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Historians and their publics: a consideration of Ludmilla Jordanova

In 1841, having unsuccessfully contested the Professorship of Natural History at University College London, W. S. Farquharson wrote to the College authorities as follows:

I am given to understand that the Professorship of History is vacant [.]. Should the Council have any desire that the vacancy should be filled up, I beg leave to [...] offer myself as a Candidate for that office.

Seven years later, rumour that the Chair of History was once more up for grabs prompted the Rev. Soutaine to secure a warm testimonial from Thomas Hankey, who indicated that the cleric's 'first-rate talents as a preacher' in addition to his 'literary pursuits' suggested that the candidate was 'fully up to the fulfilment of duties' of the professor of history.⁽¹⁾

To a reader of *History in Practice*, encounter with this historical incident would be more likely to provoke reflective comprehension than amused condescension. For as might be expected from a scholar who was trained initially as a natural scientist and then practised as a cultural historian of science in history departments at Essex and York before becoming Professor of Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia in 1996, Jordanova succeeds admirably in her aim to place the practices of history in a wider disciplinary context. Not only is she alive to the constructed nature of subject boundaries and their porosity, but also to the relatively recent date of their institutionalisation. Here she fits into a long and fertile tradition of 'outsiders' who have helped historians to reflect on what they do and how they do it. As Patrick O'Brien has observed elsewhere on this website: 'Intellectual trade across the borders of our disciplines continues as it

has done for generations past'.⁽²⁾ What is of particular value about *History in Practice*, however, is that it seeks to build a bridge between the insight of Hayden White et al that history is a 'literary artefact' and the essentially empirical, 'common sense' working practices of the majority of academic historians.⁽³⁾ Moreover, it does so using a prose style whose conceptual crispness and clarity of exposition makes the book a genuine intellectual pleasure to read from cover to cover.

For Jordanova 'the most important act historians perform is that of writing' (p. 186) From this it follows that the practice of history should be identified not only with the archive, (which has been the usual focus of reflections by historians on their craft from Mabillon to Marwick) but with the written results of research and their audiences. Attention should therefore be focused on interpretation as much as on sources. This is not only because the authority of historical texts derives substantially from their power to persuade, but also because it is primarily by written means (and oral versions thereof) that historical ideas, accounts and claims are apprehended, not only within the academy between peers (in both published and unpublished forms), but also by the wider public (as books, magazine/newspaper articles or as spoken scripts on radio or TV).

Directly related to this is the issue of 'mediation'. Jordanova uses this concept not only to describe how sources are 'turned into' historical narratives, but also to refer to the processes by which sources themselves come into being (as constituted by archivists, museum curators and historians). In her analysis, she is careful to emphasise that the strategies adopted by historians in order to interpret and mediate between sources and narrative are not sequential in a linear way that leads from scarcely intelligible and fragmented archival facts to a coherent narrative of events, with the historian as alchemist. Rather she favours 'a more dialectical way of imagining historical work' (p. 183), in which:

historians constantly move between the main types of activity they perform, namely, engaging with the sources, delineating a problem, setting it into broad contexts, developing a framework and constructing arguments in written form (ibid.).

A highly significant implication of her foregrounding of this dialectical characterisation of historians' practice is that it brings the notion of their audiences or publics centre-stage. It has long been publicly acknowledged that one cannot be an archaeologist on one's own. The very creation of archaeological evidence necessitates the teamwork and physical effort that make excavation possible (and, incidentally, archaeology a media-friendly discipline since its practitioners can actually be seen to be doing something). By contrast, the image of the historian as a lone researcher beaver away in dusty archives and surrounded by weighty tomes in libraries is hegemonic not only outside the academy. The current AHRB policy of inviting bids for Subject Centres has discomfited not a few professional academic historians, who see their individual working practices as correspondingly undervalued and under threat. In the eyes of such scholars, this development is merely an updated version of the, to their mind, equally misguided attempt by the cliometricians of the 1960s to turn history into a social science of the past staffed by computer-bound teamworkers in white coats. However, if one follows Jordanova's convincing description of historical practices as being unavoidably collaborative and social, (in the sense that even the most inveterate of solipsists writes for an audience, uses 'primary' materials, many of which were themselves created with particular users/publics in mind and depends on the products of networks of scholarly co-operation for his/her 'secondary' reading matter), such fears are not only misguided but irrational.

