

History and National Life

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At a time when, particularly in the new universities and colleges of higher education, historians feel themselves in danger of being swept away by the advancing tide of vocationalism, any attempt to uphold the importance of the subject to the life of the nation is, one might think, to be welcomed. Unfortunately, despite its accessible and vivid style, Peter Mandler's *History and National Life* rather sells the discipline short.

In essence Mandler's argument is based on the construction of a very simple narrative of the development of History in Britain from the nineteenth century down to the present day. According to this account History emerged, initially, as a tool of national identification. In Britain this process led to the emergence of the 'Whig Interpretation of History'. This was a narrative that described the continual process of improvement taken to mark British society and linked that process to certain supposed national characteristics. In this period, it is claimed History 'held an unprecedented, and perhaps irretrievable high position in national life'.(p. 48)

This happy state of affairs, alas, did not endure into the next century. After the First World War, British historians erected the barrier of 'professionalism' between themselves and the wider world. With one or two exceptions, like G.M Trevelyan, they withdrew into the fastness of the universities and eschewed the writing of works for popular consumption. By mid-century the subject was in retreat and rapidly losing ground to the social sciences.

The tide turned, according to Mandler, after 1960 when, with the demise of 'myths of national destiny'(p. 94), history again became popular. The recovery, we are led to believe, reached a climax (which is still with us) in the 1990s when, in print and on television, academic history re-connected with popular history. History is the new rock'n'roll, and Simon Schama is its Elvis Presley!

This unification of academic and popular history has created, we are told, ‘unparalleled opportunities’, for historians to ‘chart a new social purpose for history in the twenty-first century’. (p. 10) In his concluding chapter Mandler offers his thoughts on what might be the components of such a ‘new social purpose’. He suggests that the examination of difficult ethical problems is often easier within an historical context. This process of ethical examination, he continues, can enable one to place one’s own values in a wider perspective, and, by doing so, fix the elements of one’s individual identity. Put simply, it is possible to ‘find yourself’ in the past. One wonders if Mandler has done this himself. The problem with such a procedure is, as he himself points out, that it would be virtually impossible to determine how far you were merely applying the values of the present in a supposed historical location. Ultimately, though, the idea that it is possible to fix one’s moral position by an act of empathy with, say, the executioner of Charles I seems rather a desperate contrivance.

Mandler also suggests that those with postgraduate history degrees could find employment writing guidebooks for the National Trust and English Heritage. Indeed this, no doubt agreeable, employment prospect is of a piece with what appears to be his view of the discipline’s ultimate role:

The more commercial sectors of the knowledge culture – journalism, the mass media, the heritage industry – have come increasingly to rely upon academics for raising and policing standards that they cannot sustain on their own. (p. 163)

Errand-boys and proof-readers for journalism and the entertainment industries, a depressing vision. However, it is not only the end-point of Mandler’s narrative that is questionable, so too are many of the points along the way.

When Mandler discusses what he regards as the revival of popular history he overwhelms the reader with a multitude of examples. In the process, though, he conflates an interest in the past and objects from it with history. If he had read his copy of E. H. Carr’s *What is History*, he might have a clearer idea of the difference. [\(1\)](#)

One of the examples that Mandler cites is the television programme, *Going for a Song*, first screened in 1965. The format of the programme involved the examination of antiques by lay-people, whose conclusions were promptly shot down by the resident expert, Arthur Negus, whose favourite comment was: ‘Now here’s a lovely thing’. The focus of the discussion was always on the *objet d’art* as an *objet d’art*. In other words, no attempt was ever made to contextualise the objects displayed. The programme was actually devoid of any meaningful historical content.

Mandler also cites the fashion for Edwardian/Victorian clothing in the 1960s as indicative of a broad historical interest. As someone who bought the Beatles’ album, *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1966, as a thirteen year-old, I can definitely say that history was the last thing on my mind as I gazed at the Fab Four in their exotic period uniforms. Neither do I believe that the mohican-haired punk rockers of the late seventies had any interest at all in the Mohawk peoples of upper New York state. It is perfectly possible to plunder the past for striking images, without developing any interest whatsoever in history.

On another count, Mandler claims that this interest in the fashions of the past was possible because history, in the 1960s, no longer acted as a conduit for ‘myths of national destiny’. What, then, would he make of those women’s fashions of the 1930s – a period during which, he claims, history was unpopular, because of its link to national myths – that were based upon an entire genre of popular historical films, like *The Private Life of Henry VIII*? [\(2\)](#) He could hardly simply dismiss them as the products of the cinema, when he himself cites film and television programmes to support this alleged upsurge in popular history. Among such programmes cited is the series, *Poldark*. Many of Mandler’s readers will be too young to remember this series, so it is worth saying that in, it ‘The Past’ acted principally as a location within which exposed bosoms could heave, untrammelled. It was ‘history’ of the Daphne du Maurier school. It would tell one little of the eighteenth century in which it was set, but a great deal about the fantasies of its 1970s audience. I would

argue that many of the trends that Mandler identifies represent the development of a particular category of commodities, which are consumed as commodities of the present, with very limited, if any, engagement with the past to which they refer.

