

## Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture

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**Author:**

Jerome De Groot

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Ian Gwinn

‘Heritage should not be confused with history. History seeks to convince by truth ... Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly admits and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error’.<sup>(1)</sup> David Lowenthal’s remarks on the difference between these two enterprises go a long way to explain why historians have had a rather negative view of public historical practices. Understandably, there is concern at how the past can be easily misrepresented and falsified by forms of historical representation that do not adhere to the rules of evidence and standards of academic rigour. There is, however, something of an irony here, since historians, who still think of themselves as having a public audience and a duty to inform their sense of the past (as I believe they do), lack an informed perspective on popular contemporary engagements with history.

Enter Jerome de Groot’s *Consuming History*, which responds to recent calls for a more concerted effort on the part of historians to understand the nature of historical representations in the public domain.<sup>(2)</sup> His aim is twofold: first, he seeks to understand ‘how History as a set of entities and discourses works in contemporary society’ (p. 3); and second, he suggests that an examination of the way society engages with its past can illuminate the dynamics of culture itself. De Groot takes us on a sweeping and, at times, fleeting survey of a broad range of cultural phenomena and entities that use and engage with the past. From popular history to amateur history, re-enactment to gaming, history as television to historical television, and drama, literature and graphic novels to museums and heritage, *Consuming History* squeezes a lot of material into 250 pages. Nonetheless, de Groot has produced a lucid and stimulating account of how the ‘historical’ is conceptualised by the cultural imagination.

What the book tries to make clear is that in recent years our engagement with the past undergone an important shift. This departure is indicated by the title – how we engage and interact with history publicly is very much conditioned by processes of consumption and commodification (p. 5). Historical knowledge and products can now be purchased online or at a museum gift shop; history can be valued as part of the desirability of antiques or property; or it can be ‘packaged’ as way of selling television dramas or video games. Yet the notion of ‘consuming history’ ought not to be understood in purely material terms. Rather, it suggests a way of relating to and ‘interfacing’ with the past that can be equally symbolic and emotive. The idea is pursued throughout the text and it can be said to pose a challenging thesis about the nature of how history operates in contemporary society, suggesting that historians may need to rethink their approach to the past as a result.

A brief summary of two examples can help to illustrate the changes in the way we engage with history. The first is outlined in part one (the book is divided into six parts), where de Groot contrasts the recent fortunes of the popular historian with that of the historical discipline. He identifies two main trends. On the one hand, there has been the rise of the ‘celebrity’ historian’, who are now less valued for their academic credentials than their individual persona and style (‘famous for their fame as much as for their profession’ (p. 20)). On the other, the influence of the academic historian in the public arena has waned, whilst a host of journalists, critics and other writers have increasingly informed our understanding of the past as writers of biographies or presenters of television programmes. This is seen as a consequence of a divergence between academic priorities and popular interests, as well as differing perceptions about the popular and academic historian in the cultural imagination. More original, however, is de Groot’s claim that the erosion of academic power is an outcome of the increased ‘enfranchisement’ of the public that has encouraged by the appearance of reading groups, magazines, and websites that support customer-led reviews and on-line blogs (pp. 46–8). This is part of what he describes as a ‘seeming grassroots revolution in historical participation’, examples of which can be found all the way through the text (p. 48).

The second example comes from the final part of the book, which considers the changing role of the museum in light of recent funding cutbacks, theoretical shifts, and changes in visitor expectations. De Groot argues that museums have undergone a shift in the way they operate, which reflects the impact of market developments in the heritage sector, turning museums into commercial ventures with a corporate identity and structure (p. 241). They have also been incorporated into a government-driven agenda based on the neo-liberal rhetoric of inclusion, diversity and widening participation. All this has had the effect of making museums places where engagement with the past has become interactive, focusing attention on the experience of an active ‘user’. For the author, this represents a ‘democratisation’ of heritage: ‘Interactivity implies an involvement and an enfranchisement for the visitor ... rather than be shown the artefact and told its meaning, interactive exhibits and museums involve the audience in the narratives of history’ (p. 246).