This acknowledgement that historical practices, even those specifically focused within the academy, necessarily engage with various publics, has as its corollary an obligation for historians to consider their role and responsibilities vis à vis audiences *outside* the thinning groves of academe. Accordingly, a specific and welcome innovation of *History in Practice*, is the inclusion of a chapter dedicated to 'Public History'. Here Jordanova, as the guest curator of a highly successful and intellectually stimulating exhibition on Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660-2000 at the National Portrait Gallery last Summer (2000), writes from a rare position as an academic historian with direct experience of the challenges of presenting historical arguments to the general public.⁽⁴⁾

Of course, the term 'Public history' is by origin a N. American one that specifically refers to the work of

historians and archivists active outside the university context in, for example, the National Park Service, Federal Museums and private corporations (as authors of company histories or keepers of company archives). (5) Unlike its UK counterpart, the not entirely helpfully entitled 'Heritage studies', it is not in the first instance concerned with analysing the preservation, interpretation and consumption of the past in an extra-academic context. (6) Indeed, the centrality of place and the latter's role in constituting identities, has resulted in the fact that much of the most innovative work currently being undertaken in this area in the UK is being conducted not in history, but in geography departments. (7)

The very title of the recent report on the future of the historic environment, which was commissioned by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and undertaken under the auspices of English Heritage - *Power of Place* - is revealing in this context. Even more pertinent are the presuppositions and results of the MORI poll which was undertaken to assist the authors of *Power of Place* in their work. (8) The poll, in particular, substantiates Jordanova's emphasis on the centrality of the role of state, as key funder of museums and archives, in public history, on the one hand, and on the fact that: 'collective understanding of the past is imbibed by *all* the senses, and worked upon by the imagination' (p. 155), on the other. Committed as it is to social inclusion and the widest possible intellectual access, the DCMS adopted a deliberately all-embracing, definition of 'heritage' as its point of departure. (9) In their summary to the Poll findings, the authors refer specifically to the personal nature of heritage, which specifically among non-white respondents tended to be defined in terms of non-built, cultural issues (such as styles of dress and types of food). Moreover, they highlight another fast-growing, related trend which they call 'polysensuality':

More and more people are relying to a greater extent on their feelings and emotions in their everyday lives, at the expense of the purely rational. Meaning and value will be placed on something if it satisfies the individual in different ways. Not only does this mean that [heritage] providers will need to consider audio, visual and tactile interpretation techniques, but they will also have to think about how to engage visitors' emotions, if they are to make a lasting impression, and create true value.

In this context, Jordanova's observation that the past presented by museums 'is highly refined, in the manner of processed foods, [which] renders both the original materials and the means by which they have been processed relatively invisible' (p. 143) is both acute and highly topical. Directly linked to this is her reflection on the 'significant silences' of museums, in relation to curators' principles of selection, management and interpretation, [which] are rarely accessible to the general public and remain unimagined by them' (p. 145). This leads Jordanova to discussion of ways in which museums not only satisfy curiosity about the past but also *shape the very forms of the public's curiosity*, particularly by deploying unnecessarily crude models of causation and agency that are irresponsibly value-laden since they tend to operate within an idiom of heroes and villains.

Jordanova, however, is careful not to make the still frequently committed mistake which identifies 'public history' with museums. Indeed, a central plank of her discussion of the topic centres on the importance of genre and other literary conventions for any understanding of the practice of (public) history. These genres include: historical fiction and drama, film documentaries, non-specialist magazines and memorials/anniversary celebrations. Viewed in this light, 'public history' must be an umbrella term, one which, furthermore, brings together two concepts 'public' and 'history' which are particularly slippery and difficult to define. Just to take the former, it can mean: 'for a mass audience', 'popular', 'non-specialist', 'of concern to an entire polity' or 'available for anyone to see' (p. 149).