Similar points might be made about some of the television series that Mandler seems so keen on. In the most recent notable example, Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*, the audience is presented with a simple, linear narrative. No critical engagement with the past is offered, the package is complete and resolved; it is, as such, profoundly ideological and is also a fairly standard item of television entertainment. Again and again Mandler tells his readers that historians no longer believe that History offers lessons for the present. (p. 145) However, Schama's series was shot through with 'lessons', as this review notes:

Again Schama asserted that their [Winston Churchill, and George Orwell] correct reading of the present came from a correct reading of the past. He was also uncharacteristically bitter in his denunciation of the appeasers – not least because they lacked a proper sense of British history. Fortunately, he cheered in time for courageously earnest peroration, which hymned in turn, Britain and even patriotism. (3)

Not only does Schama endorse the notion of 'lessons' from history' he also appears to be wedded to nationalist myth-making, and so completely at odds with Mandler's vision of a history that has transcended its 'nationalist origins'. (p. 10) The biggest problem with Schama's series is, though, its completeness. In that sense it conforms to the demands of television for resolution. Consequently the series was no more than an entertaining story, told in an entertaining way, that just happened to be a version of the history of Britain. Schama's status as an entertainer was confirmed recently by an article in *The Guardian*, subtitled 'Simon Schama on how he learned to love the kitchen'. (4) Schama has no particular culinary expertise, and nothing really interesting to say about food. He is, though a 'celebrity' and consequently all aspects of his life have become saleable commodities. The process is not new, A. J. P Taylor consciously marketed his 'personality', crusty, witty, clever, good talk-show fodder. His much-referred-to television lectures were, in reality, 'turns'. Viewers remember that he spoke without notes, and finished bang on time. They do not remember what he said.

Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad* (Penguin, 1998) is also promoted by Mandler as an example of serious popular history. Within its limits it is a very impressive work, but its limits are very clear, it is a straightforward linear narrative. In effect it presents itself as the truth about Stalingrad, and its readers engage with the book on that level as, in the words of Antonia Fraser, a 'superb work of narrative history'. (5) This type of reading does not even consider that narratives are human constructs, and not simply reproductions of reality. Consequently, the consumption of the book is conditioned by the force of the narration and is similar in kind to that of a novel. Indeed, in July of 2002 Beevor published an article in *The Sunday Times* with the subtitle: 'Antony Beevor on why history is the new novel'. (6) Beevor's books and Schama's television programmes are fine, as far as they go; but, for the reasons I have given above, it seems to be stretching a point to claim that they represent, along with other examples, the development of a new historical consciousness. The great majority of these works do not address the issue of conflicting interpretations, and consequently do not engage their consumers in the processes involved in the construction of historical accounts. They are, ultimately, entertainments. This is highlighted by a forthcoming BBC series called 'Great Britons', due to be screened in October, 2002. This is to consist of ten programmes outlining the lives of ten 'Great Britons' including individuals like, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, John Lennon. At the end of the series viewers will be invited to vote for the greatest Briton of all, out of the pre-selected ten. What criteria will they apply? Will they make informed evaluations? Is it a meaningful historical exercise? Or is simply an historical form of Big Brother? I tend to favour the latter view.

Mandler pays very slight attention to the work of Britain's marxist historians. He gives over three pages to E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (Victor Gollancz; London, 1963), and 'history from below'. The book also contains three references to Eric Hobsbawm, none of which comments on his political affiliations. His comments on Thompson suggest that 'history from below' emerged as a trend in the early 1960s and was an element in the 'revival' of the subject that, he claims, developed at that time. In fact the roots of Thompson's approach go back to the Popular Front campaigns of the late 1930s. A period

which saw the publication of A. L. Morton's, *A People's History of England* (Victor Gollancz; London, 1938), a work which remained in print for much of the post-war period; and a conscious effort by the Communist Party of Great Britain to utilise history as a political tool.

