enough to be characterised as a paradigmatic change’ and produced a ‘scientific revolution in historical research’ (ibid.) and that ‘everyday history, too, was transformed towards the turn of the twenty-first century thanks to the unparalleled number of people engaged with history’ (p. 7).

But, Kalela claims, the nature of this change in ‘perspectival paradigms’ (p. 8) led to no consensus on what is ‘real’ historical research (ibid). Kalela then says the extent of these paradigmatic changes (to cleaners as opposed to kings and the linguistic turn) remains open to question, quoting John Tosh to argue that the connection between ‘historical enquiry and history-making as a basic social practice is a case in point, since most academics look askance’ at popular uses of the past (ibid.). And the author completes his thoughts with a further Tosh quote, to the effect that these developments were a diversion from the real job of reconstructing and interpreting the past. And this is what concerns me with this book. I find myself having to qualify the author’s claim that ‘It is the task of the profession to advance archive-based scholarly knowledge that has been reliably reconstructed and explained’ which is again from John Tosh (ibid.).

So, what is the point of this book? I read it as being an evaluation of the process of the creation of history and its use in society, and not merely by academics. This leads the author into heritage and the social context in which history is produced and used. The author invokes the customary range of reasons for why history is socially useful, particularly that history which is written in a common-sensical everyday way (though most historians have not reflected on the consequences of this). History, the author argues, is a present-minded discipline and that mediates the distinction between ‘objectivists’ and ‘the representatives of partisanship’ this time quoting Koselleck (p. 13). As the author notes, the dominant objectivist or orthodox section of historians take no account of the present, and that this view was rejected by the postmodern radicals. But the meaning of all this furore is that historians do not work in a social vacuum which permits no involvement in

the present. This is the return to the classic idea of E. H. Carr (as the author more than happily admits) that historians can do the job (in an objectivist way) but still ‘shake off their professional blinkers, and clarify their relation to the ongoing social process of history-making’ (p. 18). In effect historians can rise above their social and historical situation by recognising the extent of their existence in it.

The answer to all this, for the author, is to acknowledge and welcome a ‘participatory historical culture’ (p. 20) that builds ‘... on the shared histories which people have mutually created’ (ibid.). Hence the author argues that his book is not an introduction to the study of history but an introduction to a discussion on the nature of historical research ‘...as a genre of history making’ (ibid). The rest of the book delineates how this can be achieved. It is a mix of classic empirical-analytical and representationalist procedures that Tosh and his familiars would approve – planning, testing and producing a final account that acknowledges the ‘tension’ between ‘reasoning’ and ‘rhetoric’ (p. 23). Making the history sound ‘...in order to make the message (meaning?) more convincing’ (ibid.). Rhetoric of course serves scholarship. Writing-up is important – very important – but it is still writing-up. It serves the meaning of the past and does not create it. At this point I found myself muttering to myself about the ontological distinction between the past and history.

The analysis and description of historical research (in chapter two) is pretty straightforward. After acknowledging that historians must reflect on their profession as a cultural institution, he goes on to say that they must also evaluate it as a discipline (p. 25). This means that thinking about the scholarly practices of historians must take place on the historian’s terms, and not be influenced by ideas imported from issues in philosophy. Historians, we are reminded, work in society, and they make histories in and for their society. History making is a public endeavour and the idea of ‘everyman his own historian’ is restated in support of the notion of ‘shared histories’ and the existence of the remnants of the past in the present (pp. 27–49). This section of the book offers and defends the classic empirical, inferential and representationalist model of historical research. So, sources yield meaning to the ‘expert referee’ through the notion of the most likely interpretation that results from the ‘reconstruction’ of the past in the historian’s description. The author says ‘The argument of this book, all the consequences of the linguistic turn notwithstanding, is that there is no reason to give up the objective of reconstruction’ (p. 35). The author immediately admits that it is true that ‘...it is an epistemological impossibility to make transparent something that is inherently opaque. This is the argument that supports the postmodernist demand that *construction* is substituted for *reconstruction*’ (italics in original). However,

‘...the impossibility of mastering another person’s thinking does not prevent the historian from attempting to reach out to that other person’s concept of reality and discourse. Still less does it hinder the scholar from reconstructing the circumstances in which that person lived. On the contrary, if research is carried out properly, the resulting account is a fair description. Performing these methodological operations is what the rationale of historical research demands’ (p. 35).

I think this is a step too far. That it seems practical, realist, common-sensical, and representationalist fails to convince me. Surely, historians today know about images and stories, the creation of narrative, the knotty nature of causality, their own subjectivity, the unavoidability of authorial points of view, that they are writing invented narratives, the cultural imperatives under which they labour and above all – surely these days – they/we are all too well aware of the fictive nature of the connection between language and the world both past and present?

That a whole profession can be said to legitimately ignore all these strictures is for me inexplicable. And calling it common sense does not make it any kind of sense. Many years ago I wrote a book called *Deconstructing History* in which I dissected precisely this argument, and as far as I was aware at the time, I created this nomenclature to describe the basic forms of historical thinking and practice – reconstructionist, constructionist and deconstructionist (later Keith Jenkins and I added what we called postist history). Anyway, I ‘deconstructed’ the concepts of reconstruction and construction and argued that they were fraught with unwarranted and – frankly – woefully undercooked epistemological assumptions. I confronted what I took then (and still do take) to be the facile belief that the notion of being able to reconstruct the past *as* a narrative mental model was at best unlikely and hence this is why I find Kalela’s argument to the contrary

unconvincing.

Historians are no better fixed to referee the meaning of the past than anyone else. There is nothing special in either reconstructionist or constructionist historical thinking and practice that permits the historian to elevate themselves beyond desire and prejudice. It remains – as Kalela admits – that historians must justify their choices and decisions, and truth is enigmatic (pp. 41–3). Indeed, Kalela acknowledges that the historian is an intermediary between the past and present, and one who can only operate from a point of view. This point of view it is again admitted is generated by the relationship the historian creates between form and content. But Kalela denies that Hayden White’s analysis of form and content is of value. He argues it is reasonable to deploy literary conventions and devices such as modes of emplotment or different kinds of tropes but that a history text ‘cannot be reduced to them as White suggests’ (p. 139). Well, I do not think that is what White was saying. He also pursues Frank Ankersmit’s concept of ‘narrative theses’ (e.g., ‘Renaissance’ or ‘Cold War’) ‘which bring historical data together but do not emerge from it’ (p. 140). It all depends, as he says, on the balance between truth and argument. To do this he examines the relationships between the historian, the audience and the content of the past. A useful survey but ultimately flawed by the judgement that ‘literary techniques are helpful’ (p. 141), rather than being central to an understanding of the past *as* history. And this is why we should always distinguish history (in all its forms) from the content of the past.

So, my criticisms of this book concern its author’s assumption that history is essentially a sophisticated reconstruction of the past as it most likely was – as the author says ‘The point is that the historian aims, firstly, to reconstruct the reality of the people studied – as they saw it’ (p. 130). The notion of such an access to the reality of the past is defended as well as it could be in this book. But while the defence is elegantly put it just does not convince me. The notion of ‘reasoning while writing’ (p. 131) fails to persuade me because I prefer the argument that reasoning about the nature of our engagement with the past can only be reasonably addressed through an understanding of ‘writing-the-past-*as*-history’. If historians really wish to grasp what they are doing, then they need to understand how they create and write narratives – and different forms of narrative – for public, heritage or so-called professional history purposes.

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