Justification for dedicating such a relatively high proportion of this review article to the subject of Public History can be found in the fact that this topic crystallises several of Jordanova's central concerns with regard to the practising historian's professional and ethical responsibilities to her publics, both inside and outside the academy. In particular, those who create knowledge need to make clear their position and, specifically, 'to explain more openly to a wider public the processes through which historical judgements are reached' (p. 171). Indeed, there is a sense in which the whole book is a meditation on the words 'history' and 'public' and their interaction.

Having so far largely focused discussion on Jordanova's treatment of 'public', I would like now to devote the rest of my consideration of *History in Practice* to her treatment of 'history'. As the book's very title implies, her approach is fundamentally an anthropological one, in that 'it tries to make sense of the practices and ideas of a distinct group of people, without being overly prescriptive about what historians ought to do' (p. xv). If history is best understood as a set of practices rather than a constellation of beliefs and theories or a stable body of subject matter, then logically 'History is indeed about what historians do' (p. 2). Accordingly, Jordanova lets the (student or lay) reader in on the 'secrets' of the guild by giving her a tour of the subject infrastructures (including professional associations and educational systems with their teaching and research agendas) and by introducing her to world of academic publishing and its conventions (pp. 17-22 where there is the inspired inclusion of a sample set of 'instructions to authors' from an academic journal).

This first chapter provides the reader with appropriate tools with which to map the discipline of history (ch. 2) and consider the relationship between history and other cognate disciplines (ch. 3), before launching herself into the more 'traditional' topics for discussion relating to the status of historical knowledge (ch. 4) and periodisation (ch. 5). After an 'excursus' into Public History (ch. 6), Jordanova concludes with a chapter that in more conventional treatments of the discipline might have been expected near or right at the start: the issue of historical skills and their application.

Of particular value in this book is Jordanova's principled eclecticism and her openness to widely different approaches and methods. Whilst one might have anticipated her plea for the integration of the study of visual culture into historical practice, less expected is her impassioned defence of Clio's current Cinderella, economic history. She is also excellent on the problematic distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' sources and for the need to subject the latter to equally unsparing interrogation. Personally, I particularly welcomed her helpful discussion in chapter five of period terms such as 'modern/early modern' and 'decade', 'century' and 'fin de siècle', as well as that of 'style' as a category of historical interpretation.

Perhaps the section of the book which academic historians will find most contentious is her treatment of the status of historical knowledge in chapter four. Here Jordanova's initial historical training in the field of history and philosophy of science comes to the fore. This is particularly so in her contention that 'truth' (of either the upper- or lower-case variety) assumes and indeed requires a completeness that history lacks (pp. 93ff). She goes on to argue that 'reliability' and 'trust' are more realistic and appropriate aspirations. Adoption of the latter term clearly alludes to the assumption, shared with scholars of the history of science such as Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, that knowledges are negotiated socially and imply a 'community of belief'.⁽¹⁰⁾ It follows from this that the nature and status of historical knowledge cannot be constants and that there are many ways of knowing. Belief in the social construction of knowledge suggests to Jordanova that 'truth' and 'objectivity' may not be the most helpful concepts for historians' purposes, and that they should perhaps be replaced with 'reliability' and 'judiciousness' (p. 113).

Here I detect a moving away from truth being regarded as a rhetorical strategy for acquiring legitimacy (à la Shapin) towards its being seen as the embodiment of a code of practice that calls for honesty, decency and mutual respect. Such high-mindedness certainly commands the assent (and admiration) of this reviewer, but I wonder whether it carries so much weight and assent in the highly politicised wider world of usable pasts that Jordanova has so adroitly sketched for us elsewhere in the book? Within the circumscribed world of academic historians I agree that such ground rules are pretty much taken for granted and indeed regarded as sacrosanct even at the level of the undergraduate essay. However, I do wonder whether the 'community of belief' whose practices Jordanova has so helpfully analysed does extend very far into the public sphere.

At this point, I want to follow the author's own preference to avoid arguing out such issues in the context of extremes such as the Irving case. Instead, I would like to pursue the issue of 'trust' in relation to the wider, extra-academic consumption of the past and take as my example Simon Schama's BBC-TV *History of Britain*. Here I return to Jordanova's crucial observation, mentioned above, that the general public has a tendency to take the past unproblematically as essentially 'unmediated'. One of the most worrying (and potentially dangerous) corollaries of this state of affairs is the tendency on the part of many lay enthusiasts who profess

an interest in the past to believe and trust 'expert' opinion, especially when it is presented in a slick professional package on prime-time TV and fronted by one of the most articulate and intelligent members of the academic history profession.