Turning to the rest of the book, it is evident that the author believes the way contemporary culture engages with the past is more complex, multifaceted and diverse than anyone has hitherto imagined. This claim is made plausible by a variety of examples supported by cogent, well-rehearsed arguments. For example, in part two, entitled 'enfranchisement, ownership and consumption', de Groot considers how the practice and experience of amateur history has been revolutionised by the advent of technological innovations such as Web 2.0. To a large extent, the internet has facilitated the commodification of historical information, restricting online access to documents, records, and other sources to those who are willing to engage in networks of consumption (pp. 75–6). There again activities like genealogy have been transformed into sites of complex historical engagement, where the experience of the past has become something personal, revelatory and liberating. Historiographically speaking, genealogy is wedded to a conventional epistemological model of history, yet it also supplies a direct and active connection with the past, one that allows users to bypass culturally established meanings in the pursuit of knowledge and self-identity. Moreover, de Groot contends that the ability to share, store and communicate information, and to establish online communities, enfranchises users whilst undermining hierarchies of knowledge and the authority of cultural 'gatekeepers' (p. 91). Above all, the experience of the past is fundamentally interactive, complex and less reliant upon narratives imposed by external authorities.

The themes of complexity and interactivity are repeated in the examination of the forms of re-enactment and living history in part three. In this instance, history is experienced as performance, a mode of expression receptive to the contingencies of the past and the imaginative aspects of historical reconstruction. At the same it is a kind of performance that is rooted in a fidelity to the actuality of the past and an authenticity of experience. In battlefield re-enactment, for example, this leads to a paradoxical engagement, whereby the striving for authenticity (customs, behaviours and styles of dress are meticulously reproduced) is at odds with the re-enactors pursuit of a personalised experience affording them license to act out the past, imaginatively recreating what might have been. This tension is succinctly expressed by de Groot who writes 'history has to "live" whilst acknowledging its very pastness' (p. 113). This ability to embody the past in performance gives re-enactment an enfranchising quality for both participants and audience alike, communicating meaning in a first-person interpretation of history. As this indicates, performance can be a potentially space of dissidence, disrupting conventional modes of historical knowing.

Another important argument that is raised in support of book's thesis is the idea that one of the major developments in the positioning of history in popular culture has been the emergence of what has been described as the 'virtual turn' in historiography (p. 2). This notion holds particular significance for mediums like television, film, novels and plays. In part four, de Groot debates the presentation of history on television, challenging received assumptions about television history as something simplistic, populist and inauthentic (pp. 153–4). Firstly, he demonstrates that the historical documentary is a complex and paradoxical visual format, analysing how narrative, plot, and stylistic choices are deployed in order to engage audiences and convey a sense of historicity. This is an interesting example of how a popular form of historical representation is comprised of simultaneously conventional and problematic elements. Conventional in the sense that documentary relies upon narratives of progress and teleology, which seek to connect with viewers through empathetic understandings. Yet it also makes such comfortable understandings problematic by including a series of tropes and visual techniques that often self-consciously foreground the problem of representing historical truth. 'Historical documentary', according to de Groot 'is acutely aware that it cannot reconstruct a true past and as a consequence presents a necessarily indeterminate and incomplete picture' (p. 153).

Secondly, he goes on to discuss Reality History television as a style of programming that presents a rather different experience of the past to audiences than mainstream historical documentaries fronted by popular historians like Simon Schama and David Starkey. Indeed, de Groot suggests that the rise of Reality History renders problematic the status of the historian 'as master-of-narrative' (p. 168). As a model of historical engagement, reality history creates meaning via the lived experience of ordinary people as they encounter the past through privation and hardship. In this manner, it seeks an authenticity of experience, immersing participants into unfamiliar social and behavioural rules, yet at the same time it remains cognisant of its own

contemporaneity and artifice. Furthermore, Reality History is a format that is dynamic and interactive, enfranchising viewers and involving them in the drama that unfolds. Thus, it has potential to subvert traditional models of historical knowledge, though it also maintains an affinity for rules, authority and order. Ultimately, however, the results are ambiguous: 'Reality History can challenge the received ideas and imposed narrative of our past and heritage', states de Groot "but replaces them with a muddle" (p. 72).

*Consuming History* supports the idea that history dominates contemporary society and the social imagination. (3) In part five, de Groot explores the position of history in popular cultural forms of expression, in particular the realms of drama and literature. Historical television is accorded extensive treatment; in particular those television series based upon adaptations of works by classic British novelists like Austen, Dickens and Eliot. Whereas most commentators have portrayed them as exemplars of a cultural genre that is conservative and elitist, de Groot details a more complex picture, including programmes which defy the conventional categories of the genre by presenting the stories of marginalised elements in society. Outside of the classic adaptation, the picture is even more complicated, since new styles of programming have swapped the comfortable nostalgia of old for a past that is depicted as violent, dangerous, and lacking morality (pp. 200–1). On a more historiographically self-conscious level, de Groot identifies recent British film (notably *Atonement* and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*) as a genre where conventional forms of historical representation and populist themes are open to question. As a genre often criticised for its cultural elitism, historical drama is treated here as something that can also be dynamic, challenging and problematic (p. 184).