Communists in this period, set about deliberately fostering a sense of democratic heritage, and in those 'March of History' pageants which the Party organised in 1936, Cromwell's portrait was borne proudly aloft along with those of John Ball and Wat Tyler.⁽⁷⁾

Very similar pageants were also organised by local Labour parties, featuring figures like the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the Rochdale Pioneers and the Chartists. The point is that during the 1930s and even before, there existed a significant minority version of popular history. However, unlike the version of popular history that Mandler describes as existing today, this, earlier form involved the active selection of an historical interpretation by its participants. These communists and labour movement activists knew History was a contested territory. The supporters of Blair's New Labour 'project' are also aware of the importance of historical justification, and attempted to use Labour's centenary as an opportunity to use history to underpin their views.⁽⁸⁾

This tradition of radical/activist history continued to be a significant element of British historical practice until at least the mid-1980s. Some would, of course, argue that it is still a significant force. They would not, I think, deny that it is in retreat. Mandler's work pays scant attention to the tradition, and none at all to the retreat. His account of the discipline's development is, at the very least incomplete. Mandler calls those historians who write for a mass market 'Thatcher's children', because of the alacrity with which they move to turn a buck. They are indeed Thatcher's children but not for that reason. One of the consequences of the rule of Baroness Thatcher of Finchley was the decline in influence of the Labour movement, socialism and the Left in general. Left-wing historians lowered their aspirations. In 1978 Paul Thompson claimed that oral history would give people a new vision of their past, and a new future 'of their own making'. In 1998, his colleagues in the Oral History Society, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson claimed that oral history 'has had a significant impact upon contemporary history'.⁽⁹⁾ So, it did not change the world, but it did impact on the discipline. As the Labour movement declined, so too did the influence of its popular traditions and historical perceptions. A generation grew up which, in Hobsbawm's words saw the break-up of the Beatles as more significant than the success of Scargill's NUM pickets at the Saltley coking depot, in 1972.⁽¹⁰⁾ It was this process that enabled the current crop of 'popular' historians to come forward and push their packaged, commodified history onto a largely passive market.

If, as has been suggested, Mandler's account of the development of the discipline is so lacking, and his view of its future so marked by a paucity of ambition, is it possible to turn to any alternative view? Mandler, as we have seen, is very keen to deny that lessons can be learned from history. It would seem very likely that most historians would agree with him that direct lessons cannot be learned from History. Hence, it would be foolish to suggest that Tony Blair would fall from office in the event of a war because this is what happened to Asquith in the First World War, and Chamberlain in the Second.⁽¹¹⁾ It would not seem unreasonable, though, to suggest that a depth of historical knowledge would enable a better grasp of social and political issues to be developed. This perspective has led some historians to establish the History and Policy Group.

This world of policy makers and think-tanks has a penumbra around ministers, and what we are saying is that it's not good enough for such a powerful group to rely on [television programmes such as] *Timewatch* and Simon Schama for its view of history.⁽¹²⁾

What goes for 'policy wonks' also goes for the rest of us, those, that is, who are force-fed their slogans, and suffer the consequences of their policy initiatives. The current war crisis around Iraq vividly illustrates this point. For many in the American administration, and possibly for Tony Blair as well, the conflict with Iraq is a clear-cut case of good people, themselves, versus bad people, Saddam and supporters. To sell this idea they use a kind of historical shorthand, Saddam becomes Hitler, and George Bush become Churchill. This may reflect the limitations, as Matthew Engel suggests, of their historical knowledge:

Of course, politicians should understand history. Unfortunately, it is not something that either Bush or Blair bothered about much when they had more time. All they now have to guide them are fuzzy ideas about Hitler and Churchill they might have picked up from bubblegum cards.[\(13\)](#)

A politically literate population in a democratic society cannot afford to make decisions on the basis of 'fuzzy ideas'. Mandler's accurate National Trust guidebooks may have a certain value, but they hardly constitute a *raison d'être* for an entire discipline. Playing a part in the creation of a politically and socially literate population, equipped to make real choices in a functioning democracy, just might.

Notes

1. Mandler makes a point of telling his readers that he bought a copy of Carr, but did not read it: *History and National Life*, p. 88. See E. H. Carr, *What is History* (Penguin; Harmondsworth, 1973) p. 12.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (first published 1940; this edn., Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971) p. 351.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James Walton, 'Tale of the Century', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 June 2002.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. 'Michael Caine inspired me to cook (and not a lot of people know that)', *The Guardian*, 19 Sept. 2002.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Reproduced on the cover of Anthony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (Viking; London, 1998).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Sunday Times, 14 July 2002.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Raphael Samuel, 'British marxist historians 1880-1980', *New Left Review*, 120 (March-April 1980).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See Joe Haines, 'A century of the People's Party', *Inside Labour: The New Labour Magazine*, Feb. 2000. See also Roger Spalding, 'Spinning history: the Labour Party and its centenary', *New Politics*, 8:2 (Winter 2001).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1978), p. 226; Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds, *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge; London, 1998) p. ix.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Eric Hobbawm, 'Observations on the debate', in Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhearn, eds, *The Forward March of Labour Halted* (Verso; London, 1981), p.181.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. As, indeed Andrew Roberts did suggest on the Radio 4 *Today* programme in the autumn of 2002.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Simon Szreter, quoted in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 13 Sept. 2002.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Matthew Engel, 'Only one Adolf Hitler', *The Guardian*, 8 Oct. 2002.[Back to \(13\)](#)

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