On the evidence of at least the first series of episodes, (without having seen the tie-in book and with the proviso that the second series, which overlaps chronologically with the presenter's 'own period', might yet deliver the critical goods), Schama has clearly betrayed this public trust and purveyed a 'drum and trumpet' narrative of English history (sic) which in its social and thematic narrowness would have surprised even the Victorian author of that eloquent tag, J. R. Green. Even allowing for the constraints of the genre, Schama has singularly failed to draw the attention of the viewing public to the processes by which historical narratives are made not given. By contrast, Michael Wood's most recent series which was also commissioned by the BBC, *Conquistadors*, clearly testifies to the possibility of putting across a feel for the process/interpretation by which the narrative/product is arrived at. Instead, the Kings-and- Queens, 1066 and All That storyline of the *BBC History of Britain* Show arrogantly presumes that the viewing public cannot cope with argument and a multiplicity of voices even as the MORI poll recently commissioned by English Heritage unequivocally testifies to the variety and sophistication of public engagements with their historic environment.

The problem, it seems to me, is not how we are to bring to book such loony extremists as David Irving, but how we are to critique effectively such popular history presentations as Schama's *History of Britain*. Jordanova has performed with considerable sensitivity and keen intelligence the valuable task of analysing the practices of academic history and the assumptions and values they embody. She has also, as never before in the genre of 'history primers', foregrounded the centrality of audiences, both within and without the academy, and sketched in some of the implications this fact has for historians. It is for us now to take up the ethical challenge she has laid before us and engage more fully with the public understanding of history.

Notes

1. Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: antiquarians, historians and archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886*, (Cambridge, 1986), p. 147.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Patrick O'Brien, *An Engagement with Postmodern Foes, Literary Theorists and Friends on the Borders of History*. (February 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For a concise statement of his position see; Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: essays in cultural criticism*, (Baltimore/London, 1978), ch. 3 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact', pp. 81-99. The most robust, recent restatement of the case for 'common-sense', empirical history is undoubtedly Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, (London, 1997). The book has recently been reprinted (January 2000) with a sixty-two page afterward responding to his critics, an earlier version of which appeared on this website.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For a challenging yet thoroughly accessible introduction to the intellectual issues raised by the exhibition see Jordanova's accompanying book: *Defining Features: scientific and medical portraits 1660-2000* (London, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For the most up-to-date survey see James B. Gardner & Peter S. LaPaglia eds., *Public History: essays from the field*, (Malabar, Florida, 1999).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See, inter alia, Michael Hunter ed., *Preserving the Past: the rise of heritage in Modern Britain*, (Stroud, 1996) and John Arnold, Kate Davies and Simon Ditchfield eds., *History and Heritage: consuming the past in contemporary culture*, (Donhead St Mary, 1998) and Hilda Kean, Paul Martin and Sally Morgan eds., *Seeing History: public history in Britain now*, (London, 2000).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See, for example, Brian Graham, G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage: power, culture and economy*, (London, 2000). It should also be noted that one of the most widely read books in the field of heritage studies, David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985) with sales in excess of 60,000 copies, was written by a scholar who, although initially trained as a historian, spent a significant part of his academic life as a member of a department of Geography, (at UCL).[Back to \(7\)](#)

8. The results of this poll may be accessed via the English Heritage website at www.english-heritage.org.uk. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Government's review of policies relating to the historic environment. An invitation to participate (English Heritage, 1 February 2000), section 1.3 'The term historic environment.. knows no chronological limits. knows no thematic limits. knows no geographic limits. knows no limits to its scale. knows no limits of culture or ethnicity'. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. See, in particular, Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: civility and science in seventeenth-century England*, (Chicago, 1994). Cf. Keith Thomas, 'Gentle Boyle', *London Review of Books*, 22 September 1994, pp. 14-15. For the wider context see now: Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge from Gutenberg to Diderot*, (Cambridge, 2000). [Back to \(10\)](#)

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