At the outset of the book, de Groot boldly proclaims to be setting out 'an agenda for further study of the ways that history is presented and engaged with' (p. 5). Does he fulfil this ambition here? The answer is a partly qualified yes.

He puts forward a convincing case that popular engagement with history is a more complex affair than most scholars have been willing to concede, and he ably demonstrates how it relates to contemporary cultural experience and meanings. One of the book's major strengths lies in its comprehensive scope and the broadening of the parameters of our vision of what constitutes public history. The reading of a range of marginalised elements of culture (only some of which are mentioned here), including Reality History, living history, gaming, urban exploration, as well as the discussion of the role and impact of the internet and digitisation are particularly useful in this regard. In addition, de Groot offers fresh insight into more well-known genres, such as television history and museums, situating them within contemporary cultural trends.

As for the question of who should read this book, *Consuming History* has valuable things to say to both historians and scholars of cultural and media studies. What the book shows is how history pervades contemporary culture, illustrating how it is used, consumed and exploring what it might mean for our understanding of the past. 'Recognising this', Ludmilla Jordanova has written, 'should help historians see their own activities in a wider perspective and to raise broad questions about the practice of history'. (4) In this sense, *Consuming History* has some unsettling implications for the profession, as not only does it highlight the fact that academic history has no monopoly on historical knowledge, but that popular forms of historiography signal a diffusion of academic authority, or 'an undermining of authoritative, legitimised History in favour of multiple histories' (p. 249). This is a provocative and disputable thesis, which is sure to raise levels of anxiety amongst historians.

With that said, de Groot's volume is not beyond reproach. One has difficulty in accepting certain key aspects of the book, where the arguments advanced remain unconvincing. This is the case with the claim that public history can be a source of dissent and resistance towards conventional, academic forms of knowledge. At issue here is the question of whether these modes of expression actually undermine the epistemic model of academic history. We have witnessed a general shift from the textual to the visual, performative and embodied in popular historical representation, but to what extent has the epistemological status quo been challenged?

Looking at how historical meaning is created and representation is made to function, many of the examples given in the book remain wedded to traditional values and concepts, such as authenticity, empathy and

experience, which betoken a realist epistemic model of history. Moreover, it appears that, in general, what lies behind the purpose of public displays of history is a conservative intent, either to reinforce a sense of nationhood or to impose a sense of order. On this account, non-academic forms of historiography are dissident insofar as they give expression to their own subjective and fictive qualities or to the extent that they undermine the authority of academic and cultural gatekeepers by equipping lay audiences with the tools to produce their own versions of history. Whilst this may not be 'proper' history as conceived by historians, this does necessarily imply a radically different approach to historiography. As Alun Munslow suggests, 'while first-person interpretation is undoubtedly a way to rethink the expression of history ... it still conforms to the epistemological model for 'discovering' historical knowledge'.[\(5\)](#)

Thus, de Groot may well be correct in his view of popular mediums of historical representation as offering a different style of engagement with the past, but in and of itself this is not enough to substantiate the argument that they constitute a fundamental shift in our historical imagination. His claim that 'an entirely new way of thinking about history and formulating approaches to it ... might be necessary' is perhaps somewhat premature in this regard (p. 248). It suggests that further research in the field will need to address the conceptual distinction between the means of historical expression and their epistemological and cultural implications.

These criticisms aside, *Consuming History* is a timely and important book. Taken as a whole, it adds substantially to our understanding of non-academic forms of historical engagement and contemporary culture's ongoing fascination with the past. For this reason it ought to be compulsory reading for anyone interested in the boundaries between non-academic and academic history, and the relationship of culture to its past.

November 2009

## Notes

1. David Lowenthal, 'Fabricating heritage', *History and Memory* 10, 1 (Spring 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (2nd ed., London, 2006), p. 149.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Martin L. Davies, *Historics: Why History Dominates Contemporary Society* (London and New York, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jordanova, *ibid*, p. 136.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (London, 2007), p. 76.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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